THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF EQUITY AT
PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Annitra C. Leigh
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to describe the perceptions of equity among African American graduates of Virginia predominately white institutions. Participants included 12 African American male and female student graduates who attended predominately white institutions in Virginia as full-time campus students. The theories that guided this study are Bandura’s social learning theory and the theory of self-efficacy as they focus on retention and motivation and the influence on one’s surroundings. Data sources included open-ended questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group. Data analysis followed the phenomenological method of listing and grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering, validation, and textural description of participants. Data were analyzed via initial and pattern coding to explore themes, and the researcher also implemented ongoing memoing of data. Six themes were present in this study: Campus Climate and Relationships, Social and Academic Obstacles, Multiculturalism, Access to Resources Promoting Diversity, Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom, and Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution.

Keywords: African American, Efficacy, Equity, Historically Black College and/or University, Predominately White Institution, Professional Success
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One presents the background information that shares the historical, social, and theoretical purpose and research on African American student experiences at predominately white institutions. It will define the purpose of the present study and why it is a problem. It will further provide the significance of this study, guiding research questions and critical definitions.

Background

The presence of African American students at historically black colleges and universities has decreased over the years for several reasons. One primary reason has been the lack of resources and the historically Black university’s need to enroll white students as the new minority. Besides, an increasing cause of low enrollment is the African American student’s desire to attend a predominately white institution. Bourke (2016) states that “Institutions of higher learning are regularly identified in scholarship and conversation by their racial composition, which generally reflects a distinction between predominately white institutions (PWIs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs)” (p. 13). More than ever, African American students are choosing to attend PWIs for what is considered better opportunities. As a result of this, historically Black colleges and universities, which once served as choice universities, continue to experience significant declines.

While these colleges and universities have built a history of providing African American students with a quality education in an environment that has been comfortable and familiar to several cultural experiences already representative in their lives, historically black colleges and universities are explicitly known to be institutions that address Black
communities’ needs. (Williams et al., 2018). It is documented that the experience of HBCUs offers the familial neighborhood element for African American students. According to Smith et al. (2017), HBCUs have a history of engaging the Black community. This provides comfort already in place and does not require the African American student to learn a new life way. However, a reoccurring theme of decreased enrollment persists as students take advantage of opportunities that were once not afforded.

Historical Context

With the present-day idea of all students being able to receive an education at the school of choice, this has not always been possible for the African American student. While provisions have been established to provide all students access to the college or university of choice, colleges and universities’ historical establishment did not always support this goal. The initial institution design was to educate in a segregated environment.

The formation of college can be dated back to the Morrill Act of 1862. The Morrill Act of 1862 allowed opportunities for colleges and institutions to build on public land. Individual states were given 30,000 acres of land per senator or Congress representative to be sold to create colleges specializing in teaching agriculture and mechanical arts, fields of importance and relevance at the time. It was later that some HBCUs benefitted from this, but due to discrimination, African Americans were often denied access to the land grant colleges, specifically in the south (Bracey, 2017). Later, the 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education provided African American students access to white institutions of higher learning, an opportunity that African American students continue to use to their advantage. According to Allen (1992),
In the twenty-first century, African American (black) students will continue to enroll in predominately white institutions (PWI) at greater rates than black students enrolling at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); yet, if this current trend continues, over half of the black students at PWIs will fail to persist and graduate (p. 26).

Also, this increase was seen as early as the 1960s. Harrison (2016) reports that from 1967 to 1976, Black college students in higher education increased by 24%, with this increase being at predominately White institutions (p. 140).

However, earlier studies of Black students enrolled in PWIs state that only a small number of PWIs had interventions in place for African American students and had no way of preparing for positive or negative (Patton et al., 2019, p. 174-175). African American students continue to take advantage of the opportunity to attend PWIs, and the number of black students attending PWIs outnumbers those attending HBCUs. Beasley et al. (2016) note that “Over the past three decades, the majority of Black undergraduates matriculated into predominately White institutions (PWIs), with recent data indicating only 11% of Black undergraduates are enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (p. 21). Because the enrollment of African American students continues to increase at PWIs, these institutions, over time, have worked to put measures in place to include all students. The focus should remain on the growing minority population enrolled at PWIs.

**Social Context**

Many students who attend PWIs feel that the environment does not necessarily present a comfortable climate or acceptance regarding social context. Kelly et al. (2016) state that engaged learning allows students to connect their classroom learning with their lived
experiences (p. 168). The authors say that students of color who have experienced discrimination struggle with maintaining a positive perspective, which can negatively impact their ability to thrive on college campuses (p. 169). The experiences of African American students, whether positive or negative, can affect their overall performance. Harris et al. (2017) found that “Black students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) may be more engaged than their Black peers at PWIs” (p. 783). This is partly due to the African American student’s necessity to be immersed in an environment that offers more than academics and provides a place of familiarity, understanding, and inclusion.

Vecci et al. (2019) define social identity as a person’s perception of self, based on membership in a group such as an ethnicity, race, or gender. The authors conclude that a person’s social identity governs behavior and can explain behavioral differences between groups” (p. 1). Understanding social identity creates a more transparent lens for why African American students often feel misplaced in PWI environments. Additionally, social identity can also impact a student’s sustainability. Museus et al. (2017) inform that previous research confirms that students’ capability to find their sense of purpose and belonging in college positively impacts their ability to persist and graduate (p. 188).

Research suggests that while attending elite public institutions, African American students report and experience higher stress levels and worse performance when placed in the PWI environment. African American students reported feeling underrepresented, alienated, and isolated at PWIs, which lead to feelings of frustration and being misunderstood. Students reported race-related stressors such as hostile reactions from other students and professors, campus segregation, and overall racism at PWIs (Boyraz et al., 2016). It is determined that “African -American students routinely experience much higher levels of social stress than
other students, yielding poorer mental health, greater time and effort devoted to family problems, and hence worse grade performance” (Torres & Massey, 2012, p. 172).

The focus on and inclusion of social context regarding African American students’ experiences at PWI cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Still, they must be included as a baseline point for the argument of equity. Equity, as defined for this study, is the attempt to provide fair opportunities for all students (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). Equity in learning opportunities has served as a precipice in the success of African-American students. A proportionate change has and will continue to be the goal.

**Theoretical Context**

The theories of self-efficacy and Bandura’s social learning theory connect to the African American college student’s success regarding motivation and should be considered a factor in whether or not self-efficacy and motivation play a role in a student’s progress. Efficacy refers to a person’s aptitude to achieve a goal or positive result (Bandura, 1997). Cheon-woo et al. (2017) report that such factors as self-efficacy, motivation, and a sense of belonging are predictors of college students’ academic performance and retention. Their work also shares information from the National Center for Education Statistics, which shows that in 2015, 59% of the students who entered 4-year colleges graduated within six years (p. 1119).

To be successful in college, students need the resources in place to be successful and a particular mindset. Tinto (2012) believes that student retention and graduation is shaped by knowledge of clear and consistent expectations of what success looks similar. He shares that many students begin without knowing what to expect and are not exceptionally equipped with self-efficacy. Tinto (2012) says, “A good many students begin higher education without knowing what to expect. First-generation and low-income college students, for instance,
typically lack the sorts of shared knowledge or cultural capital, that more affluent students possess about the nature of the college experience and what it takes to succeed” (p. 11). A recent study found that African American students possess lower intrinsic attributions, including motivation and expectations for success (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016, p. 257). Besides, empirical studies have shown that both expectancies of success and learning value determine learning outcomes (Cook & Artino, 2016, p. 1000).

The history of the African American student’s enrollment in PWIs and how social integration plays a role in performance is vital in considering student success and achievement. Also, considering the theories of social learning and self-efficacy to determine if personal and intentional success further sheds light on African American students’ experience while attending PWIs and helps better understand the concern of equity at such institutions.

**Situation to Self**

As a historically Black university graduate, I have long been interested in Black students’ experiences and successes who attended a PWI. The sense of community that was felt at my HBCU prepared me for the workforce and developed my ability to interact socially within diverse settings. However, several African American students choose to attend predominately white institutions; hence, I found the motivation to conduct this study. Wanting to know their reasons for attending PWIs, and this decision’s experiences has sparked an interest in me. My curiosity centers around wanting to know if students felt that they were given an equitable opportunity to be successful if they felt included in campus and classroom activities, and if they felt that by attending a PWI that the result would be better education and a better job after graduation.

From an ontological perspective, I believe all human experiences have meaning. In this
study, I will attempt to give a collective purpose to the participants’ lived experiences. The epistemological assumption I relate to this study is that qualitative research is empirical. An empirical, philosophical assumption focuses on empirically justifying a belief and separating that belief from my opinion as to the researcher. This is appropriate for approaching this study because it forces me to remove my idea of what I believe my participants’ experiences will be. I am choosing this philosophical assumption because I want to know the experiences as shared by the participants without regard to what I feel. I want this study’s outcome to be evidence-based on the participants’ experiences and justified through a systematic analysis of their responses. Axiologically, I believe the participants’ collective lived experiences are valuable knowledge, and their collective voice is worthy of being heard.

The paradigm that will guide this study is the post-positivism paradigm. Post-positivism requires motivations for and commitment to the research of one’s study. This is appropriate because I am dedicated to this study and eager to know and learn from the study’s outcome. Post-positivism is also relevant because it focuses on the researcher taking on a learning role. Because my college experience has been different from those of the participants, I become the learner, understanding that the participants’ experiences will construct the reality of this study. Post-positivism relies on an imperfect reality. This paradigm will allow me to step away from being the researcher, as it is known that Post-positivism allows humanity to connect the researcher to the people. This positions me in a vulnerable position to interpret the experiences of my participants fully.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that African American students are struggling to experience equity while at predominately white institutions. While the range of research on enrollment of African
American students is available, there is limited knowledge and understanding in the existing literature of the African American student’s equity experience at PWIs that report a positive outcome. African American students are significantly impacted by racial climate and cultural norms. The racial climate at some colleges and universities can significantly affect the African American student’s ability to persist and graduate. On average, White students graduate about a 20% higher rate than African American students (Levy et al., 2019). When students do not feel welcomed or racial harassment or discrimination is present, African American students are likely to drop out (Roscoe, 2015, p. 48).

Previous research focuses on the isolation within the learning environment and the disparity in achievement between the African American student and White peers. Campbell et al. (2019) suggest that “For African American students attending PWIs however, academic performance is significantly related to campus climate issues” (p. 392). The PWI experience has often proven to be very different from the social environment that is comfortable for African American students. “Participating in majority White cultural institutions, such as a university, often requires African American students to engage in values, beliefs and practices that may be different from their culture of origin” (Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo, & Hurst, 2010, p. 144).

Little focus has been given to display students’ perceptions of equity beyond a negative experience based upon inclusion and exclusion research at the PWI setting. However, much literature exists to support inequality in academic opportunity and campus inclusion for African American students. “To address these observed educational inequities, considerable attention has to be paid to the experiences of African American college students, particularly those who attend predominately White institutions (PWIs)” (Baber, 2012, p. 67). Baber (2012) continues to share the need to examine all issues related to the transitional experiences of African American
students enrolled in PWIs as the lack of attention continues to allow for a negative experience. Wei, Ku, & Liao (2011) found that “minority students enrolled at PWIs potentially develop stress due to the student’s maladjustment to the environment of the majority, thus allowing for a negative view of the campus environment contributing to a likelihood of attrition” (p. 158).

With an increase in the number of minority students attending PWIs, minimal information has been shared to support varied experiences. Further research is needed to extend opportunities to all PWIs to ensure that this standard of opportunity is transferrable. Of today’s African American college graduates, the majority receive their degrees from PWIs. However, research states that “Isolated and cumulative discriminatory experiences can be cognitively and emotionally taxing and interfere with students’ ability to achieve at their full potential” (Griffith et al., 2019, p. 116). This study is necessary, as many efforts have been devoted to looking into underrepresented racial groups and the higher education experience. Bourke (2016) states that “Members of underrepresented racial groups are underrepresented both numerically and are subordinately aware of the dominate culture and social groups and therefore maintain a subordinate identity” (p. 16).

A campus’s racial climate is negatively affected when African Americans and other ethnic groups feel isolated or unsupported in identity. Current research has proven that African American students have a difficult time at PWIs due to feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness. While this problem exists, glimmers of hope are emerging. Still, more situations on campuses must be examined so that programs essential to all students’ success are not goals but rather expectations. While African American students perceive PWIs as unwelcome and often hostile, white students generally perceive campuses as welcoming and open (Bourke, 2016). This suggests additional reason to explore the varied experiences shared
by African American students who are a part of this environment. While literature is available that discusses the negative experiences of African American college students, not much is available to highlight a different experience for Black students attending PWIs.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the African American student’s perception of equity based upon the research of inclusion and exclusion at PWIs. Attention will be placed on the participants’ thoughts and experiences to understand what can be done to provide a learning environment attuned to all students’ needs regardless of race and prior experiences.

For this study, equity is defined as the student’s perception of opportunity for success in the college classroom, inclusion in the availability of resources to promote diversity on campus, and preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). Participants will be professional graduates of Virginia PWIs who are current professionals in fields related to their undergraduate majors. As a result of this study, the desired phenomenon to explore students’ different experiences in the PWI environment as it relates to inclusion and exclusion. Inclusive is to be interpreted as opportunities provided for all students that allow for their academic and social growth and acceptance feeling, thus diminishing the pre-conceived notion or fear that many students hold.

This research will be framed by Bandura’s social learning theory (1977), which concludes that one learns through modeling, observations, and interactions with others, as well as the self-efficacy theory, which concludes that a student’s level of motivation and “withitness” is the main factor in determining success. While not limited to education, education is often one of the purest examples of these theories.
Significance of the Study

This study will examine African American students’ lived experiences who attended full-time and graduated from PWIs in Virginia. This study contributes to the current literature by determining if African American students feel that their time spent at PWIs was equitable and beneficial to their overall success. Harper (2015) found that “racial stereotypes are commonplace on many campuses, and that their effects are usually psychologically and academically hazardous” (p. 646). Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) suggests that learning is social and heavily influenced by our surroundings and environment and, thus, our peers. A perception of inequitable experiences is what has been found in current research. This study will be conducted to consider what is missing in African American students’ experiences that possibly inhibit success. Kelly et al. (2017) suggest a gap in the literature on whether or not African American students are thriving at PWIs (p. 167).

This study’s significance is to understand the perception of equity of African American graduates of predominately white institutions by highlighting a more holistic look at experiences that are not found in the current literature. Existing literature suggests that the African American student experiences at PWIs are a concern. In a study where the focus group was African American students attending a PWI, students felt that they “were often looked upon as the ‘token Black student’ and experienced stereotyping by peers” (Walls and Hall, 2018, p. 50). Current empirical contributions of this topic show barriers for African American students at predominately white institutions. Walls & Hall (2018) go on to say that “African American students attending predominately White colleges and universities (PWCUs) face unique challenges as they navigate majority culture and contend with ignorance, discrimination, racism, and racial microaggressions on college campuses” (p. 48). This study adds to the recent body of
knowledge by providing a different perspective of what is present in the current literature. This study aims to describe factors that can lead to equitable outcomes for the selected participants. Empirical evidence will allow for the recording and analysis of participants’ lived experiences as I will have an opportunity to record individuals’ perceptions directly associated with the experiences I chose to develop a phenomenon.

This study is essential to PWIs and African American graduates as it will provide a current perspective of how graduates feel regarding equity during their undergraduate experience. Knowing that, on average, White students graduate about a 20% higher rate than African American students (Levy et al., 2019), we must consider all factors to eliminate this graduation gap.

The goal is to use the information to ensure that resources are in place to see that all students are successful. Organizations within colleges can benefit from this study as it can serve as a data point to see what specific services African American students need. This study has the potential effect change on college campuses as PWIs identify what is necessary for student success on a larger scale. It brings attention to students’ needs who potentially benefit from support while in an unfamiliar environment and perceived as inequitable. Bourke (2016) states that “When crafting race-conscious policies, programs, and services, enrollment management professionals in collaboration with student affairs educators, need to work closely with faculty to create plans to diversify learning environments” (p. 20). This study can recognize the need to implement equity and diversity training beyond the college classroom in such locations as workplaces and communities. Additionally, this study is vitally important to the participants as it will serve as an opportunity for them to share their experiences to address a problem that remains current.
Research Question

For this study, the following central question and sub-questions will guide the research:

CQ. How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI?

This question aims to allow participants to describe their experience of equity in campus academic, cultural, and leadership opportunities and their experience of inclusion and exclusion from campus educational, cultural, and leadership opportunities. Arnett (2015) states that “most predominantly White institutions have built themselves on a tradition of exclusion, which is counter to the mission of many minority institutions” (p. 10).

SQ1. How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting diversity on campus?

This question allows participants to share access to resources promoting diversity on campus. This can include coursework, organizations, admissions programs, among others. Berray (2019) suggests that in efforts to create an environment where everyone belongs, colleges should aim to develop leadership for diversity resource teams, offer specific training in equity, diversity, and inclusion to employees, and work to create an environment where everyone feels that they belong (p. 2). This question is vital to the study because it opens the discussion of available resources to serve all students’ needs. Students will share how the access to or the lack of thereof contributed to their overall college experience. Bourke (2016) states that “When crafting race-conscious policies, programs, and services, enrollment management professionals in collaboration with student affairs educators, need to work closely with faculty to create plans to diversify learning environments” (p. 20). The availability of and access to resources and how students experience these are necessary for future research on this topic.
**SQ2.** How do African American students describe opportunities for success and inclusion in the classroom?

This question aims to allow participants to describe the lived classroom academic experience while attending a Virginia PWI. Participants will focus on the level of preparedness that they feel their education offered them professional roles. There continues to be an academic gap in the performance of African American and White students. According to Martin et al. (2016), college-level black students experience lower graduation rates, take longer to complete their degrees, and have lower grades than white students. This question allows participants to consider academic disparity as a reality and consider if equitable opportunity to close the achievement gap was offered during the undergraduate experience at select PWIs. DeFreitas (2012) found that “African Americans do not perform as well as European Americans in college, especially at predominately White institutions” (p. 109).

**SQ3.** How do African American students describe their preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation?

This question aims to enable participants to describe their experience upon graduation from a Virginia PWI. Specifically, participants will share their opinion of the opportunities provided for them post-graduation. Gallup Education found that while nearly half of African American graduates of HBCUs reported that they selected the school that best meets their needs, only 34 percent of black PWI graduates felt that their institution was appropriate to their needs (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2015).

**Definitions**

The following terms will be significant to the understanding of this study and are defined as they are preferred to be interpreted relative to this study.

2. *Efficacy* - referred to in this study, is the aptitude to achieve a goal or positive result (Bandura, 1997).

3. *Equity* - referred to in this study, is the attempt to provide fair opportunities for all students (Clauson & McKnight, 2018).

4. *Historically Black College and/or University* - referred to in this study as accredited institutions of higher learning founded with the mission of educating African Americans and have historically had student bodies that are predominately African American (Capers & Way, 2019).

5. *Predominately White Institution* - referred to in this study as a PWI(s), is an institution of higher learning where White students account for over 50% of the population (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

6. *Professional Success* - in this study, is the graduate’s current level of professional advancement (Apugo, 2017).

**Summary**

Chapter One identifies the problem that African American students struggle to experience equity while at predominately white institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the African American student’s perception of equity-based upon the research of inclusion and exclusion at PWIs. This chapter invites the reader to understand how the African American students’ enrollment at PWIs sets the study’s tone. By considering the significance and need for this research, Chapter One transitions the reader into the theories and literature that will drive this study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two will provide a framework for the current research regarding the African American students’ perception of equity and opportunity at predominately white institutions. This study’s significance will be presented by reviewing the existing literature and identifying a significant gap. Chapter Two will include the overview, theoretical framework, related literature, and summary. Related literature will focus on the history of African American student enrollment in HBCUs, Student Resilience, African American enrollment at PWIs, and student perceptions of acceptance at PWIs.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of self-efficacy and Bandura’s social learning theory are connected to the African American student’s success concerning motivation, or the lack thereof. They are often considered through the lens of whether or not students have a willingness and desire to adjust or a cultural inability to adjust at PWIs. Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) suggests that learning is social and heavily influenced by our surroundings and environment and, thus, our peers. This theory is essential to this research’s nature as it will help determine how environmental factors aid in the success or the lack of success for African American students. A specific amount of inclusion and socialization drive this theory and these are both opportunities that African American students are perceived to lack on PWI campuses.

Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) focuses on the ability to socialize in preparation for integration into society appropriately. It has long been the desire of society to produce citizens that align with the goals and the progress of the environment. Much like this idea for overall society, the history of PWIs has been to present an environment that does not alter its
standards to fit the student’s needs, but one in which the student must conform to fit the needs of the environment. As African American students continue to be marginalized both academically and socially, it is necessary to understand how academic integrity is maintained while pursuing educational goals. (Howard, 2003, p. 5). Unfortunately, students are aware of how peer comparisons are made, and they are also aware of how they are treated by adults based upon our pre-conceived perceptions. This study will examine Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) by exploring the necessity to create such an environment for all students and student self-efficacy in determining persistence and success.

Self-efficacy for learning, refers to a students’ belief in their capabilities to control their learning, and could determine students’ motivation and academic achievement and, is therefore significant in the learning process (Alt, 2015, p. 47). This study’s nature lends itself to the use of the self-efficacy theory as the phenomenon of equity is considered. This theory is critical because it helps to define further if the student ultimately drives student success or the responsibility of PWIs to create an environment responsible for students’ success. Arguments have been made that students must bring a certain level of efficacy to any higher institution environment to succeed. This theory will be used to consider if efficacy is enough when students are placed in unfamiliar or uncomfortable environments. Students’ perception regarding the learning environment may influence their conclusions of self-efficacy, which is a significant element of Bandura’s social learning theory (Alt, 2015).

Self-efficacy is believed to have a strong influence on students’ academic achievement as it affects how students respond when faced with obstacles (DeFrietas, 2011, p. 110). The success of many students does not lie simply within what is offered to them. The success of African American students at PWIs is often coupled with a fair yet copious amount of resources
available to students by the institution and the student’s ability to endure set personal achievement goals and maintain an unfamiliar environment. The theory of self-efficacy, like the social learning theory, considers students’ competence to successfully execute the necessary course of action for academic success (Bandura, 1977). For this research, this theory will be considered when interviewing participants upon interpreting their overall perceptions of equity regarding academic support and leadership opportunity.

Related Literature

While literature exists on the experiences of African American students enrolled at PWIs, more is needed to determine these students’ lived experiences while enrolled. This chapter considers what literature and studies have been conducted on this particular study while also sharing limitations in this topic’s literature.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the African American Student

Arnett (2015) articulates that while historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges are often overlooked in conversations about best practices in higher education, their proven success with the populations they serve cannot be repudiated and is often looked to by major institutions hoping to promote more diversity on their campuses (p. 10). Around the midpoint of the 20th century, 90% of African American students who enrolled in college enrolled at historically black colleges and universities (Kim & Conrad, 2006, p. 399). According to census research in 2012, African American students made up nearly 15% of the United States’ 20 million college students (Sparks, 2013, p. 5). While the number of college students collectively decreased by nearly 500,000 from 2011 to 2012, African American students continue to represent the smallest race of college students compared to Hispanic and White peers. The rate at which African American students are entering college is alarming, and
the reasons for the decline continue to be revealing. According to Cabrera (1999), African American college enrollment has shifted due to a change in aspirations (p. 135). Tinto (1987) argues that there are differences in the persistence rates between non-minorities and African Americans due to differences in academic preparedness over students’ backgrounds. (p. 135).

While college enrollment among African American students has suffered over the past few years, historically black colleges and universities, specifically, have felt the void of students. The goal of historically black colleges has been to maintain the Black historical and cultural tradition; provide leadership for the Black community affairs; provide an economic center in the black community; provide role models who interpret the dynamics of Black people; provide college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority populations, and to produce black graduates for specialized areas, this simply has not been enough regarding the promotion of college enrollment of African American students (Brown, 2013, p. 4). While historically black colleges and universities have proven to offer a great source of social networks while fostering an empowering educational climate (Palmer & Gasman, 2008 p. 52) where students generally are more engaged in the environment, African American students are seeking institutions with programs and legislative endeavors found at predominately white institutions.

When considering this, we must first recognize the growing shift in college patterns amongst African American students. With national mandates for more accountability, student performance, and overall excellence (Brown, 2013, p. 4), new demands are placed on postsecondary institutions. Historically black colleges and universities are continuously struggling to meet the satisfaction of the new student. While current research highlights the opportunities afforded to African American students who chose to attend HBCUs, opposing
literature depicts these institutions as academic wastelands suggesting that they are cheap and inferior to competitive PWIs (Brown, 2013). While HBCUs carry the common characteristic of providing African American students a socially productive and inclusive environment, African American students feel that this is not enough to compete with non-minority peers.

The number of African American students attending college continues to fall short of the national norm. Research states that a critical perspective in this debate is that African American students, aside from affirmative action, regarding enrollment and admittance, are often considered less academically prepared than their white counterparts to enter into prestigious colleges and universities (Trent, Owens, Eatman, Burke & Daughtery, 2003). The underrepresentation of African American students in higher education institutions has been well documented, and scholars continue to examine factors responsible for this disproportionality (Ford & Harris, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2001).

Besides, many African American students traditionally intentionally underachieved because academic competence at the level of excellence required the abandonment of their cultural and ethnic knowledge and integrity (Howard, 2003, p. 4). The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2015) reports that black students who graduate for HBCUs may go on to a more satisfying life than Black graduates of predominately White colleges and universities, and only 29% of African Americans who graduated from predominately White colleges and universities thought they had been well prepared for life after college.

Considering how the African American student performs and the experiences afforded when attending a PWI differ significantly from the discussion that African American students attend HBCUs. This study’s topic of the discussion focuses on the African American student’s perception of equity and how opportunities are afforded after the college experience. In
considering this, a complicated yet necessary angle to this discussion is whether White college students placed in the HBCU environment perform academically and socially at a higher rate than their African American peers do. This is a crucial element to consider. It further discusses whether the lack of performance and opportunity for African American students is based on the environment or whether it is based on self-efficacy and will.

In a study conducted by Aruguete and Hardy (2016), academic attributions of both African American and White students at a historically black university was measured to determine academic performance. Included in this study were 151 African American students and 67 White students. Overall, the study found that African American students showed a weaker sense of control, lower expectations for success, lower grades, higher negative affect, and poorer attendance than white students. Attribution is defined in this study as a reason for the source of an event or behavior (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016, p. 257). For clarity, academic attributions for this study aim to answer why in the academic setting. Students who do poorly on an exam may ask why a particular grade was received. Students are in search of a cause for failure. The study classifies academic attributions in four domains: Effort, Ability, Context, and Luck (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016, p. 258). Participants were recruited from freshman-level courses at a Midwestern HBCU. Fifty percent of participants were female, 48% male and 2% were of unknown gender. Sixty-three percent identified as African American, 28% as white, 5% as another ethnicity, while 4% did not identify ethnicity.

The study found that both African American and white students displayed effort at the start of the semester. Regarding ability, White students showed more robust academic performance than their African American peers. Towards the conclusion of the study, African American students showed lower effort than their white peers. They displayed an increase in the
context attribute, which prompted them to find causes and ask why in response to poor performance. The expectation for success declined, and white students showed little to no change in effort. An interesting element to this study (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016) is that it was predicted that African American students would experience an increased decline in effort and performance but was not predicted for white students. This is important to this study as it raises the question of whether an opportunity is genuinely sought after or if the expectation of African American students within their comfort environment is one of entitlement; one of the very things Black students identify as being established for their white peers in the PWI setting.

**Being Black in America and the PWI College Experience**

Pride serves as a foundation of success, a commitment to one’s cultural awareness and identity, beliefs, goals, and aspirations. According to Bradley et al. (2016), the events in a student’s life outside of school can be related to academic outcomes (p. 823), particularly on their grades, persistence, and graduation. To live in a nation where freedom is not necessarily free has, for centuries, plagued African Americans. While it easy in theory to express and promote the freedoms that are bestowed upon all, such liberties have come at a cost and have not proven to be beneficial for all African Americans. In considering the effect of being Black in America and the college experience, it is essential to realize that this identification of a people has come with barriers and hardships unknown to different races who matriculated in this country. Pre-college characteristics can affect the college experience and outcomes for students. Non-college college experiences in this context are the events occurring aside from university control which are likely to cause change in the student’s everyday relationships, expecting routines, general assumptions or roles (Bradley et al., 2016, p 826). Because of this, students enter the PWI environment experiences that potentially can be changed either positively or
negatively. While the feeling of being Black in America can never fully be understood or experienced by other races, it is not the African American seeking education or the educated African American’s desire to solicit pity or reparation. It is a desire to develop cultural awareness and understanding of a people’s perspective that has been dismissed and overlooked due to lack of concern or possibly a lack of understanding. The plight of the educated African American is to live respectfully in a country where opportunities are plenteous on the sole basis of qualification and performance at one’s college selection.

Race in America continues to a sensitive topic to embrace and address. Whether it is a dismissal due to a lack of understanding or the dismissal is due to a difference of opinion and desire, it is still a topic that can uplift and upset groups of people. Bentley-Edwards, et al. (2016) refer to the African American college student enrolled at PWI’s experience as the Identity-Based Motivation Theory, which states that although identity is perceived as stable, in specific environments, this stability comes with barriers in certain environments (p. 152). This lends itself to the idea that what it means to be Black in America is having a preconceived notion that factors are already stacked against you. Whether or not this is true, it has been ingrained in the fibers of being in the African American soul. While education is often used as the tie that binds us together through its offering of opportunity, it is still a feeling of power amongst the white community in African Americans’ minds. A study conducted by Evans and Herr in 2010 suggests that racial identity and perceived discrimination influence the aspirations of African American students (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016). It is the feeling of not knowing how one will be received, whether one’s talents will be recognized, and whether or not skin color will automatically dismiss the opportunity. Though this is merely the opinion of a group of people, it is an opinion that can be documented via experiences.
Within the African American community, the topic of race and equality is sensitive and potentially affects the African American student’s attitude of self-worth. According to Education Trust, despite recent gains in graduation rates among American public colleges and universities, racial disparities in higher education persist with lower college attendance and graduation rates among ethnic minority students (Walls & Scott, 2016). Today’s college environment contributes to the success or failure of students of color. What is to be considered is the reason behind the lower graduation rates of minority students. Past research has examined African American students’ apparent stressors without being specific to the micro-contexts in which the stress experience occurs. (Walls & Scott, 2016, p. 47).

Recent students have aimed to draw awareness to race-related stressors, precisely the African American student’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to race discussions at PWIs (Walls & Scott, 2016, p. 47-48). Walls & Hall (2018) note that African American students attending predominately white colleges face unknown challenges while navigating through majority culture and battles of discrimination, racism, ignorance, and microaggressions (p. 48). For an underdeveloped adult mindset to grapple with such negative factors can bring upon ultimate defeat. Being accepted by a majority culture in which you have no prior knowledge of navigating your way through can be very different from the African American experience at an HBCU.

It is vital to know that in this study, the acknowledgment of ignorance and microaggressions. Microaggression is defined as momentary or every day verbal, behavioral, environmental injustice either intentional on non-intentional that may be hostile, defamatory, or a negatively racial influence unintentionally meant to target a person or specific group. (Walls & Hall, 2018, p. 49). Microaggression suggests the struggle of having to communicate with those
who display an unawareness for a different culture and those who display a subtle, indirect form of racism. An unawareness of microaggression does not suggest that this treatment will be all African American students’ experience. It merely suggests what occurs when cultures are brought together without knowledge of one another. Recent studies have shown evidence that students of color experience subtle forms of racism while enrolled at PWIs, whether intentional or unintentional. The topic of microaggression brings about an often-overlooked bias in the classroom that can lead to the lack of dialogue on race matters, thus further isolating that African American student.

**Plantation Politics and the History of Inclusion**

According to Clauson and McKnight (2018), a new trend of multiculturalism in the United States has influenced college enrollment and therefore led to modifications in the curriculum and college culture. Campuses are merging separate cultural centers into multicultural centers to respond to campus diversity, including gender identity, different ethnicities, sexual orientation, and other key factors (p. 40). While African American students who meet the criteria can today enroll in the university or college of their choice, this has not always been the case. Historically Black Colleges were established to provide an opportunity to learn for African American students to support the notion that America was created as a land of hope and access for everyone. Predominately White Institutions often find themselves playing catch up to offer acceptance to the institutions and working to prove to the African American enrollee that equal opportunity exists. However, on some PWI campuses, the modern thought of plantation politics is the idea that one (African American) is inferior, incapable, or ignorant and, unfortunately, still exists. Dancy et al. (2018), when discussing plantation politics during the Black Lives Matter era, shed light on the persistent engagement of African American students as
property. Understanding that race is the foundation on which society’s sociopolitical organization is built, this research delves into the history of the United States’ higher education system and its unfortunate commitment to the African American’s degradation to maintain colonial order.

This history of African Americans as a property is necessary to understanding colonialism. Dancy et al. (2018) define colonialism in the context of this article as the control or influence over a person. The authors delve into the legacies of America’s colleges and universities and the fact that those universities were created to educate the offspring of colonists and preserve social inequality. The presidents and staff of these universities were slave masters who used African Americans as attendants and servants in the home. Outside of the home, the African American human being was used as recreation. In the book, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America’s Universities*, Wilder (2013) shares that

At one of Yale campuses, the record shows that the early students raped Black women so frequently that the college removed them from the students’ presence except the cook whom the students also terrorized. At Williams College, students forced a Black man to smash his own head into wooden boards and barrels. On other early college campuses, college students shot at Black enslaved children to satisfy their boredom when out of class. (p. 183)

On college campuses, African Americans were subjected to pranks, endured whippings, brandings, sexual assaults, and secret sales, which ultimately disrupted family units. While it is history, this treatment has negatively affected generations of people. Though the modern student’s intentions are more than likely far from this past behavior, knowledge of such events
continues to contribute to the divide found amongst White students and their Black peers who attend PWIs.

**African American Student Networks**

Whether at an HBCU or PWI, student networks have provided a sense of belonging to students. The difference to consider in the two settings is the cause behind the participation in social networks. For the African American student at HBCUs, inclusion in social networks further solidifies the sense of community and connectivity of those who share common characteristics. Students join social organizations to make connections, meet lifelong friends, and to solidify one’s place. The perception of why African American students participate in social networks at PWIs can be different. The idea that students participate at PWIs can be related to finding a sense of purpose in a foreign environment. Therefore, connecting with those who share similar backgrounds, desiring a need to belong to a group because of a lack of inclusion in pre-established non-cultural organizations, and a sense of inferiority that needs validation from those who share everyday experiences are considerations for discussion.

African American students who participate in student networks have historically shown higher retention and graduation rates than those who chose not to become involved. Grier Reed and Wilson (2016) found a significant difference in achievement when Black students participate in student organizations, and even so, black students often experience a hostile environment while enrolled at predominately white institutions (p. 375). The importance of social support to psychological and academic performance has a strong bearing. African American students found that those who connected through social groups found that Black students who had a network to discuss racial unfairness experiences had higher performance outcomes than students who did not have such supports. The African-American Student Network was designed to meet the social
and psychological needs of Black students at a predominately white institution by providing social support and resources for coping in the college environment (Grier Reed & Wilson, 2016, p. 376). Students felt that this opportunity provided a unique experience and afforded them a space and a sense of belonging on campus. An essential factor in this study is that it included 38% of men who seemed to experience just as positive of an outcome as female participants. This is necessary to note that African American female students have traditionally experienced higher college graduation rates than their African American male peers.

This study investigated African American students in direct contact with social contacts. Participants listed the number of people in their networks and how many were of the same race and gender. It was hypothesized that there would be a noticeable difference in the experiences of those who participated in African American Student Networks than their Black peers who did not. The study was comprised of 225 students, where 193 did not participate in the African American Social Network, and 32 students did. It was found as it was expected and as it has been recorded in research that African American Student Network participants show higher rates of retention and graduation than their counterparts even after taking into account academic factors such as Act score, HSR, and GPA (Grier-Reed et al., 2011; Grier-Reed et al., 2015).

This study focused on the importance of social interaction, but it is to be noted that this social interaction existed amongst African American students independent of their White college peers. While this proved to be positive for those who participated in this network, it still leaves out the sense of belonging on PWIs of those African American students not involved. While some experienced success, there is a question of whether equal access is provided to all students regardless of cultural and ethnic identity.

**Race in the Classroom**
The perception of the African American student differs from any other race of educated Americans. Whether it is blatant oppression or just a feeling of inferiority, African American students feel that there is always a struggle to achieve the excellence experienced by their white peers. Haywood et al. (2016) believe that great efforts have been made to explain why African American scholars continue to progress at a lower success rate than other academic groups (p. 110). Race in the classroom is a sensitive subject for African Americans because it is often felt that there is a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity when addressing race in the classroom. Haywood et al., (2016) go on to state that African Americans enter college with traditional and racial traits acquired from but not limited to their families, social and physical environments, religion, and prior experiences in academic and community settings (p. 110). It is often the perception of African Americans that there is either a lack of sensitivity or a put-on of sensitivity that unfortunately comes off as impervious or non-authentic. While African American students often understand that this is not the initial intent of such conversations and environments, it is difficult for both Black and white Americans to understand how this setting should look.

A primary reason for this is that the white student in this environment, through their experiences frequently, do not recognize that there is a difference, and Black students in this environment have too much knowledge of the differences, which include entitlement, pre-opportunity, and simply complexion. Grier-Reed et al. (2016) note that African American students face numerous challenges and pressure to conform, lack support, experience institutional racism, and social isolation, and receive inequitable treatment by university personnel (p. 185). Entering a different community that is nothing like what has been lived for 18 years forces the African American student to choose a new identity to conform to a new
environment. When this is done, the levels of stress, the need for inclusivity, and separation feelings become more prevalent as students struggle to find their place in a new setting.

Student engagement is a high indicator of student success at PWIs. This is not solely based on inclusivity to reduce social stress, but rather it pertains to the classroom experience. Class participation is experienced differently in environments where racial dynamics impact interaction. Walls & Hall (2018) conclude that the stress which is associated with Black students is distinctive from universal stress related to college attendance and is an exclusive predictor of academic achievement for students of color (p. 48). The study expresses how racial stereotyping is not uncommon and that such identification places students at higher risk for drinking, stress, and anxiety. In a study conducted by Morrison in 2010, it was found that African American students agreed that entering a predominately white university was frustrating and that they felt like outsiders feeling that their white peers and professors were ineffective in diversity practices. (Walls & Hall, 2018, p. 48). This same study showed that while at PWIs, fewer African American students pursued advanced degrees and, concerning their peers attending HBCUs, had lower GPAs and reported a higher stress level.

Most students’ experiences through recent studies have targeted emotional and psychological reactions to class discussion and have been viewed as having problematic or negative impacts on students. In a study where the focus group was African American students attending a PWI, students felt that they were thought of as the token Black students and were also stereotyped by their white peers (Walls and Hall, 2018, p. 50). The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American students in classroom discussions that relate to race. Researchers aimed to see if classroom experiences negatively impacted student retention, graduation rates, learning experiences, peer and teacher interactions, and professional
development. Students were asked to explain their perceptions of classroom discussions about race and how it influenced their participation and performance—students who had experienced race relations conversations over various disciplines but applicable to African American students.

The sample included 17 women and five men who were students at a four-year PWI in the Midwestern region of the United States. The university population consists of approximately 6% Black, 84% White, 3% Latino, and 7% other races. Targeted students were African Americans participating in campus groups and clubs. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, identify as Black or African American, and must have attended at least one class where race-related topics were discussed. Due to potential discomforts, participants were given the option to drop out of the study if they felt uncomfortable. On average, students were 20 years old, and over half were raised in predominately Black neighborhoods, with about one-third attending predominately-black high schools. At the same time, one-third also attended predominately white high schools. The rest reported attending ethnically diverse high schools. The average family income for roughly 50% who participated in the study was $50,000, while 19% had an annual income of $50,000-$75,000, and 25% with an annual income of greater than $75,000. All but one student received financial aid support.

This study’s analysis followed a phenomenological design that involved reflection, coding, identifying themes and patterns, and interpretation. Students were asked to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to race-related discussions in the classroom. Students also answered questions about their class participation and whether their participation level changed during topics of race. An essential focus of this study was the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that students expressed towards race discussions. The study found that
participants’ responses to race-related discussions varied but were also interconnected in compelling ways. Three themes identified from this study were labeled as Awareness, The Black Perspective, and Represent. African American students were aware that they were often the only African American in their class and were well aware that they were the minority. The second theme of The Black Perspective was displayed through African American students feeling that others looked at them or felt uncomfortable when topics of the race were raised. African American students felt that their peers and professors expected them to answer questions from a different perspective when the race was discussed. Students also reported that they felt as if they were often expected to offer the African American perspective as related to race with conversations of health. With the final theme of Represent, African American students felt responsible for representing their race by offering a different perspective to the discussion. Students felt that they had to “break the wall” because their white classmates expected a different viewpoint.

Students reported feeling a level of stress in feeling that their opinions and context would be misinterpreted. African American students reported feeling that they felt responsible for making themselves look good. Students reported consulting with African American friends outside the classroom to make sure they represented appropriately. An example used in the study was African American student discussion topics with other African American peers to ensure that they represented the entire group’s opinion (Walls and Hall, 2018).

In addition to the feelings attached to the defined themes, students overwhelmingly reported negative thoughts and feelings, including being made to feel “uneasy, uncomfortable, frustrated, upset, defensive, trapped, and shameful (Walls and Hall, 2018, p. 54). One student reported feeling uneasy, while others reported feeling emotions of aggression towards the
discussion. Another response from students was that they felt shy or tentative during the discussions because of how their comments may be received during discussions. Students feared that they would be viewed as students who conformed to the typical “angry black person” or “angry black woman”. A small number of students reported being excited to talk about their experiences as they felt it was an opportunity to educate others. They also consider this an opportunity to gain new perspectives from their classmates that would potentially open an understanding between the cultures. Students felt those race topics made them want to participate because it allowed an opportunity to display passion about topics that they were interested in and felt this as an opportunity to share a perspective that may not have been considered. Students felt that White peers did not understand the African American experience, and that opportunity such as class discussion was a time to educate others who held stereotypical opinions of them. Through the discussion, it was learned that misinformation stemmed from a lack of exposure to African American students, not being informed of Black culture, or being taught to senselessly hate people. (Walls & Hall, 2018, p. 55).

Some participants sought a healthy exchange of dialogue and reported that this was dictated by the professor’s ability to set the discussion tone. While it was reported that the professor’s role plays a part in setting the tone, many students reported that it was easier to withdraw from the conversation to avoid the frustration of something that may be said or misinterpreted. African American students involved in this study realized that it was possible that many of them may have been the first African American person with home their Caucasian classmates held discussions of race. Under the appropriate environment as the professor as the facilitator, students reported trying to share exciting experiences through discussion that would promote engagement intentionally. Students felt that it was important that their peers listened to
them and allowed them to share their opinions but also felt it necessary for their White classmates to share their opinions. African American students expressed the desire to walk in as a student and not as an African American student but reported that typically, this was not the case. Students often felt conflicted between whether to participate or not. One student reported the following:

…sometimes I feel bad because I don’t speak up. I also want to sit back and see what they have to say, um and I guess that’s something that I need to overcome in that particular class, but I say certain things on that particular topic I am aware that a majority of people in the room may not understand or be knowledgeable of the same things that I am aware of. Um, so for me it is more of an internal frustration, um it, it bothers me, um and I’m sure it shows on my face when I’m in class. Um especially when some topics come up and I guess everybody expects you to speak up for your race. And it’s just like, I should, at the same time I want to sit back and see how much people really know, um, I don’t know. It’s, it’s a battle, you know. (Walls & Hall, p. 2018, p. 56)

The study revealed that when the environment was perceived as open, students were more willing to participate. A positive attribute to a difficult situation was having culturally aware instructors and corrected students who were wrong with the facts on race-related conversations. One of the biggest upsets of the study reported by students was white classmates who enjoyed participating in the discussions as if they knew African American students' experiences. When African American students involved in the study felt the need to respond, they often trained themselves to respond calmly. To avoid awkward interactions, students felt that by remaining calm, the opinion would not be misinterpreted and that their classmates would receive their remarks as more of facts and logic when presented calmly instead of emotional.
Being the classroom spokesperson was an issue that arose amongst the African American population of the study. Students felt a binding commitment to be the voice of the Black community within the classroom. As reported by the participants, the pressure presented from this resulted in physiological stress, negative perceptions of the instructor, and conversation withdrawal. The study suggests that some students resented this platform and preferred that instructors find other ways to validate cultural heritage within the classroom. Negative emotions were reported more frequently than positive emotions throughout this study. Students reported avoiding engaging in conversation about race to keep peace and avoid conforming to racial stereotypes. The study found that distrust of white peers and instructors was a strategy to protect African American students from being labeled, attacked, or misrepresented. Students stated to avoid being placed in such situations; it is common to use a “wait and see” approach to class discussions.

The final and probably most important component of this study is the role of the instructor. Students enter college, seeking support and encouragement from those in leadership positions. While forming peer relationships is vital to students' success, having a relationship of trust and support with a professor is a crucial indicator of student success and students being inspired to enter the world as productive citizens. Franklin et al. (2017) define student-professor interactions as both verbal and nonverbal interactions, overall class remarks, and frameworks of interactions between the professor and students within or outside of the classroom (p 640). Franklin et al. (2017) go on to say that factors such as being approachable, providing career guidance, offering respect, caring attitudes of professors, outside of classroom interactions, a sense of connectedness, access to the professor, and also negative interactions (p. 641) also significantly affect student outcomes.
When professors are not knowledgeable about how to deal with the classroom's demographic makeup, this further complicates the comfort of students who are enrolled in the course. Professors are expected to bring an awareness of diversity to the classroom and aim to provide students with an experience that allows them to explore different perspectives while also realizing who they are as individuals and embracing every component of that person. The environment set forth by the professor can empower as it also has the power to divide. Roksa and Whitley (2017) suggest that the student’s perceptions of faculty can balance the relationship between academic and academic achievement (p. 334) and state that addressing these questions is essential to the development of a compelling understanding of student success and how policies and practices can facilitate these outcomes. Universities must be conscious of this and provide staff opportunities to receiving appropriate professional development as it pertains to race matters and cultural awareness within the classroom.

The professor’s role is to create an environment where all students are respected and challenged. This challenge is given when students are allowed to think beyond what has been taught or ingrained regarding race relations. It is an opportunity to explore others’ opinions and have critical conversations that identify differences while offering understanding. According to Walls and Hall (2018), it is the instructor’s responsibility to create a climate that allows respectful and intellectual discussion (p. 39). This begins with instructors being equipped with strategies to facilitate engaging class discussion pertaining to race relations appropriately. Students in the study believed that instructors’ behavior, level of competence, and classroom strategies and practices could guide conversations about race in either a positive direction or a negative one. When students felt that professors were credible, students reported being more willing to participate and more comfortable in the learning environment. When professors in a
recent study were asked their opinion, some reported that they felt a lack of training and anxiety when discussing race in the classroom. Past research and studies suggest that faculty have not been exposed to but would benefit from training to develop skills to provide students with a learning environment that promotes race conversations.

This study's thematic breakdown suggests that the African American students’ emotional and behavioral responses to race discussions and how students are not protected from racial tension upon entering college. African American students face challenges when attending PWIs, which has been echoed in numerous studies. According to Walls and Hall (2018), the overall past and present-day collective contexts related to being an African-American contributed to the reactions and potential participation of the students (p. 57). While having previous experiences of interacting within the majority culture, students held limited experience with navigating through classes with white students who were limited in their exposure to students of diverse backgrounds. The study focused on the classroom because it provided an opportunity to examine a setting where students were held to standards both academically and behaviorally. Students were observed in a setting where they did not control the ethnic composition of the environment.

While PWIs continue to diversify to include different cultures, students will look to institutions and academic leaders to support their race relations exposure. Recent studies have found that as the African American population of students has increased at PWIs, the negative racial attitudes among white students has increased, unfortunately. Additionally, when instructors implement an approach to teaching about race that downplays open and purposeful dialogue, this could have a detrimental impact on students’ racial attitudes, willingness to confront biases, and their ability to become more racially aware (Craig & Richeson, 2014). The
misfortune in this is that a further divide is birthed, and not only do we impact the opinions of the African American student’s preconceived idea of how society views him, we possibly validate the same opinion held by white students that we aim to destroy. Factors must be identified that will enable minority students to be more successful at PWIs while feeling engaged.

**African American Student Resilience**

Resiliency involves standing when one does not want to stand. Resiliency is the ability to endure situations that may not end in your favor. It has the hope that despite the negativity, one is determined to carry out a mission or achieve a goal. African American student resiliency is about an individual who has experienced let down but has the will to continue to move forward. The African American student entering and completing college must display a resiliency level that can withstand treatment that may be unbearable for some.

Resiliency is a critical factor in the academic success and performance of students. The ability to withstand cultural factors, environmental differences and uncertain outcomes play heavily on African American students' decisions to persist. A student’s ability to endure academic situations with the tools necessary to achieve often determine whether the college experience is one that sets a plan of future success or experience that merely strongholds students in a zone of complacency. With consideration to what is needed to be successful, existing research details this success from the perspectives of parents (Jones, 2009), from what has been reported by educators (Reis, Colbert, & Herbert, 2005), and also from administrators (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002). However, little research exists that shares what is needed from the actual African American college student's perspective. According to Fraser, Kirby & Smokowski (2004), being resilient is not a sole personal trait or characteristic of an individual. Rather, it
results from multifaceted and constant interactions between an individual’s traits and the resources in the individual’s environment (p. 13).

Academic resiliency is best defined as the student’s ability to adapt to challenging circumstances and succeed despite certain factors (Bernard, 1991). Williams & Portman (2014) argue that “resilience is not simply a personality trait that superficially prevents the negative environment from influencing children and adolescents; some of the real causes of the individuals’ success include protective factors that involve support systems, institutions, and resources” (p. 15). Academic resiliency is bred from a determination that is possessed to achieve excellence. This requires the ability and desire to achieve academically despite adverse circumstances.

According to Mueseus et al. (2017), 62% of first-time, full-time white students who enroll at a four-year college complete a bachelor’s degree within six years while Black students are at a 40% average (p. 187). While African American students continue to lag their white peers, this disinterest in competitive performance is often attributed to environmental factors and a lack of support from contributing adults. Thus, students develop an attitude of failure. Wiggan (2014) documents that African American students’ school failures and disengagement, essentially fill the discourse with negative contentions about students’ ideals and their connection to school (p. 477). This misfortune adds to the already widening gap of performance between African American students and their white peers. As a result of minimal motivation, attrition rates nationwide continue to pose challenges.

A key factor in student resiliency is the feeling of belonging. Students often struggle with resiliency because there is a lack of understanding of what it means to be resilient. While the African American student is familiar with generational acknowledgments of resiliency, what
is necessary for an unknown environment can become foreign and make the desire to succeed that much harder? When students are felt that their presence is purposeful and contributive, students can thrive in uncertain and unfamiliar environments. Walton and Cohen (2007) describe social belonging as an essential human need to have concrete relationships with other people (Patterson et al., 2017). With some racial minorities feeling a sense of stigmatism, inclusion adds confidence. Reversely, the alternative, the doubt of belonging concluding in social exclusion in the long term may result in poor health and other well-being issues. (Patterson et al., 2017, p. 777). Cultivating social belonging can have positive effects on student behaviors and student college retention rates. Patterson, Butler, & Barnes found that a social-belonging intervention that exposed students to statements about social difficulties in college indicated that intervention positively impacted participants’ sense of belonging and academic performance (2007). Because racial minority groups are not exclusive in most universities, explicit efforts must be made to provide students with such opportunity. If not offered, a harmful campus culture and environment manifested by categorized stereotypical threat along with explicit and implicit macroaggressions can corrode the drive to persevere through intensified stress, mental load, and consequent negative psycho-emotional and physical outcomes including a critical sense of belonging uncertainty (Patterson et al., 2017, p. 778).

Higher education retention programs aim to avoid the negative consequences of reduction by offering support for students (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). In a study conducted through Washington University in St. Louis, students were provided an intervention class that aimed to provide support to minority students. The sample included 128 students, 63 enrolled in a minority intervention class, and 65 minority students not enrolled. Students participating in the intervention class received a structured introduction along with guided social-belonging theory
discussion. Students participated in a structured discussion around a students’ sense of purpose, student worries, and preparedness for college. The student minority population was mainly African American (76%), and involved students enrolled full-time in 2013. Results found that 68.3% of students in the control intervention group re-enrolled in spring 2014, with only 56.9% of those in the comparison group (Patterson et al. 2017., p. 779). This student's findings suggested that social belonging efforts and interventions played an integral part in college preparation.

In comparison to 41 percent of white males receiving bachelor’s degrees, only 22 percent of African American males receive bachelor’s degrees (Kena et al., 2015). Many African American males see college as an unachievable goal due to their plight in education. According to Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2012; Harry et al., 2000; Moore et al., 2008, as early as the k-12 level, many African American males experience low expectations from teachers, limitations with academic preparedness, higher suspension rates, and disproportionate placement in special education services. All these factors contribute to a non-desire or a fear of higher education, particularly in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable environment. Little is known regarding African American males who complete college. However, it has been reported that students who have greater social and ethnic capital, come from families of higher economic status, have college expectations placed on them by parents, have exceptional academic records, and have parents with post-secondary experience, are more successful than their African American peers without this support system (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 226). This does not come as a surprise when considering the supports needed for students to be successful. In contrast to African American students who enter the college environment with family support and exposure
to cultural differences, students who do not have this support represent a growing number of college students.

A study involving African American males who graduated from a mid-sized predominately white institution, in sharing their experiences, both reported being first-generation college students from rural southeast USA communities. Both participants reported that during their years at a PWI, the number of African American students rose from 15-20 percent, and the number of African American freshmen nearly doubled. (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 228). However, this same study revealed that only about one-third of the African American students did not return during their sophomore year. This being in comparison to only one-fourth or less of white students returning. The results of this study proved that students were initially pushed by the family to attend college. Participants reported that pre-college experiences such as pre-planning and parental support as first-generation college students initially assisted in the decision to attend a PWI. Participants also reported racial tension and incidents at predominately white high schools that prepared them for what would be experienced at a PWI. One subject the difficulty of knowing that there were still inflexible racist attitudes when referring to his high school experience which involved an unjust Student Government Association campaign (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p.231).

Because of high school experiences in rural predominately white communities, participants in the study revealed several key elements that made what could very well have been a negative college experience into one that was culturally rich, meaningful, and life-changing. Participants admitted that they entered the PWI to increase enrollment amongst African American students, and at the time, the institution was not ready for them regarding safety and inclusion. One participant felt that the PWI was not prepared to reported that “The institution
was not prepared to accept them as legitimate students in some ways, and this sent a message that while they could possibly earn a degree, they would not have access to the overall institutional experience which included recognition that comes along with being a college student (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 236). However, with time participants attributed black student visitation weekends, multi-cultural affairs office involvement, and the support of persons on campus, both black and white, as having been positive influences in their determination and resiliency. The simple act of a few caring and offering consideration and inclusiveness contributed to a turnaround in what was formally a negative experience.

**African American Enrollment at PWIs**

Lewis & McKissic (2010) believe that the African American population on white campuses is under-examined and therefore neglected as a true undergraduate experience. Research has shown that African American students are less likely to persist than their white peers are. Being exposed to a prejudiced climate and a discriminatory classroom has gained attention as one of the leading factors attributed to the differences in withdrawal behavior between Black students and non-minority students (e.g., Fleming, 1984; Hurtado, 1992, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Smedley, Myers, & Harrel, 1993). Because of this, PWIs have sought to change the experiences offered for minority students, but the enrollment of minority students continues to present a challenge. Jones et al. (2002) believes that changing demographics present challenges when trying to create an environment that is conducive to the needs of the ethnically diverse population represented at white institutions (p. 20).

While many minority students believe that attendance at PWIs will afford them equal opportunities as their non-minority peers, these students are aware of the challenges associated with being a part of an environment unlike one’s own. Multiple factors have been found to
influence the persistence of African American students enrolled in PWIs. Social factors such as transitioning from familiar neighborhoods to areas of cultural difference can impact college success. Coupled with this is often a fear of isolation, dissatisfaction, and stress-related to a pre-conceived feeling of negativity regarding the environment found at PWIs.

Predominately white institutions nationally are about 11% black, which causes intensified insecurity due to such a huge racial divide (Keels, 2013, p. 311). The African American student’s experience at an HBCU in comparison to that at a PWI has been documented that students learn better and are more satisfied at HBCUs than at PWIs (Bohr et al.; 1995, Cokley 1999; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Watson & Kuh, 1996). The Center for Postsecondary Research concluded that the best indicator of student gratification was a student’s awareness of how supportive the college is to his or her educational needs (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014, p. 566).

The adjustment of African American students to PWIs continues to be a significant struggle as African American students understand that the PWI environment is not designed for their experiences and cultures but has been adapted to accommodate their experiences and culture. Research presumes that by default or by chance, Black students experience lower adjustment and performance in predominately white institution settings because of fewer socioeconomic assets in the home and school, or conflict between their traditional and social values and the underlying principles and beliefs associated with predominately white institution environments (Chavous et al., 2002, p. 234). This is further confirmed by the visibility of difficulty in the social and academic integration of African American students at PWIs across the United States.
To be fully engrossed in the PWI experience, African American students must show cultural and academic representation and leadership representation. Baber (2014) suggests that leadership experiences have shielded African American students from specific derogatory experiences, but these opportunities have been somewhat confined to ethnic organizations. Ethnic organizations have been created to foster solidarity, but a more inclusive experience is necessary for African American students to validate equitable opportunities. Baber (2012) considers leadership by considering the experiences had by African American student leaders, interaction with organization advisors and peers, and benefits of leadership experienced by African American students in predominately white campus organizations.

Leadership opportunities account for a small percentage of African American students on PWI campuses. The fact of the matter is that with such a small opportunity for campus-wide leadership, the notion of leadership resiliency must be extended through other opportunities to meet students' cultural and developmental needs. Marbley et al. (2013) believe that it is necessary for colleges concerned about African American academic success to recognize that failure or success is due in part to unmet cultural and developmental needs (p. 92). Leadership opportunities must be extended by meeting students' needs developmentally and culturally, allowing them to display such qualities.

The African American Female Experience Versus the African American Male Experience

While African American females and males share similar college experiences due to race, it is essential to consider whether gender provides a difference in experiences. African American students graduate at a rate of 39.5% in six years in comparison to White students who graduate at a rate of 61.5% (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Beattie et al. (2018) suggest that non-academic factors past grades help identify who is likely to succeed and who is likely to flounder
It is essential to consider if gender experience plays a role in this determination. Kelly et al. (2015) report that as of 2014, black women comprise 16.6% of women undergraduate students at four-year PWIs, but only 43.3% of that number graduate within six years, a rate which has not changed much since 2002 (p. 167). Aside from factors known to inhibit retention and graduation, the authors state that while Black female students are graduating, not many reports of having a fulfilling or engaging college experience (p. 168).

While the higher education experiences of Black women matter, Phelps-Ward, et al. (2017) suggest that the African American woman college student voice is suffering and requires attention (p. 53). Winkle-Wagner (2015) states that many factors contribute to the sense of fear that is present for African American women. These include fear of not being a part of mainstream, PWI culture, and the possibility of having to change oneself to fit in (p. 178). Studies have been conducted to unpack persistence and sustainability. However, few consider the African American woman’s sustainability and persistence from the lens of support and peer relationships on the college campus (Apugo, 2017).

The African American student’s pursuit of education has received attention over the last few years, but most have not been specific to the male student. The research challenges include lack of teacher and counselor encouragement to enroll in college, lack of college preparatory courses, low academic achievement, and underrepresentation in gifted programs. However, what is necessary is information on factors that influence African American educational underachievement (Haywood et al., 2016, p. 112). According to Harper (2015), studies have repeatedly shown that racial stereotypes are common on PWI campuses, the impact of these stereotypes are hazardous both psychologically and academically, and that African American undergraduate males experience stereotypes more than anyone else in higher society populations.
In addition to this, Harper (2015) further expands on the fact that several researchers have also explored underrepresentation, social isolation, academic stress, and racism of students at PWIs and through this report that 33% of black male undergraduate students attain a bachelor’s degree within six years compared to 48% of students overall. The literature on Black male students has focused on challenges with stereotypes, but limited attention has been devoted to understanding how students resist racial challenges (p. 649).

It is vital to provide opportunities for experiences to understand African American male college student's perceptions. Parker et al. (2016) state that understanding the black male’s undergraduate experience from a student perspective helps produce an accurate description that informs those who work with them. Additionally, Black male undergraduate students can begin understanding what it means to be a Black male at a predominately White institution and use this information to better operate and flourish in these institutions (p. 77). In efforts for staff to better respond to the needs of an already disadvantaged by the statistics population, it is vitally essential that time and opportunity allow for this understanding. Hines et al. (2015) share while the journey of African American males in education has been thoroughly documented, little is known about the college persistence of African American males and that there is statistical confirmation that degree attainment is most elusive for African-American males (p. 226).

**Student Perceptions of Acceptance**

While African American students believe that the opportunity for education is best met at PWIs, they still enter these institutions with a certain level of fear and concern about the experience outcome. Wolf et al. (2017) report that a toxic climate and campus culture noticeable by identity-based stereotype threat (p. 778) can heighten the stress and mental load of students. Gusa (2010) found that racial discrimination continues to be a cause for high attrition rates of
African American students enrolled at PWIs and believes that the “denial of racism ignores the continual racial hostility and discrimination” (p. 465). Little research exists where solutions are provided to address the retention of African American students. While PWIs generally are not blatantly racist, African American students’ perception senses racism through the adoption of White ideology on PWI campuses. This idea is often further complicated within their African American communities, as attending PWIs brings about mixed feelings from their racial group as there is a sense that the African American college student has changed identities to fit in. Webb (2017) describes this idea as “acting white” or outside of one’s true ethnicity or culture and states that extensive studies have been conducted that question the validity of the accusation, identity among members of minority groups, students within academic settings, and behaviors that are often alleged as suggestive of the accusation (p. 479). Webb (2017) goes on to share that based upon surveys of recent studies, more than 200 college students that were comprised of numerous levels of apparent racial identity and empathy, their findings suggest that African American students with white friends are perceived as untrustworthy to their identified racial group (p. 480).

This study’s perception is defined as the awareness or sensitivity an individual hold regarding his or her environment or experiences (Phillips, 2005). The idea that campus environments have influenced the academic experiences of college students in a repetitive discussion in research on African Americans in higher education (Davis, 1994, p. 620). It has been the opinion of some that African American students receive a better education at HBCUs due to an environment that is welcoming and promotes success. Several studies suggest that two salient factors differentially affect Black college student performance vis-à-vis that of white college students: (1) a perceived lack of positive social
support; and (2) perceived discrimination on the part of professors, administrators, and peers (p. 623). Considerable attention has been paid to the African American student’s college experience, particularly those who attend PWIs (Baber, 2012). Regardless of an increase in enrollment of African American students at PWIs, when compared to white peers, African American students at predominately white institutions are more likely than their white peers to develop a perception of racial hostility while on campus (Baber, 2012, p. 67).

African American students continue to experience the lack of sensitivity from non-minority peers that forbids a change in perception. Examining campus environmental perceptions of African American and White students enrolled in an equal opportunity program at a PWI, Phillips (2002) found that African American students felt marginalized and unwelcome on their campuses and found it challenging to overcome racial, socioeconomic, and academic issues. This information encompassed advising relationships, administrative climate, faculty, peer interaction, and student services. Focusing on a plethora of factors and placing students in various situations, the perception of equity amongst African American students remained negative.

Hotckins’ (2014) work focuses on the perception of African American students’ perception of equity through leadership. While Hotckins’ (2014) research examines the benefits of African American students at PWIs involvement in ethnic organizations as positive, he also focuses on the hostility and stress that African American students face while attending predominately white universities and colleges (p. 172). This is vital to the research as it opens an opportunity to focus on PWIs’ desire to provide opportunities for African American students, but how this attempt has been marginalized due to the African American student’s perception of exclusion. Dahlvig (2010) further exposes this notion through the eyes of Tanya, an African
American student at a PWI, who recounts her experience as being somewhat sad where no other face looked like her African American face (p. 369).

To offset this perception of isolation and displacement, Land and Land (1995) believe that all faculty, staff, and students are responsible in recognizing cultural insensitivity of African American students and are required to respond to their unmet needs (p. 13). To address these insensitivities, Marbley, Bonner, Williams, Morris, Ross, & Hansel (2013) believe that professors play a significant role in the academic achievement of unprepared students, and for college students of color, this includes both their social and academic success (p. 9). The desire is for predominately white universities to embrace diversity and multiple cultures by creating a philosophy with staff to prepare students with support and understanding better to meet their needs. This goal is still debatable as very little is known of schools, operating as racial socialization agents (Wiggan, 2014, p. 116).

While the notion has been that current public education is attuned to all students' needs, this has not been the reality for minority students. Within the traditional model of education, schools, by and large, are viewed as the reputed equalizer (Howard, 2002, p. 5). This misconception suggests that members of the minority share this perspective. This is not the case as many African American students do not view school as the equalizer or environment of equity, but of one where their academic and cultural identities (p. 6) are under attack. As a result of this, the effects on African American students tend to be unacceptance, leading to substantial cumulative effects of the academic experience.

The African American student also struggles with the concept of “acting white”. This term derives from the idea of a person acting outside his cultural and racial environment. Many students struggle with racial identity at PWIs because of this very perception. At times, this
accusation can hurt the student and result in harmful psychosocial outcomes. Research suggests that the label known as acting White is one of the most damaging denunciations one African-American adolescent can launch at another (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 27). While this begins outside of the PWI, dating back as early as elementary school, students carry this view into later teen years and college. While believing that people develop through open-minded stages of ethnic identification based on low or high levels of examination of cultural history and dedication to their cultural group (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 29), adjustment to PWIs can prove to be extremely difficult. This belief states that students are accustomed to and comfortable around what is the norm. In order to feel a part of the norm, students are often forced to take on a different identity. Current research suggests in comparison with other racial identity measures, public and private regard have stronger associations with key emotional conclusions such as depressive symptoms, apparent stress, and psychological functioning (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 30). In this situation, private regard is defined as the practical attitudes that contribute to their racial group. In contrast, public regard refers to how they feel their group is viewed positively by society (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 30).

Attached to “acting white” and African American racial identity is the oppositional culture theory, which is a framework for “describing how Black students responded to the acting White label and suggested that opposition toward mainstream American values significantly shaped their sense of identity” (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 30). However, studies connected to this theory suggest no evidence that the oppositional culture theory influenced students’ grades. While academics may not define this theory, an overall identity crisis of who one is can significantly impact academics, thus affecting the African American student’s performance and sense of belonging.
The biggest concern with African American students “acting white” is how it affects the student psychologically. While few studies have been conducted to explore how suppressing the African American student’s persona affects mental well-being, evidence suggests that some African American students who fall under this accusation develop a raceless personality and tend to reject Black culture while embracing a mainstream culture (Durkee and Williams, 2015, p. 31).

A recent study conducted consisting of second through fourth-year undergraduate students attending a PWI aimed to determine the mental and psychological impact experienced by African American students who felt the need to identify with a culture and race different from their own. This study included 145 students with an average age of 20 with an equal representation of students in years two through four. Sixty-five percent of the sample group was female, while the remaining thirty-five percent was male. Of students participating in the study, sixty-nine percent identified as African American, ten percent as African, seven percent as Caribbean/West Indian, and thirteen percent as multiracial. Participants responded to questions such as whether they had ever been accused of acting white and whether being labeled as such negatively impacted them. Students were asked to complete rating scales to determine how their levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional stress were affected by the label (Griffith et al., 2019).

Summary

Current research continues to share a divide in support for African American students in the form of cultural inclusion, faculty support, mentoring, and academic performance. Repetitive literature suggests that African American students perform lower academically than White students and that attrition is an increasing factor amongst this population. Prior research has considered factors that contribute to this study, including family structure, lack of preparedness
upon entry, and feelings of isolation. However, future research is needed to empirically validate the experiences of equity while enrolled in PWI undergraduate experience for African American students and the professional success afforded to this population of students as a result of receiving an academic and cultural experience PWIs. This study will address the gaps in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of the study participants by seeking an understanding of how participants describe their decision to attend PWIs, how they describe access to resources, and how they describe their preparedness for selected careers post-graduation.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the undergraduate experiences of African American college graduates of predominately white institutions in Virginia, as there is a lack of research in the existing literature of the African American student’s experience of equity. This chapter presents information on the selected design and presents a foundation of analysis for this study. This study followed the phenomenological qualitative design, which allows researchers to describe participants’ experiences with the intent to describe a phenomenon. Research questions guided this study, and the setting and participants for this study are identified. Procedures included the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, participant selection, data collection, and recording procedures will be discussed.

Design

The qualitative method is most appropriately used when researchers desire to explore a problem or an issue. “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Qualitative research aims to collect data that is “inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Characteristics of qualitative research include natural setting, the researcher as the key instrument (data collector through an examination of documents, behaviors, and interviews), multiple sources of data (interviews, observations, documents), inductive data analysis, participant meanings, emergent design, theoretical lens, interpretive inquiry (interpretation of what is seen, heard, and understood), and holistic accounts of the problem or issue (Creswell, 2007).
A phenomenological qualitative study was used to conduct this research as it is most appropriate to understanding the lived experiences of several individuals. This study's focus was to define what all African American graduates of PWIs have in common through their shared experiences of attending PWIs. Phenomenology minimalizes independent experience with a phenomenon to a universal core (van Manen, 1990). This study aimed to describe the perception of equity experienced by African American students at PWIs through the phenomenon of the experiences. Phenomenologists aim to describe what participants share in common while experiencing a phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 253). This design is guided by an interest in considering participants' shared experiences and making connections based upon these shared experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), “Experiences are connected to phenomena, things in consciousness that appear in the surrounding world, inevitably a unity must exist between ourselves as knowers and the things or objects that we come to know and depend on” (p. 43).

This study is based upon a transcendental phenomenology, with the researcher focusing on describing the participants’ experiences. The goal was to seek an understanding of graduates’ experiences while enrolled full-time at PWIs. Transcendental phenomenology is appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to remove preconceived ideas about students’ experiences while attending PWIs by merely trying to understand the experiences through a collection and report of relevant information surrounding the experiences.

**Research Questions**

For this study, the following research question and sub-questions guided the research:

**CQ.** How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI?
SQ1. How do African American graduates of Virginia PWIs describe their decision to attend a Virginia PWI instead of a Virginia HBCU?

SQ2. How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting diversity on campus?

SQ3. How do African American students describe their preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation?

Setting

This study's setting took place in Virginia, with participation selected from six sites (PWIs) across the state. While this study aimed to gather research around these institutions' graduates, it is appropriate to share current demographic information of the PWIs from which the participants are graduates. The rationale for selecting these institutions was that they are all Virginia institutions where African American students from different localities received a comparable education and were exposed to similar experiences, both culturally and educationally. The selected five schools also share common characteristics regarding organizations offered for students of color. With PWIs being defined as institutions having at least 50% of its population identified as White, of the settings, College A has a White undergraduate population of 77% and an African American population of 9.2%. College B has a White undergraduate population of 50% and an African American population of 18%. College C has a White undergraduate population of 51% and an African American population of 8%. College D has a White population of 66% and an African American population of 4%. College E has a White population of 58% and an African American population of 7%. College F has a White population of 58.4% and an African American population of 31.3%. Each setting has a strong representation of African Americans that has allowed the selected institutions to set in
place practices to advance all students to graduation.

Participants

The participants for this study included ten graduate African American male and female graduates from one of the selected five institutions. The study involved 12 participants to ensure data saturation was reached, as Creswell (2013) recommends that the number be determined by reaching saturation regarding the desired phenomenon. Focus on saturation was necessary to determine when new information could no longer be added to this study (Creswell, 2007). Purposeful sampling was in place to ensure that participants were appropriate for the criteria set in place for this study. Purposeful sampling involves being deliberate in selecting participants and sites to inform the research of phenomenon (Creswell 2012) purposefully. Participants of this study graduated from a Virginia PWI after leaving home for the college experience where they were enrolled full-time as a student. Participants were employed full-time in a profession requiring a college degree of at least a bachelor’s level. Participants ranged in age from 26-49, and some participants have also received Master’s and Doctorate degrees. Participants graduated from the 1990s and 2000s eras. Participants are both first- and second-generation college students. For maximum variation, a mix of both male and female students was sampled who participated in both arts and sciences undergraduate programs with different concentrations.

Procedures

This process's first procedure was to receive approval from Liberty University and the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. After receiving approval to complete the study, I worked to secure participants for this study. Participants were invited to participate in the study through telephone calls, emails, and formal letters. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they may be released by request at any point during the
study. The selection was intentional and began with African American graduates employed full-time in a career where their specific bachelor’s degree major and/or concentration area is required. Data were gathered through pre-interview questionnaires that participants were asked to complete. Pre-interview questionnaires were provided to gain preliminary insight into participants’ perceptions of diversity and culture. A focus group was also conducted to conclude similar or different experiences of graduates from Virginia PWIs.

**The Researcher's Role**

Serving as the “human instrument” for this qualitative study, I was responsible for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. Personal experiences and relationships influence much of what we do, qualitative research acknowledges this, so it was vital for me to articulate my experiences with the phenomenon, recognizing my assumptions and biases coming into the study. By acknowledging my experiences, I brought them to the forefront to be set aside to focus on only telling the stories of the participants. My relationships with the participants, while unique, did not influence the collection of data as I initially believed that our experiences differ significantly. I was familiar with this study's participants as they are current or former colleagues, individuals from my community, or other professionals that I have become acquainted with through my career in education. While some individuals invited to participate in this study are current colleagues, the data collected was not related to or influenced by my current position, and this study was unrelated to my current professional role.

While I hold different relationships with each of the participants, there is no relationship between our undergraduate experiences as they pertained to this study's goals.
Data Collection

This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach. Data were collected from participants through pre-interview surveys, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview. I described the experiences of African American graduates who successfully earned degrees from PWIs in Virginia. Triangulation was necessary to conduct this study as it refers to using multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Multiple data sources were used to ensure validity and to confirm the discovery of a shared phenomenon. Specifically, method (data) triangulation involves using multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2012). Triangulation was also used to “enhance the analysis and interpretation of findings” (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012, p. 40). As outlined by Creswell (2012), phenomenology data collection activities include selecting multiple people who have experienced a phenomenon and living the experience through their interviews while bracketing one’s own experiences.

Participant Open-Ended Questionnaires

A brief, participant open-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher was used for this study. The questionnaire addressed attitudes and behaviors regarding multiculturalism on PWI campuses. Questionnaires also addressed participants’ perceptions of campus climate and perceptions of respect. The questionnaire required participants to reflect on the college experience while as a student at a Virginia PWI. This questionnaire was used to gather preliminary thoughts of participants.

The following questions were included in the questionnaire.

1. Please share your definition of multiculturalism.

2. In your opinion, how did your university address multiculturalism?
3. When considering race relationships, how would you describe the campus climate of your PWI?

4. Please describe, in your opinion, the treatment of African American students by staff and other non-African American students.

5. How would you describe the equitable opportunities for African American students on campus?

Questions one through five were designed to spark the interest of participants. These questions allowed for the collection of preliminary thoughts before individual interview questions. The questions included in the brief survey are centered around gathering information that describes the participants’ understanding of multiculturalism, climate, and equity. It was important that to complete the study, participants were allowed to define the study’s goals. By focusing on these areas, awareness was brought to the concerns of diversity and equity. Byrd (2019) states, “Acknowledgement of ongoing and increasing disparities experienced by students from marginalized backgrounds has led to rising concern about equitable educational access and outcomes for these populations as well as about appropriate responses to these realities” (p. 136). While research lists a concern, this questionnaire was used to provide insight into equitable access, as stated by the author.

This questionnaire was also crucial as it focused on the climate of PWIs. Considering the experiences of the participants’ perspectives of climate further connected to the overall theme of equity as participants could share how climate may have influenced academic opportunity. Campbell et al., (2019) suggest that “For African American students attending PWIs however, academic performance is significantly related to campus climate issues” (p. 392). Open-ended questionnaires will allow the participants to include their feelings and attitudes, which will
provide authentic feelings on the subject.

Interviews

The researcher developed interview questions, and interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting and were expected to last between 45 minutes and one hour. Due to the length of interviews, additional time was allotted. The interviews were conducted in person and through Google interview forms. Interviews were not held on the specific PWI campus where the participants attended but in coffee shops, libraries, or locations of the participant’s choosing. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Interviews included open-ended questions to allow the participants to answer freely. The goal was to conduct interviews in a structured manner with minimal deviations from the script. If needed, follow-up interviews were requested.

The following questions guided the interviews:

1. Please tell me about your family and your childhood.
2. Please describe your experiences in elementary, middle, and high school.
3. What factors (academically, socially, or culturally) influenced your decision to attend a PWI?
4. As an African American student, did you consider an HBCU? Please explain.
5. Upon acceptance, what were your initial thoughts on what this experience would be like?
6. How did your initial thoughts change from your first semester to your first complete year, to your final year on campus?
7. How would you describe your social experiences while on campus?
8. What campus services and activities did you participate in?
9. How would you describe the academic experience you were a part of while on campus?

10. How would you describe the cultural experience you were a part of while on campus?

11. What experiences and services provided on campus did you feel were specific to your needs as an African American student at a PWI?

12. In your opinion, how would you describe your relationship with your professors, academic support, and other figures of authority while enrolled?

13. How do you describe the relationships you held with other African American peers on campus?

14. How do you describe relationships you held with White peers on campus?

15. Looking back, what do you feel was the benefit of attending a PWI?

16. What do you feel were the obstacles, both socially and academically, from attending a PWI?

17. How do you think your academic and cultural experiences while enrolled compare to those of your current acquaintances who attended an HBCU?

18. While in your undergraduate program, what would you say your definition of adversity was?

19. Presently, what is your definition of adversity?

20. How would you define equity?

21. What is your current professional role?

22. How do you feel your decision to attend a PWI has impacted your professional role?

Questions one and two served as icebreaker questions. The intent was to gain background
knowledge of each participant as well as elementary and secondary school experiences. By learning about the participants’ family and childhood, more about the parents' and siblings' educational experiences and the value of education in the home was learned. Langenkamp and Shifrer (2018) report that an individual’s family and social class identity can influence a student’s perception of whether they can or will attend college (p. 59). The authors state that educational expectations are less predictive of a college enrollment from students in lower socioeconomic backgrounds, mainly because of expectations for education change (p. 60). This is relevant to the study as it introduces the value of education in the home and early experiences and may also contribute to the discussion of whether or not equity is the concern or other factors such as socioeconomic status. Nye et al. (2019) state that while cognitive ability is related to academic performance; past experiences may also impact how they behave in specific environments (p. 180). Learning of experiences from elementary to high school possibly gave additional information regarding the participants’ desires to attend PWIs.

Questions three through six dealt solely with the participants sharing the factors that caused them to attend a PWI and whether they considered attending an HBCU. As the number of African American students enrolled at PWIs has increased, this set of questions aims to determine why students are deciding to attend a PWI over an HBCU. According to Beasley et al., (2016), “Over the past three decades, the majority of Black undergraduates matriculated into predominately White institutions (PWIs), with recent data indicating only 11% of Black undergraduates are enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (p. 21). This is essential information to the study as why African American students choose PWIs or HBCUs can support future question responses regarding equity.
Questions seven through twelve described social experiences, classroom environment, and campus activities involvement. These questions aimed to gather information to see how the participants adapted to their new environments and how they offered campus services and activities. Bourke (2016) suggests that for African American students to be successful, individuals working in enrollment at PWIs should focus on diversity and find ways to understand how race is experienced and should adjust practices to focus on curriculum that reflects the diversity, resources specific to the needs of African American students and college engagement (p. 18). These questions also detailed how students feel the professor’s role plays a part in their experiences. According to Walls and Hall, 2018, “Instructors have a responsibility to create a classroom climate that opens the door for respectful intellectual class discussions around sensitive topics, such as race” (p. 59).

Questions 13-14 focused on relationships formed with other African American students and relationships formed with White peers. Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) found that African American students who form relationships with other African American students show higher retention and graduation rates than their peers who do not (p. 374). While this is reported of African American relationships, these questions helped determine if the same can be found with African American and white relationships. These questions were important because they helped to understand the social aspect of African American students’ experiences and make a connection between relationships and resiliency. Williams & Portman (2014) argue that “resilience is not simply a personality trait that superficially prevents the negative environment from influencing children and adolescents; some of the real causes of the individuals’ success include protective factors that involve support systems, institutions, and resources” (p. 15).
Relationships formed with other African American students and white students can connect to a student’s resiliency.

Questions 15-22 allowed the participants to reflect on the undergraduate experiences and share insight based upon present perceptions and experiences. These questions allowed participants to reflect as much younger individuals on what they felt were benefits and obstacles. By allowing the participants to share present perspectives, I was hoping to learn how the participants have used their experiences, both good and bad, beyond college. Hardrick and Montas-Hunter (2017) state that, “While students have a responsibility to take ownership of their success, it is our responsibility to make sure that we acculturate students to be proactive in their self-efficacy” (p. 21). Questions 15-22 were vital as they solidified the participants’ overall feelings while attending a PWI while also sharing the present.

Focus Groups

Local participants in this study were asked to attend a focus group. “A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic” (Patton, 2002, p. 385). While most of the participants are easily accessible, some are out of state. For those who are unable to attend the focus group, a teleconference format will be an option. Participants were given the option to participate via teleconference using GoToMeeting or Zoom software. Local participants were participants who are within an hour’s drive to the group site. Participants who have graduated within a similar year span, meaning those who graduated between 1-3 years of each other, were first preference. After individual interviews, the focus group took place to allow participants to consider themes and other commonalities reported to the researcher. After individual interviews, participants had an opportunity to provide additional insight into their reported experiences by conducting the focus group. This method allowed the researcher an
opportunity to examine reoccurring themes to strengthen the intent of the research.

The following questions were to be used.

1. Please share your name, age, and graduation year.
2. Please share which Virginia predominately white institution you attended.
3. Please describe your undergraduate major and your current field of work.
4. Please share with the group any social organizations you were a part of while enrolled as an undergraduate student.
5. Please share with the group your classroom experiences.
6. Please share your campus experiences outside of the classroom.
7. During your undergraduate experience, what did you learn about diversity on your campus?
8. Please share with the group what you feel your definition of equity would have been as a freshman.
9. Please share with the group your current definition of equity.
10. If you had to redo your college experience, would you still attend a PWI? Why or why not?

Questions one through three were used as icebreakers and so that focus group members could learn information about others in the group. Information that helped them relate their experiences was used to set the tone for the focus group discussion.

Questions four through seven were used to discuss classroom and campus experiences as well as campus diversity. These questions allowed participants to share their campus general classroom and campus experiences and what they felt their respective universities did to recognize and address diversity. Recent literature supports that changes are still necessary for
campuses’ efforts to embrace diversity. Castillo-Montoya (2019) reports that students want culturally nurturing educational experiences regarding diversity but that, “These demographic shifts, however, have not led many college leaders to make systemic changes to incorporate and draw on this diversity to enhance students’ educational experiences” (p. 200). Furthermore, learning about classroom experiences will further help me understand the recognition of diversity on campus.

Questions eight through ten focused on past and current definitions of equity and participant reflection. Equity, for this study, is defined as the student’s perception of opportunity for success in the college classroom, availability of resources to promote diversity on campus, and preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). These questions were essential to the study as the student’s definition of equity could have changed since enrolled. A change in defining equity could result from participants’ age or experiences beyond graduation, and these questions allowed the opportunity to learn more.

**Data Analysis**

Moustakas’ (1994) recommends modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. This process includes the seven steps to include:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping;
2. Reduction and Elimination
3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents;
4. Validation
5. Textural description of the experience
6. Individual Structural Description
7. Textural-Structural Description constructed for each participant (p. 120).
Van Kaam’s process allows for horizontalization. Horizontalization is intended to develop “clusters of meaning form significant statements into themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). During horizontalization, steps relevant to the experience are listed. Moustakas (1994) states that “Horizons are unlimited. We can never exhaust our experience of things completely no matter how many times we reconsider them or view them. A new horizon arises each time that one recedes” (p 94). Horizontalization requires that all data is considered, and even if unused, initial data is treated equally without elimination. This began the preliminary coding and grouping of collected data. In this stage, relevant quotes were considered. Also included are reduction and elimination, which allows the researcher to classify information determining what is relevant to understanding the experience. I determined whether the data gathered were essential to the participants’ experiences relative to the PWI experience. Irrelevant information was not used. After reviewing the data, information relevant to the phenomenon was used to develop the study's themes. Themes were carefully examined to ensure that they represented the experiences of all participants. Textural descriptions were used to determine which themes connected to individual participants to find common shared experiences. The process of clustering was used to identify any relevant themes. Validation occurred to identify final invariant constituents and themes to determine explicitness and compatibility. Textural description of experiences and individual structural description and participant textural-structure description (capturing the meanings and core of the experiences) were maintained.

The data organization involved me transcribing the data then structuring the data to look for recurrent and related themes and patterns in the data. The initial coding of the data was based on raw data. Pattern coding was used as an additional source to search for themes. At this stage, I clustered similar topics, reviewed my codes, and compared concepts from the literature. I was
able to use this information to group topics that related to each other. Codes were created with the intent of being expected and unexpected thematically and common themes found in the literature. Creswell (2013) represents data analysis through data managing, creating and organizing files for data, reading and memoing, making margin notes creating initial codes, describing personal experiences through Epoche and describing the essence of the phenomenon, classifying group statements into meaning, interpreting textual descriptions of what happened, and representing the essence of the experiences. By doing the previous, I made sense of the data and gained understanding and meaning.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of this study was guided by objectivity towards the participants and triangulation. Along with triangulation, bracketing was set in place to eliminate early biases. Maintaining an objective view of participants’ responses and opinions eliminated researcher bias towards the study. Triangulation also served to improve this study as it allowed for multiple methods of data collection. By providing multiple data sources, I removed biases and possible weakness of data collection that only one data set would have provided. This study's credibility was strengthened as a more balanced interpretation of the study’s data was presented. Since a qualitative researcher’s perspective is naturally biased due to their close association with the data, sources, and methods, various audit strategies can be used to confirm findings (Bowen, 2009; Miller, 1997). After interviews were transcribed, participants were asked to review responses.

**Credibility**

Credibility was established using multiple methods to gather data. These methods included pre-interview questionnaires, participants’ interviews, and a focus group interview.
Through participant interviews and focus groups, significant time was spent with participants and a review of data. Triangulation again served as a measure of maintaining credibility. Credibility was also maintained through interactions and monitoring of the research process with my dissertation committee. The research chair and committee members were given access to all data collected for this study.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability in this study was established by ensuring that the findings were consistent with the raw data collected. Dependability is essential to ensure equity over the study and ensure that others can arrive at the same or similar understandings, explanations, and conclusions from the collected data. Dependability also ensures that nothing is overlooked. Dependability may be accomplished by having an outside person look over data to examine collection, analysis, and results. I had an outside person to review my data collection to check the depth of information. This person did not provide feedback on analysis and results and was only consulted to review and offer an opinion of preliminary data collection. This helped by offering an opinion on whether additional data needed to be collected through interviews and the focus group interview.

Confirmability is the confidence level of the findings based on the participants’ words rather than the researcher's biases. The goal of confirmability is to ensure that the findings are based upon the participants and are not personal views based upon researcher bias. To ensure that confirmability was present, I detailed the process, analysis, and interpretation of the data by recording information during collection. Information was recorded through tape recordings and transcripts.

**Transferability**
Transferability was established by providing evidence that this study's findings could be linked to other contexts, situations, or populations. By having graduated from multiple institutions, disciplines, and of both genders, the intent was that transferability would be present in the findings. Information such as where interviews occurred, time of interviews, and other factors surrounding data collection were documented to understand the research settings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical consideration of anonymity was given to participants as an extra measure of security. Because the research setting involved six Virginia PWIs, names of the PWIs will be withheld, and PWIs will be identified by the alphabet only. Data security was important in this study, and it shared intimate recollections of experiences for participants. Data was securely locked in a home file, and electronic documents connected to this study were electronically secured via password protection.

**Summary**

This chapter was guided by the research questions in the development of a phenomenological qualitative study. Creswell (2013) suggests that data analysis consists of “preparing and organizing the data” (p. 148) before the reduction of themes. This concept was used along with Moustakas’ modification of the van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. This chapter's goal was to share the research methods used to address the central question of this study, *The African American Student’s Perception of Equity at Predominately White Institutions*. Procedures, participants, data collection, and introduction of interview questions served to build interest in the gap to be addressed. This chapter aimed to build the foundation of Chapter Four’s findings.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter includes the participants of this study’s responses, the collected data results, and a summary of findings presented in the data. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the African American student’s perception of equity-based upon the research of inclusion and exclusion at PWIs. Outlined in this chapter will be participants’ pre-interview questions that provide background information of participants. These interview questions describe their experiences while attending a PWI, professional life post-PWI attendance, and shared focus group thoughts of participants who attended PWIs.

Participants

Participants of this study attended predominately white institutions in Virginia. Twelve graduates participated in this study with a mix of eight female students and four male students. All participants of this study identify as African Americans having both parents of African American descent. They range in age from 25-48 years old, with most participants being aged 25-35. Eight of the participants in this study are female, while four participants are male. Ten participants are first-generation college students, and two participants come from homes where one or both parents attended college. Four participants hold bachelor’s degrees, seven hold master’s degrees, and one participant holds a doctorate. Except for three, all participants continue to reside in Virginia though none reside in the PWI city or town they attended. All participants classify their current work as a career rather than a job. Of the twelve participants, at least five attended two of the same PWIs used in this study. Table 1 shares brief demographic information followed by additional information of participants.
Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Graduation Era</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>26-31</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44-49</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jocelyn</td>
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<td>Bachelor’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perli</td>
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<td>Master’s</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>32-37</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
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<td>Stan</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32-37</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant One: Johnnie
Johnnie is a female participant who graduated in 2012. Johnnie currently lives in Maryland. She is the youngest of two children and is from a single-parent household. Johnnie did not grow up in a wealthy family but states that she always had enough. Her mother worked hard to make sure that each sibling had everything necessary to be successful. However, such success did not include college education but was recognized as the ability to take care of herself in adulthood. Although college was not at the forefront of the home environment, Johnnie always attended schools considered better than average. Johnnie’s early school experiences were in predominately white schools where she feels she was not always treated fairly and felt it necessary to assert herself at times. Johnnie believes that because of early mistreatment, she was more determined to succeed and feels that the early school experiences she received, although not always positive, prepared her to be able to handle the same situations as an adult, but with strategies to overcome.

Participant Two: Louise

Louise is a female participant who graduated in 1994. She currently lives in Maryland. Louise grew up in a diverse neighborhood in a predominately white Lutheran church. Louise has always been exposed to diversity. While identifying as African American, Louise identifies varied skin hues within her immediate family and provides a lens for diversity. Louise’s experiences better prepared her to attend a predominately white institution because she was already exposed to diversity. Louise described her elementary, middle, and high school experiences as very diverse with little to no discrimination. Her school settings were peaceful, and she was given an opportunity as a high school student to take community college-level courses. Before attending college, she was already allowed to participate in an internship, and she describes the experience as “very professional.” Louise stated that her “background and
experiences drove my decision to attend a PWI. In my impression, a PWI mirrored my upbringing and my prior experiences.” Louise attended an HBCU for one semester but chose not to continue because she did not like the “lack of diversity.” She attended to follow a love interest but stated that an HBCU “did not accurately reflect the environment, which I know is the world at large.”

Participant Three: Jocelyn

Jocelyn is a 2010 female graduate who resides in Central Virginia. Jocelyn grew up in a two-parent household with a younger sibling. Her parents have been married for over 30 years. Jocelyn stated, “I never heard or saw my parents argue, we went on beach trips every year and other trips throughout the year. We had everything we needed and never struggled (at least to my knowledge).” Jocelyn describes her childhood as pleasant. Both of Jocelyn’s parents are college-educated and hold professional jobs. Jocelyn has been around academia driven people her entire life and knew that she was college-bound at a young age. Both of Jocelyn’s parents attended PWIs, and while there was no dislike for HBCUs in her home, she knew that she would attend a PWI due to the universities’ reputation discussed within the home. The majority of Jocelyn’s experiences before college included the “inclusion of different people from all races, including school and leisure activities.” Jocelyn lived in a predominately white neighborhood and attended predominately white schools. Jocelyn was usually the only African American student in her classes and said that many of her friends considered her white because “of the way I talked and acted, so that bothered me a little, but that was just what was said about me all through school.” Jocelyn experienced bullying in middle school. However, African American students felt that she thought she was better than others and “acted white.”

Participant Four: Perli
Perli is a 2010 female graduate who lives in Southern Virginia. Perli’s parents divorced when she was a child, but both remained present and active in her life. Perli is a triplet and feels that she lived a very structured yet sheltered life. Perli’s dad was a pastor, and her mother was a teacher. Perli states that she made many friends during elementary school years, and her dad often surprised her at school by bringing a pizza lunch for the entire class. Perli describes middle school as scary because she first encountered gang activity, drugs, and student arrests. Her favorite time during school was high school. Perli says she went to a small high school, had awesome teachers, and “found my independence and wonderful, lifetime friends.”

**Participant Five: Annie**

Annie is a 2005 female graduate who lives in Texas. Annie’s parents divorced when she was younger, and she moved around a lot, attending many different schools. Annie views this experience as a disadvantage as it caused her not to make long-term friends as a child. Annie stated, “I had a good childhood from my perspective, excess love and no severely traumatic experiences.” Although her parents divorced, Annie gained a stepfather, Ben, who has been an “amazing” dad to her for 15 years. While she viewed her moving around lot as a disadvantage during her early years, she now attributes it to her ability as an adult to connect with people from all walks of life. Annie received the opportunity to graduate from high school with an Associate’s degree. Annie says that she considered attending an HBCU, but not until it was too late and she had already committed to attending a PWI.

**Participant Six: Tia**

Tia is a 2013 female graduate who lives in Central Virginia. Tia’s mother died when she was five years old, and her aunt raised her. Her father was present though not consistently. Tia is the older of two siblings. Her parents divorced when she was two. Tia grew up in a Christian
based home. She stated that her aunt was very hard on her growing up, but it was in a loving and
caring way. Tia said education was essential in her home, and she was always pushed to do her
best. Everything that was needed was provided in the home, and she believes that her aunt
“made sure we were prepared for adulthood, and she made sure that we knew that she would
always be there for us as well.” Tia describes her elementary years as pleasant, but that middle
school was a bit more complicated. “Middle school was definitely a different experience; during
this time, it was all about finding the group of people that you most likely fit in with. I was a
very quiet, shy, and to myself individual in school.” Tia shared that her high school experience
was also different because she had to find the group that best fits her personality. Tia recalled
regretting not participating in high school activities due to fear and an unwillingness to step out
of her comfort zone.

**Participant Seven: Stan**

Stan is a 1994 male graduate who currently resides in Northern Virginia. Stan is a first-
generation college student from a two-parent household. Stan’s experiences outside of his
hometown were limited until he attended college. Stan’s father was a farmer, and some of his
early life and work experiences center around tobacco farming. His mother was a factory
worker, and Stan is the youngest of five children. Stan stated that all his needs were met, and his
parents stressed a strong work ethic and church on Sundays. As a child, he participated in many
activities and was also permitted to play sports. In elementary school, Stan was an honor roll
student, loved baseball, and had many friends as an introvert. In middle school, he was a good
student, enjoyed sports, and had many friends. In high school, he remembers truly developing
his love of sports, specifically football, and remembered working out a lot, studying a lot, and
“hanging out” very little. Stan stated that he chose to attend his selected PWI because it “offered
a great education and a sports scholarship whereby my parents were relieved of paying college expenses.” Stan considered attending a Virginia HBCU on a football scholarship but declined interest after scholarship money was not guaranteed.

**Participant Eight: Joy**

Joy is a 2014 female graduate who currently resides in Central Virginia. Joy completed college in two and a half years, having entered her university with an associate’s degree earned in high school. She is a first-generation college student. She is the youngest of three brothers and one sister. She described her childhood as “pretty great, we never had to struggle, and I always had both parents in my life.” Joy attended a private Christian school for elementary and middle school, where she was one of four black students. She began public school in the eighth grade and stated that the transition was difficult. She remembered “girls not liking me because I was pretty, smart, and acted white to the point where I had to tell my parents that some girls were planning to jump me. I didn’t even know what ‘acting white’ was. By the time I got to high school, things got better for me.” Joy attended her PWI because of its reputation in the medical field. Joy originally wanted to become a gastroenterologist.

**Participant Nine: Demi**

Demi is a 2001 male graduate who lives in Central Virginia. Demi is an only child and the first in his immediate family to earn a college degree. Demi’s father did not graduate from high school. His mother received her high school diploma and several certifications after high school. Growing up, Demi was a quiet child and stayed predominately to himself or with those who had similar personalities. Demi described having a wonderful elementary experience as teachers traveled with kids to the next year’s grade level. Demi believes that this experience helped him grow and learn because teachers were familiar with his needs. Middle and high
school was tougher because “it was more of a forced independence,” and Demi had to learn how to interact on his own. Demi attended a PWI because he wanted to stay close to home, and his selected PWI was the best option at the time. He also wanted to attend a school that would look like the real world, not represented by one culture or one race. Demi believes that by attending a PWI, he gained the ability to experience different cultures and learn his likes and dislikes. Demi did not consider an HBCU due to the distance but stated that “attending an HBCU looks like it would be a wonderful experience.”

**Participant Ten: Rick**

Rick is a 2000 male graduate who lives in Southside, Virginia. Rick grew up in a two-parent household with an older sister. His childhood experiences are positive, and time was spent playing sports and musical instruments and reading. Rick’s parents did not go to college, and his older sister started but did not finish. Rick’s childhood was filled with playing sports, musical instruments, band, and reading. He detailed his elementary school years as uneventful. Middle school is when Rick started playing sports, playing in a band, and the piano. Rick was not social during those times and did not have many friends. Rick described himself as an average student. High school was not memorable for him, and he did not enjoy the experience. Rick selected his PWI based on the offering of programs that aligned with his interests, such as government and computer science. Rick also considered his PWI because it was far from home. He stated, “I wanted to get out of Chatham, VA, and go to a large city. I had the opportunity to visit the campus and I loved the area as well as the campus. I didn’t consider or examine the culture when deciding.” Rick did not consider an HBCU because he was discouraged by those around him. They considered HBCUs as “party schools” and told him that, “companies didn’t take these schools seriously when considering you for employment.”
**Participant 11: Preston**

Preston is a first-generation college student who graduated in 1994. He is the youngest of three children. His father was a factory worker, and his mother also worked at a factory, but as an office assistant. Preston’s parents did not attend college, but his older brother attended a North Carolina HBCU on a baseball scholarship but did not finish. His sister attended and graduated from a Maryland HBCU on a basketball scholarship. From an early age, family, sports, and hard work were at the core of Preston’s family values. While his parents did not attend college, from an early age, Preston and his siblings were taught the importance of education and never doubted that they would attend college. Preston became involved in sports at an early age and excelled and lettered for three sports. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, while quiet, Preston was popular and well-liked and had good experiences due to his athletic ability. Both PWIs and HBCUs in Virginia heavily recruited Preston. Intending to play in the National Football League, Preston selected the PWI that he felt would best advance his goal. He was red-shirted his freshman year and played a key player for his remaining years. One of his fondest memories is that his parents never missed a football game during his entire college experience and drove to all the games they attended no matter the distance.

**Participant 12: Kenya**

Kenya is a first-generation college student who graduated in 2010. Kenya attributed her desire to attend a PWI to her upbringing. Kenya was raised in a two-parent home with her two siblings. Kenya stated that she did not always have everything she wanted, but had everything she needed. Her father was in the military, and her mother worked in retail and banking. She described her parents as “average, working adults.” Kenya recalled summer trips to see family, cross-country trips, and summer camp as some of her best childhood experiences. Kenya was
born in Virginia, but her family moved to Nevada for better opportunities when she was three. She recalled that she and her siblings were the only African American students in high school. Kenya’s family returned to Virginia when she was in the ninth grade, and she stated that this was “pretty much starting over and learning a new way of life.” Kenya recalled moving back to Virginia and feeling disconnected from family and having to make new friends. Kenya did well in high school and eventually adjusted to a new peer group. Kenya’s decision to attend a PWI was based on her comfort with what she had experienced before moving back to Virginia. While she made friends of various races and ethnicities, Kenya stated that attending a PWI was the best decision for her culturally.

Results

This study is focused on Bandura’s belief in self-efficacy as it relates to the social learning theory. Self-efficacy is an individual’s ability to succeed in a particular situation. Therefore, considering how the individual participants presented submerged themselves in their institutions’ experiences was essential to the findings. This study's data collections include pre-interview questionnaires that participants were responsible for completing before one-on-one interviews. This was followed by one-on-one interviews and a semi-structured focus group interview. This chapter will serve as the analysis conducted through preliminary coding and the identifying themes which emerged through pre-interviews, one-on-one interviews, and the researcher’s notes from the semi-structured focus group interview.

To recognize and categorize essential themes and patterns from participants’ experiences, I acknowledged my own biases while bracketing participants’ responses. According to Moustakas (1994), researchers must identify Epoche as a necessary step in recognizing participants’ own experiences regarding the phenomenon. In doing so, I removed myself and
any prejudgments or biases. As the researcher, I did not have the PWI undergraduate experience of the participants, and this allowed for prejudgment. Therefore, I separated the experiences that I had and based the study solely on the experiences collected through interviews and the participants’ focus group interview. Removing my biases did not prevent me from considering potential biases that could surface due to this study. One potential bias that surfaced was wanting to support interviewees who described their experiences as pleasant to prove Bandura’s theory. To avoid “researcher bias,” I ensured I remained on the script with interviews, not motivating participants to answer differently from other participants.

As suggested by Creswell (2013), coding was used to analyze data. To effectively ensure coding, I read through all interviews multiple times, noting key phrases and concepts. Data were analyzed by highlighting quotes that provided an understanding of the participants’ experiences related to the phenomenon. I transcribed interviews by identifying participants by pseudonyms. I also kept a record of the date of the interview. Each interview was assigned a number based on the order in which it was conducted, and participants were identified by pseudonym and interview number. To make sure transcriptions were accurate, participants were asked to review. Using the participants’ experiences, I noticed themes and identified saturation as experiences began to repeat. During this process, the removal of redundant information was necessary, as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Coding allowed for the classification of materials and the identification of themes. Carefully considering all codes, I referred back to the literature review to ensure that codes aligned with areas of the literature review relevant to the research questions, and from there, I constructed central themes relevant to this study. This was achieved by reading and re-reading through pre-interviews, interviews, and focus group interview transcripts. Coding specifically involved transcription, sorting, and arranging the data based on the data source. This
was done to get an overall feel for the information and discover what general ideas participants held.

Categories were created to group the data. The grouping was required to consider specific categories or overall representations of data for specific themes. While coding, I considered if individual responses created a “why” for participants and how this grouping impacted the study's outcome. When looking at how some data was grouped, I considered if the code was a cause of another code in the study if specific codes could be associated to bring out other aspects of the study, and whether or not certain groupings resulted from other codes. During the coding process, I was careful to search for repetitions or statements that were frequently made. Also, I paid careful attention to participants’ similarities and differences. I felt this was relevant in considering how closely aligned their experiences would be. During the coding process, information was reviewed to see how and if it related to this study's theory. This was used to see if the participants’ responses matched the theory used to determine this study's phenomenon. Also, missing data was noted when recipients did not have a response to a question. However, missing data was not a huge concern.

In addition to Moustakas's (1994) work, Tesch’s Eight Steps of Data Analysis (1990) were used. After data collection, significant time was spent reading through the information for the participants' basic understanding and feelings. This was done to code effectively and to cluster similar themes and topics. In looking for themes, close attention was paid to remembering research questions and the key vocabulary of the study, which was African American, efficacy, equity, and professional success. Using Tesch’s model made me consider whether recoding was necessary due to an attempt to find the most descriptive wording for developed themes. Recoding was not necessary.
After coding information, memoing was used from the participants’ interviews and the focus group interview. I used this method to write useful ideas about codes and to determine if relationships were genuinely formed in the process. Through memoing, I sought to find whether or not participants had incidents while attending PWIs that created commonalities other than what I asked as the researcher. Another goal of memoing was to refer to notes when gathered information was unclear to see if clarity was available through what had been recorded. In the process, I looked for new patterns that would link participants to further develop themes for the overall study. Finally, memoing served as a reminder for things captured that were possibly forgotten.

Triangulation was necessary to conduct this study as it refers to using multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Triangulation is the collection of data from different sources. For this study, data sources included pre-interview questions, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview. As the researcher, I used triangulation to obtain reliable answers to the research questions and other responses collected. Using multiple data sources, I was able to cross-check for patterns to help produce a better understanding and not be limited to single-source data. Data triangulation involved using pre-interview questions to gain a preliminary knowledge of participants’ background information, their understanding or interpretation of multiculturalism, and their climate experience will attending a PWI. This pre-interview served as a segue to the richer discussion and allowed for an expansion of preliminary questions. For triangulation, the focus group interview served the purpose of exploring everyday experiences and collective ideas. The three data sources combined (triangulation) provided the opportunity to understand
participants’ experiences fully. Codes that were found were turned into themes. After themes were named, I begin the process of writing my data analysis.

Theme Development

This study aimed to explore the social and academic impact of the experiences of African American students attending Virginia PWIs. The six common themes present in this study include:

- Campus Climate and Relationships
- Social and Academic Obstacles
- Multiculturalism
- Access to Resources Promoting Diversity
- Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom
- Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution

Theme 1: Campus Climate and Race Relationships

Degree completion rates among students of color continue to be lower than their white peers. Research has stated that when there is a sense of belonging in college, the persistence to graduate increases. However, according to Museus, Yi, & Saelua (2018), “research on how culturally relevant and responsive campus environments facilitate or hinder belonging and subsequent graduation among racially diverse college student populations is sparse” (p. 467). When asked to consider race relationships and the campus experience while attending a PWI, participants’ responses formed three different groups. This theme connects to this research's central question: How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI? Thirty percent of participants (Group One) described the experience noticeably different between African American students and other
races. Ten percent of participants (Group Two) described the experience without a strong opinion of either a negative or positive opinion of race relationships, and fifty percent of participants (Group Three) defined the experience as no different from what other races experienced. Figure 1 displays the theme of Campus Climate and Relationships, followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 1**

*Theme:  Campus Climate and Relationships*

Group One participants described a noticeable difference between African American and white students. Participant 1 stated, “The environment was almost cold. We were all able to coexist and do things together, but there was still great separation. My sophomore year, even the dorm was segregated. I don’t believe it was done on purpose, but the lack of inclusion didn’t help the situation.” With similar feelings, Participant 5 described the experience as, “Tense. I feel like there were many subjects that were viewed as uncomfortable; therefore, they were not
addressed. We often felt that we were alone in our thoughts.” Participant 6 detailed, “In some situations, it did not always seem fair. There were definitely privileges to being in the majority on campus. I mean, I think at times it may have been possible to get in the ‘it group’, but at what cost was it worth it?”

The theme, Campus Climate, and Relationships brought out similar opinions in two groups, but only one participant felt differently. Participant 3 felt that “Each race pretty much stayed together, but it seemed that everyone was accepted.” The majority of participants shared the same opinion regarding Campus Climate and Relationships, remembering a positive climate. Participant 2 stated, “The climate of our school was great. I was a football player; therefore, I had a lot of interaction with other African American student-athletes as well as white students. My experience was not much different from my high school experience in that I felt I was a part of a group, although this may be attributed to my involvement in sports.” Participant 3 felt that while each race stayed together, all were accepted. “Each race pretty much stayed together, but it seemed everyone was accepted.” Participant 4 noted the welcoming environment by sharing, “The campus was very open, respectful, and welcoming. From the moment I stepped foot on campus, I knew that I was going to be okay. This is not everyone’s experience, and I recognize that. However, my experience was good from the start.” Participant 7 simply stated that “race mixing existed and I personally never saw or experienced any negativity.” Participant 8 described the campus climate as “very open.” Participant 9 said that “Although my university was predominately Caucasian when I attended, I didn’t feel like the demographic was imbalanced. I would estimate the classrooms were 50% Caucasian and 50% all other ethnic groups.” Participant 10 considered the low African American student population percentage, but still considered the experience good: “Race relations were good during my college years (1996-
African Americans made up around ten percent of the student population during that time."

Along with the consideration of campus climate, participants were asked to consider relationships with African American peers and Caucasian peers' relationships while on campus. According to Winkle-Wagner, McCallum, Luedke, & Ota-Malloy, (2019), “Interactions among peers are important for students’ success in college. Students who experience positive peer-to-peer interactions are more like to develop a positive sense of self” (p. 283). This study shares that instrumental relationships were formed between students from different racial backgrounds more than with students of the same racial background as detailed by African American students. However, instrumental relationships are defined for this purpose as relationships focused solely on academics and, in most cases, were short-term (p. 284). Eighty percent of participants detailed, rich, lasting relationships with peers. Participant 2 described relationships as “Endearing. We were of likeness, so in the world of a PWI, I still had an HBCU experience.” Participant 3 spoke of receiving a feeling of the family by sharing, “They were great. We were all pretty close-knit. There were clicks, but we all got along.” Participants 4 stated that “My relationship with my peers was loving and enjoyable. Similar to other participants, Participant 6 felt a sense of family: “Very strong, trustful, caring, bold, understanding, and family-oriented bonds were built. We made sure we went in “packs” and would check on each other. We formed study sessions and made time for self-care activities. We had each other’s backs.” Participant 7 remembered the African American population functioning as a community, sharing that, “The AA community was very strong, and we all worked together for success,” also revealing lasting friendships, “I made friends for life,” (Participant 8). An essential element of these relationships was that they were permanent. Participant 9 shared, “I had good relationships
with African American peers…some that continued years after graduation.” Finally, Participant 10 expressed gratitude for older college students on campus: “We were family. There were older African American guys that mentored and helped me transition to college life. We were a small community with the college.”

Four participants expressed a neutral or average opinion of relationships. Participant 1: “The relationships were okay. They were closer within my organization.” Other participants noted the low number of African American students enrolled. Participant 5 remembered relationships as interesting because “there were so few of us,” While Participant 11 felt that, “Because this is what I was used to in my high school experience, I was fine.” Finally, participant 12 remembered relationships as okay, but not much different from high school. She stated, “Because I pretty much get along with anybody and have had experiences will all types of people, I didn’t have an expectation of what relationships would be like. I simply decided that I was going to roll with the flow. However, I appreciated my African American peers, but that did not define me. That’s not why I was there.”

Relationships with Caucasian peers proved to be either good or non-existent. Forty percent of participants (Group One) formed lasting relationships with Caucasian peers while sixty percent (Group Two) described the relationships as non-existent, superficial, or only beneficial to Caucasian students. When speaking of positive peer relationships with Caucasian peers, Participant 2 said, “The relationships with my white peers were genuine. In a collegiate setting, the primary goal universally is learning. Hence, engaging with my white peers sometimes bridged a teachable or reflective moment.” Participant 3 agreed similarly with Participant 2 and stated, “I had great relationships with White peers on campus as well. Coming from a predominately white school my whole life, I was able to make great friends who were
white as well.” Participant 4 enjoyed the experience stating, “My relationship with my white peers was also very friendly and enjoyable.” Participant 7 attributed some relationships to fraternity involvement: “Some of my best friends were white, and I was in a diverse fraternity.” While Participant 11 was not in a fraternity, sports' brotherhood also played a part in his experiences. Participant 11 states, “I had a bond with my teammates that broke all color, academic, and ability barriers. We became family. I still have friends to this day that I made as a result of this.”

Group Two participants shared a different experience and listed the relationships as forced and false. Participant 1 stated that “Relationships were superficial, and some ended negatively.” This experience was similar to others participating in the study; Participant 5 stated that relationships were “Nonexistent. Because of some of my own insecurities at the time, I had relationships with very few white peers.” While not acknowledging positive, lasting relationships, Participant 6 detailed a needs-based experience and felt that she was “needed” She stated, “I would describe it as being “needed.” In the classroom, the need to complete group work or with a study group, was friendly. When in hallways or other campus areas, it was like we didn’t know each other.” Like Group 1, Participant 8 agrees that relationships were formed, but added that the relationships were limited to the classroom: “The only relationships I made with white peers were in an academic setting. We would study together, but as far as hanging out together, we didn’t have that kind of relationship.” Participants 9 and 10 agreed that relationships were limited to the classroom. Participant 9: “I had good relationships with white peers, but none that continued beyond the classroom setting.” Participant 10 shared, “Overall, the relationships were good in the classroom.” Finally, Participant 11 shared somewhat of a different experience: “I mean, it was different for some people, but I feel like I adjusted well.
The majority of my friends circle entering college was white so this was really nothing different. I didn’t expect it to be different, and I think that played a part in it not being different.”

However, we were separate communities within the same campus. Museus et al. (2018) state that the sense of belonging has become a key concept in college persistence and connects to a students’ psychological perspective of the community. It is essential as students desire to be a part of some community, and in failing to be a part of such, students may be impacted mentally and through unwanted behaviors (p. 470).

**Theme Two: Social and Academic Obstacles**

African–American college students are already at a significant disadvantage when achieving academically in higher education (Forrest-Bank and Jenson, 2015). African American students often enter college, already facing challenges. It is possible for these students to have experienced discrimination in a different environment and may feel as if they are not as equipped as their white peers (Brezinski, Laux, Roseman, O’Hara & Gore, 2018). In this study, Obstacles were to find how participants viewed both social and academic hindrances to their success. This theme supports the Central Question of this research, “How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI?” Some participants chose to respond to the experience during the time spent on campus, while others chose to respond based on reflection. Of the participants, fifty percent listed not having any social or academic struggles, while fifty percent detailed obstacles, both socially and academically. Figure 2 displays the theme of Social and Academic Obstacles followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 2**

*Theme: Social and Academic Obstacles*
Participant 1 stated, “At times I feel that I was not able to interact with people that look like me. There have not been many lasting relationships. Academically, I feel it helped to lay a better foundation of writing and reaching educational goals.” Addressing diversity and what it entailed presented challenges for some participants. Participant 2 remembered that “Social obstacles were navigating the politics of such diversity, which can be overwhelming. Academically, the biggest obstacle was knowing that your competitor is of a whole different background and is “getting theirs.” Seeing a non-black student achieving brought about anxiety.” There was also the feeling of not being accepted by African Americans because of the desire to attend a PWI. Participant 4 stated, “I have always felt that I am viewed differently by other African Americans from HBCUs because I did not choose to attend an HBCU. Yet, this could very well simply be in my head.” Participant 6 recalled the feeling of having to prove herself: “Fitting in and being able to relate with other classmates in the classroom and always feeling like I had to prove myself to others.” Participant 8 recalled missing out on opportunities
that were available to strengthen relationships. She shared, “Looking back, I wish I would have pledged. Attending a PWI didn’t give me that opportunity for that type of family. I do not feel as though there were academic obstacles.” Participant 10 recalled being overlooked due to the African American student population size. He shared, “Socially, there was not a major focus on the African American experience. We were a small piece of the pie. Academically, there was limited time to get the support you needed if you were struggling due to the size of the school.”

In a study conducted by Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), it was found that African American male students found that constant stereotyping and discriminatory practices led them to suffer from increased frustration, anger, disappointment, resentment, and anxiety. Students share different experiences regarding obstacles being a hindrance to success. However, recognition of this is what is key to providing opportunities for all students.

**Theme Three: Multiculturalism**

According to Patton, Sanchez, & Berenice (2017), “Predominately white institutions (PWIs) have increasingly implemented formalized diversity initiatives over the past 50 years as a response to ensuring federal legislation and the influx of Black students into PWIs” (p. 173). College experiences impact students in different ways. Some of the most significant encounters evolve around encountering new people of different races and ethnicities and different cultures. According to Museus, Zhang, & Kim (2016), “it is important for higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to understand better how they can construct institutional environments that maximize success among increasingly diverse student populations in college” (p. 768). Furthermore, institutions began to develop diversity requirements inspired by an ongoing multicultural education movement requiring a diversity curriculum to include all students (Patton et al., p. 176). When asked to define multiculturalism, ninety percent of
participants interviewed defined it from a coexistence of the same space perspective. Participants were also asked to describe how each university addressed multiculturalism. This theme supports Sub-Question 1 of this research, “How do African American graduates of Virginia PWIs describe their decision to attend a Virginia PWI instead of a Virginia HBCU?” Figure 3 displays the theme of Multiculturalism followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 3**

*Theme: Multiculturalism*

Participants were asked to define multiculturalism and their university experiences with its presence on campus. Participant 1 defined multiculturalism and the experience as, “The belief, representation, and understanding of multiple different cultures that share the same space. I feel that my university tried to address multiculturalism such as game night and lunch to bring students together but nothing directly inclusive.” While similar in their definitions of
multiculturalism, Participant 2 did not experience strong campus inclusion of the concept: “Multiculturalism is having people from multiple cultural backgrounds exist and work cohesively in a desired space. My university did very little to address multiculturalism in the early nineties. The multicultural center had very little impact on the student population.” Participant 3 focused on available groups sharing, “Many cultures in society or in a space. I feel my university addressed multiculturalism. Although it was a PWI, there were many groups we could join that included our particular cultures.” The ability to coexist continued to be a common understanding of multiculturalism, and Participant 4 described it as, “Multiculturalism is having different ethnic groups in one place. Multiculturalism was addressed through the creation of different clubs that would be interesting to several cultures.”

Participant 5 defined multiculturalism as the ability to coexist but expanded on her university’s efforts to include all students. She shared, “My university tried to create an inclusive environment for every culture. All students were respected. All around campus you could find posters highlighting different cultures and different meet and greets for different cultures. Those not of the culture were welcomed to join as well.” Participant 6 expanded on defining multiculturalism by speaking on open-mindedness. She stated that multiculturalism is, “A mixture of different ethnic groups with a society/environment having an open mind towards others’ perspectives. My university would have events catering to the differences of ethnic backgrounds and traditions such as food, holidays, and events.” As in previous responses, Participant 7 discusses the significance of fraternities in his college experience while defining multiculturalism: “Several ethnic groups within a certain environment. My university had several diverse social fraternities and clubs that one could join to learn about other cultures.”
Participant 8 could not confidently say that her university did an appropriate job of incorporating multiculturalism. She shared, “Multiculturalism is the co-existence of several cultures in one area. I can’t really say my university addressed multiculturalism. I interacted with many cultures on a daily basis, but I think it’s because I majored in biology.” Participant 9 recalled numerous organizations available to students on campus while asking to define multiculturalism: “Multiculturalism is a mix of ethnic groups living and working in a community preserving their traditions and culture. There were multiple organizations on campus that highlighted and promoted different cultures.” Like Participant 9, Participant 11 remembered opportunities to be a part of different organizations highlighting diversity. He defined multiculturalism as “the preservation of culture” and shared that his “university provided opportunities and spaces for diverse groups to meet. They also created campus-wide activities.”

During the interviews, participants submitted the above responses after the introduction and overview of the study. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences when considering their responses. The responses submitted are connected to the undergraduate experience and how they felt multiculturalism was presented at their respective universities.

**Theme Four: Access to Resources Promoting Diversity**

Clauson and McKnight (2018) state that the “steady increase in student diversity over the past several decades is demonstrative of the enduring success of the U.S. higher education system” (p. 39). This theme supports Sub-Question 2 of this research, “How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting diversity on campus?” Access to resources that allow all students to feel included and a part of the climate is crucial for college students’ success. Due to a new multiculturalism era in the United States, college enrollment at PWIs has influenced forcing shifts in academic course development and campus culture.
College campuses were expected to merge or develop cultural centers that appealed to all students’ interests and backgrounds (p. 41). When describing access to resources offered to promote diversity, participants remained split, with fifty percent (Group One) recognizing that resources were offered. At the same time, fifty (Group Two) shared that resources offered were not specific to the African American student body's needs. Figure 4 displays the theme of Access to Resources Promoting Diversity, followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 4**

*Theme: Access to Resources Promoting Diversity*

Participants were asked to consider campus resources that promoted diversity. Responses ranged from organizations, learning labs, culture centers, students, unions, study groups, and peer counseling. Some participants did not recall having access to diverse resources. Participant 1 stated, “The Black Student Union was offered as a place to gather. I was able to speak with the professor over the program and be exposed to more black history facts and knowledge. Not many others were specific outside of the Black Student Union.” In comparison to resources
provided at HBCUs, Participant 2 stated that resources were better at her PWI: “Study sessions, computer labs and libraries were available. When speaking with my friends at HBCUs, generally, the resources at my PWI were at a greater opportunity when considering learning mechanisms.” Participant 3 was a part of the Black Cultural Center on campus. During her interview, she shared, “We had the BCC, which is the Black Cultural Center, which is a place of inclusion. Many African American students gathered there for studying, to hang out between classes, and also various events were held there, highlighting African Americans.” Participants 7 and 10 detailed experiences unique to their universities. Participant 7: “We had the “Black Bus Stop” which was a place where black students hung out in the evenings after class. We also had the Black Ball Dance and several parties devoted to our culture on campus.” Participant 10 shared, “The Black Peer Counseling assisted students with specific needs or issues. It helps provide a resource guide for new as well as existing students. Black Student Alliance was a group of African American students who promoted activities and engagement for other African American students.”

Other participants of this study did not experience the variety of offerings that others did. Participant 5 stated, “I cannot think of any. I think they were so caught up in making us feel that academia was the main priority that they forgot to be culturally inclusive.” Participant 12 stated that because of her experiences with her to school, “she did not feel it was necessary to be involved in culture or race specific organizations.” Participants 6, 8, and 9 recalled not be familiar with any specific opportunities. Participant 4 recognized the organizations existed on campus but felt that they were “not specific to me.”

Some participants took advantage of multicultural organizations, and some did not. The perception that multicultural centers do little to bring students together but rather further divides
cultural organizations is still an opinion of students when multicultural centers are treated as separate and are not intertwined to merge cultures (Clauson and McKnight, 2018, p. 42).

**Theme Five: Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom**

According to Manning-Ouellette and Beatty (2019), “The profile of students entering higher education is ever-changing, deeming it critical to understand the impact on institutions and teaching methods that foster student learning across perspectives (p. 19). This theme supports Sub-Question 2 of this research, “How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting diversity on campus?” African American students attending PWIs remain the minority in number and race within the classroom. The need to find an inclusive environment, offering a sense of belonging, is vital to African American students' success. When asked to consider opportunities for success within the classroom, and interactions with professors, 80% of participants (Group One) considered the experience to be positive. In contrast, twenty percent of participants (Group Two) experienced that relationships were not necessarily negative but more non-existent. Figure 5 displays the theme of Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom, followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 5**

*Theme: Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom*
Participants were asked to consider classroom experiences. Participants were divided in their experiences of positive classroom experiences or lack of concern from professors and peers. Participant 2 details a positive classroom experience, sharing, “The treatment received by African American students and other non-African American students was the same as others. At no time did I feel one race was treated better. My relationship with my professors was very pleasant, fair, and about content.” Participant 3 recalled a “fine” experience with little of a relationship with her professors, but no real mistreatment. She shared, “I felt it was fine. The school and classes were so large I don’t feel African American students were treated any differently. I didn’t really have a relationship with my professors, but I didn’t feel like I was treated differently. I rarely took advantage of getting to know them.” According to Participant 4, “African Americans were treated fairly overall. Yet, there was still minor evidence of racism, more so by fellow students. My relationship with my professors, other faculty members, and
staff can be described as supportive, respectful, and mature.” Participant 5 shared similar experiences to Participant 4, detailing, “I did not experience any prejudices from staff.

Exceptional! Most of my professors were beyond helpful and genuinely showed they cared and wanted you to succeed.” Similar experiences were recalled by Participant 7. He stated, “I did not see any differences. My professors were easily accessible, and I also utilized tutors and had no issues.”

While Participant 8 shared the positive experience of other participants, she recalled that while having to put forth the effort to form relationships with professors, the outcome was positive. Participant 8 stated, “From what I saw and personally experienced, African American students and other students of color were all treated equally. When I made a true effort to meet with my professors during office hours, the relationships I made were positive.” Participant 9 detailed positive relationships with professors: “I never experienced or witnessed negative treatment of African American students and or any other ethnic groups. I thought all of my professors were approachable.” Participants 10 and 11 could not recall concerns and identified positive relationships with professors. Participant 10 shared, “There were no serious issues or major concerns with the treatment of African Americans during those years. My experiences were positive with instructors and other figures on campus,” and Participant 11 shared a similar experience saying, “I can’t recall any problems I had in the classroom setting. I wasn’t there because I was the smartest in high school. I was an athlete, however, I can’t recall my experience being more difficult. I didn’t always ask for help, but I knew it was available.”

Few participants did not recall a positive experience with professors and felt that no accommodations were provided to support African American students. Participant 1 remembered that “Most staff members were great, but didn’t make efforts to accommodate black
students and students of other races. Caucasian peers’ problems were solved immediately. I have felt dismissed by professors when seeking information.” While the participants understood the need to build independence and seek answers and knowledge, Participant 6 also recalled classroom situations where things did not seem fair. Participant 6 shared, “In some situations, it did not always seem fair. There were definitely privileges to being in the majority on campus. Although I never had a problem talking to professors about class-related items, it was a struggle finding someone to talk to specifically about campus experiences.”

To ensure the equitable success and inclusion of all students, curriculum development must address not only instruction but also the lived experiences of students to have a relation to the content. In doing so, students possibly develop a sense of belonging and academic resiliency. Figure 5 displays the theme of Social and Academic Obstacles followed by participants’ responses.

**Theme Six: Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution**

African American students choose to attend PWIs for various reasons. Some students are seeking a different cultural experience from the known, some for sports opportunities, some feel that academic opportunities will be greater, and others feel that attending PWIs will better support future career prospects. Regardless of the reason why African American students choose to attend, there will, at some point, be an impact of this decision. Mills (2020) suggests “that experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)—colleges or universities in which the majority of enrolled students are non-Hispanic White—are notably different from the experiences of white students” (p. 45). While recognized as different, this does not necessarily focus on whether the experiences are positive or negative. When participants were asked to identify their current career and whether or not attending a PWI
impacted their professional roles, sixty percent of participants (Group One) believe that attending a PWI provided tools and experiences that help them effectively communicate and relate to various races and cultures due to their PWI experience. Group Two participants (forty percent), while holding careers, do not feel that attending a PWI has impacted their professional roles. This theme supports Sub-Question 3, “How do African American students describe their preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation?” Figure 6 displays the theme of the Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution, followed by participants’ responses.

**Figure 6**

*Theme: Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution*

![Diagram of Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution]

Participants were asked to share their current occupation and whether or not they feel their PWI opportunity equipped them beyond graduation. All participants identified their current work as a career, but some are not in their selected degree program occupations. Some
participants felt that they benefit from attending a PWI, while others do not identify that their current success is connected to attending a PWI. Participant 1 is a special education department chair and shared that, “Professionally, I am able to build relationships with people of varied backgrounds. It has opened doors of opportunity due to my own way of learning how to diversify my thinking.” Participant 3 is a teacher and feels that her decision to attend a PWI impacts her professional role. She also believes that “I feel that I am well-prepared to teach and build relationships with students of every race and culture.”

Participant 6 is a school social worker and added, “I believe that everything happens for a reason, and I would not change my decision to attend a PWI. I cherish the moments I have created with friends made from living on campus at a PWI.” Participant 7 is a federal probation officer and shared, “I interact with people from all educational, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. I believe the PWI assisted my success there.” Participant 9 shared, “I am an administrative analyst with the Virginia DMV. I still feel that learning to interact with people from different backgrounds while in college better prepared me for the real world. The world is not just one of anything; it is an array of differences.” Participant 10 shared, “I am a program coordinator and career coach. By attending a PWI, I had the opportunity to learn how to adapt and maneuver in a setting where I am among few minorities in the workplace and community.” Participant 11 is currently a private school campus pastor. He did not follow his career goal of making it to the NFL, but used his sports management degree to teach high school and become a high school administrator before becoming a private school campus pastor. When asked how his university prepared him he stated, “My university further developed my social skills and ability to interact with a variety of people. Without God and the experiences I gained from attending a
prestigious PWI, I am certain that I would not have had the opportunities that I have. I do not regret my decision. It truly prepared me.”

Half of this study participants did not attribute their decision to attend a PWI to their current success. Participant 1 said, “I am a clinical social worker. I knew since a child I wanted to work in mental health.” She did not further elaborate on whether or not the decision to attend a PWI was a benefit. Participant 4 is a business education teacher and shared, “I am glad I chose to attend a PWI, but there are times that I feel that I would have enjoyed being enrolled at an HBCU as well.” Participant 5 is a human resources manager and does not feel that attending a PWI impacted her professional role. Participant 8, who originally wanted to be a gastroenterologist, stated, “I teach high school biology. I do not feel a PWI impacted my professional role. I’m still trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up.” Participant 12 currently works in a director’s position for a non-profit organization and believes that her drive and determination would have been present if she attended an HBCU though it wasn’t her preference. Participants of this study detailed, varied responses on the impact of attending a PWI had on their careers and thinking. The decision to attend a PWI varies by each student.

**Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this study was to understand the African American student’s perception of equity at PWIs. The central question that guided this study focused on how African American graduates of PWIs described their overall equitable experiences while attending a PWI. Sub-questions used for this study support the African American student’s belief in access to resources, campus diversity, and preparedness post-graduation. The explanations of these questions are presented below.
CQ: How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI?

Equity, for this study, was defined as the attempt to provide fair opportunities for all students (Clauson & McKnight, 2018). The themes found for CQ1 are Campus Climate and Race Relationships and Social and Academic Obstacles. Both themes support the central question by seeking information on climate and obstacles. The central question required participants to consider equitable experiences, and the themes developed in this study helped determined climate, race relations, and obstacles, which align to equity. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this study, racial identity and perceived discrimination influence the aspirations of African American students (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016). To be educated in an environment that is welcoming and inclusive is just as necessary for success as a student’s intellect. African Americans who choose to attend PWIs are seeking equitable opportunities to be successful.

When asked to consider campus climate and race relationships, participants had either no negative or positive opinion of race relationships or felt that their experiences did not differ from other students. No participants revealed that they felt they were treated better or given special breaks due to race. When asked to consider obstacles that may have impacted performance, 60% of participants described environments that possibly hindered social and academic growth.

SQ1: How do African American graduates of Virginia PWIs describe their decision to attend a Virginia PWI instead of a Virginia HBCU?

The theme of Multiculturalism relates to SQ1. Multiculturalism relates to support question 1 as it required participants to share their decision to attend a PWI. The need to experience multiculturalism was revealed in participant responses when asked why they chose to attend a PWI. Lewis & McKissic (2010) believe that the “Black community is a largely under-
examined and neglected aspect of the undergraduate experience of African American students at predominately white institutions” (p. 265). Research shows that African American students are less likely to persist than their white peers are, and for this reason, it is difficult to understand why African American students choose this experience. When asked why they attended a Virginia PWI over a Virginia HBCU, participants detailed their need to experience something different and described their multiculturalism views concerning coexistence. Participants believed that by attending a PWI, they would be more open-minded to other perspectives, better understand different cultures, and better coexist with others. Participants also felt that by attending PWIs, more opportunities would be available to them and access to needed resources. While several participants entered their PWIs thinking that the environment would automatically provide them with greater opportunity, some learned that the experiences were not greater for students of color, but were the same as other students. Few participants also felt that there was a lack of accommodations for African American students and other inequities.

**SQ2:** How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting diversity on campus?

The themes Access to Resources Promoting Diversity and Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom relate to SQ2. Participants were asked to identify resources that were significant in their social and academic success. The themes support question 1 by identifying resources that were specific to the needs of African American students. While historically black colleges and universities have proven to “provide a rich source of social networks to students, fostering and empowering educational climate” (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p. 52), African American students are still seeking institutions with programs and legislative initiatives found at predominately white institutions. African American students enrolled at PWIs seek to find
resources on campus to include them in the overall campus experience. Participants of this study remained split when describing access to resources offered to promote diversity on campus. Some participants detailed culture centers, peer counseling, and other recreational activities and clubs, while other participants did not feel that resources were available to promote diversity. Because the profile of students attending PWIs is changing, it has become critical to understand all students' needs while also enacting a plan to meet the needs of all students enrolled.

**SQ3: How do African American students describe their preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation?**

The theme, Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution, supports SQ3. Participants in this study were asked to consider how they felt their PWI experience prepared them for success beyond the institution. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, “Black students face a variety of stressors on predominately White campuses and face challenges such as pressure to conform, racial conflict, lack of support, institutional racism, social isolation, and inequitable treatment by university personnel” (Grier-Reed et al., 2016, p. 185). Considering that this is the reality that many African American students face on predominately white campuses, the question of whether or not the experience was worth it was imperative to this study. Participants reflected upon their experiences and shared whether they felt better prepared because of their PWI experiences. Some participants felt that they could have possibly received the same opportunities if they had attended an HBCU while others felt that attending a PWI allowed them to build relationships with people of different backgrounds. They also felt that they were better prepared academically to enter the workforce and learned to adapt to all settings.
Summary

Participants’ interviews revealed their thoughts and perceptions on the main themes of this study. These themes are multiculturalism, campus climate and race relationships, resources promoting diversity on campus, social and academic obstacles, and participants’ views on the impact of attending a Predominately White University. The next chapter will provide implications of the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences of African American students attending Predominately White Institutions for undergraduate programs. This chapter details a summary of the study findings from data, which includes pre-interview surveys, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview. Included with the summary of findings is a discussion of findings to include theoretical and empirical connections to literature, implications related to the literature and theory, and delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

Since this phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences of African American students at PWIs, it was essential to examine their thoughts and perceptions to gain a full understanding of their experiences. A qualitative design was chosen because, as Creswell states, “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning of individuals or groups ascribed to a social or human problem” (2007, p. 37). This design allowed for humanistic interaction with participants. Triangulation was used because it involves using multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). This study included twelve participants who graduated from PWIs in Virginia. There were six Virginia PWIs included in this study. From the data collected through the process of coding, six themes were developed from this study. The themes identified from the findings are campus climate and relationships, social and academic obstacles, multiculturalism,
access to resources promoting diversity, opportunities for success and inclusion in the classroom, and the current impact of attending a Predominately White Institution.

The central question guiding this study asked: How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a PWI? The central question relied heavily on research that states the vast difference in degree completion rates among students of color compared to their white peers. This was considered to understand whether participants’ definitions and experiences of equity played a role in degree completion. The participants in this study had different opinions regarding equitable experiences. The central research question helped develop two themes from this study: campus and climate relationships and social and academic obstacles. Most participants described experiences as no different from what other students experience. Few described the experiences as noticeably different experiences of African American students from those white peers' experiences, while only one participant had no strong opinion, either negative or positive, regarding race relations. Also supporting the central question was the theme of social and academic obstacles. The majority of participants felt that, at times, race played a factor in social and academic success. Participant 1 shared, “I think the opportunities were out there because they needed us to stay around. I felt as though the standard accommodations and opportunities were geared towards a certain culture, and if you wanted to be a part of it, you had to push through and almost camouflage to fit their standards.” Participants felt that they were unable to interact effectively, struggled navigating through the politics of diversity, an internal sense of feeling that those of other races held certain opinions regarding them, and a feeling of exclusion due to being the minority (based on numbers) on campus.
Sub-question One: How Do African American Graduates of Virginia PWIs Describe Their Decision to Attend a PWI

The first sub-question sought to understand the reason why participants chose to attend a PWI. The question asked: How do African American graduates of Virginia PWIs describe their decision to attend a Virginia PWI instead of a Virginia HBCU? Using data collected through pre-interviews and one-on-one interviews, I understood and learned the idea of multiculturalism, another theme developed in this research. Most participants had a similar understanding of the word multiculturalism. Participants were also asked to describe how multiculturalism was present on campus and if the need for its presence impacted their decision to attend. Participant 3 stated, “I initially wanted to go there just because they are so well-known for their football program, but once I went on a visit, I fell in love with the campus and what they had to offer academically. I knew I would be attending one of the best schools in the nation.” Participant responses mainly described multiculturalism as people from multiple cultural backgrounds who were able to work and exist in the same space cohesively. Participants noted that multiculturalism was about not only working together but also successfully coinciding. The idea of multiculturalism for participants was about being open-minded to others’ perspectives and experiences and inclusive interactions. When discussing multiculturalism from the idea of services offered on campus, participants shared how multiculturalism was addressed, but the offering of services was not rich in depth. Participants noted cultural groups, clubs, catering events, and fraternities/sororities.

Sub-question Two: How Do African American Students Describe Their Access to Resources Promoting Diversity on Campus
The second sub-question asked: How do African American students describe their access to resources promoting campus diversity? Themes developed from this question were Access to Resources Promoting Diversity and Opportunities for Success. According to Clauson and McKnight (2018), college campuses were expected to merge or develop cultural centers that appealed to all students’ interests and backgrounds (p. 41). This is due in part to campuses needed to ensure that all students were included in campus activities and experiences. Data from participants showed a split opinion on the deliberate, explicit attempts made by PWIs to provide diversity resources on campus. Participants who felt that resources were provided noted resources as black student unions, black cultural centers, study sessions, and peer counseling. While these resources were listed, no participant elaborated on the outcome of having these resources available. Several participants did not feel that resources were specifically designated for African American students and detailed their experiences of remembering only clubs and organizations that were established for all students.

Sub-question Three: How Do African American Students Describe Their Preparedness for Selected Career Paths Post-Graduation

The final sub-question addressed was: How do African American students describe their preparedness for selected career paths post-graduation? From this sub-question, the theme, Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution, was developed. Mills (2020) suggests that African American students’ experiences at PWIs are notably different from white students’ experiences. When asked to consider the PWI experience in professional roles, participants shared mixed feelings on the positive impact of attending. Participants who felt that the impact of attending a PWI was positive noted that they feel that they are better prepared in their current roles, easily interact with people from all backgrounds as a result, and feel that they
can adapt and maneuver any environment or setting. Participant 6 shared, “I believe that everything happens for a reason and my experience at a PWI has helped to mold me into who I am today. If I could go back and change my decision I probably wouldn’t. I cherish the moments I have created with the friends I made from living on campus.” Not all participants felt the benefit of attending a PWI. A little less than half of the participants did not feel that attending a PWI was more beneficial to their current professions or successes. Participant 4 stated, “I have always felt that I am viewed differently by other African Americans from HBCUs because I did not choose to attend an HBCU.”

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the African American student’s perception of equity-based upon the research of inclusion and exclusion at PWIs. This chapter discusses the findings concerning the theoretical and empirical review of the literature found in Chapter 2. This study shares the experiences of African American students at a PWI, therefore, helping others understand the unique experience. Theoretical and empirical implications and delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research, are also discussed in this chapter.

**Theoretical Discussion**

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are the theory of self-efficacy and Bandura’s social learning theory (1977). Both theories are connected to success related to motivation, or the lack thereof, and are considered a willingness and desire to adapt to an environment. Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) suggests that learning is social and influenced by the environment and peers. Data from this study were examined, and six themes were developed that impacted the participants. The first theme discovered, Campus Climate and
Race Relationships is connected to the theory of self-efficacy as it is believed to have a strong influence on students' academic achievement. Participants in this study detailed their attitudes as it relates to self-efficacy. While some described inequities in classroom settings and superficial relationships with peers, the opposite of this, participants described the atmosphere as equal, respectful, and even great. As a definition, this study's self-efficacy was considering whether students had opportunities available to them and whether or not they accessed such opportunities. The self-efficacy theory defines if student success is simply the student's responsibility, or if it is the responsibility of the PWI to set in place such motivation for students to be successful. Whether or not the participants sought to be a part of the culture of their PWIs could have very well impacted their performance and social adjustment. From participant one-on-one interviews, it is believed that most participants, before attending a PWI, already held a sense of self-efficacy, and this potentially aided in their success and determination to complete their undergraduate programs (Cook & Artino, 2016).

Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) focuses on the ability to socialize in preparation for integration in society appropriately. PWIs have historically been established as environments where students are required to adjust and align with the goals of the environment. Howard (2003) states that because African American students have been “marginalized academically and socially in schools, it is imperative to understand how they maintain their academic integrity in pursuit of their educational goals” (p. 5). This theory suggests that it is imperative and necessary to create an environment that promotes persistence and success. When asked about opportunities for success in the classroom, some participants listed the opportunities as equal within the classroom, while few participants identified privilege within the classroom. From the data collected, Bandura’s idea of preparedness relates to the theme of the Current Impact of Attending
a Predominately White Institution. Participant responses varied on whether they felt better prepared professionally due to having attended a PWI. Participants felt that they were better prepared for the workforce in some cases and were more articulate, and were more comfortably able to navigate through diverse settings having attended a PWI. In some instances, participants felt that they did not feel it was an extra benefit of attending a PWI.

Both theories collectively focused on internal motivation and a desire to be a part of an inclusive environment. Participants did not focus their experiences solely on the overall environmental factors that played a part in their successes. While these theories are evident throughout the six themes found in this study, data suggest that participants’ struggles were partially due to feelings of non-inclusion but were also due to personal feelings and self-inflicted stress at times within the environment. However, participants found ways to persevere and achieve, thus supporting both self-efficacy and social learning theories.

**Empirical Discussion**

While studies have been conducted on African American students attending PWIs, few are explicitly focused on the African American student’s perception of equity. Research is available, but most studies focus on African American male athletes at PWIs, low retention rates of African American students, comparisons of PWIs and HBCUs, African American female post-graduate students, post-PWI experiences, and the success of low-income students. These studies do not necessarily glean the overall experiences as detailed through the students’ perspective, both male and female, of the undergraduate experience. Few studies offer the next steps to include African American students in the overall campus environment, both socially and academically.

**Campus Climate and Race Relationships**
The current literature, as outlined in Chapter Two, addresses Campus Climate and Race Relationships. Since both male and female African American students’ personal opinions on campus climate and race relations are minimal in the literature, this study helped fill gaps present. According to the literature, “African American students attending predominately White colleges and universities (PWCUs) face unique challenges as they navigate majority culture and contend with ignorance, discrimination, racism, and racial microaggressions on college campuses” (Wall & Hall, 2018, p. 48). Boyraz et al. (2016) suggest that the adjustment to PWIs is a significant struggle as African American students are aware that the PWI environment is not necessarily designed. While few participants of this study identified campus climate and race relations as divisive, most participants defined campus climate and race relations for African American students as no different from what students experienced.

Social and Academic Obstacles

From current literature, social and academic obstacles are present for African American students attending PWIs. According to a study conducted by Grier-Reed et al. (2016), “Black students face a variety of stressors on predominately White campuses and face challenges such as pressure to conform, racial conflict, lack of support, institutional racism, social isolation, and inequitable treatment by university personnel” (p. 185). Most participants of this study detailed pre-interview questionnaires similar experiences that did not necessarily prepare them for such factors that a new environment could bring. Not being prepared for this could have played an influence on how participants described their social obstacles. Class participation and performance has a different impact on students when racial dynamics impact interactions. Wall and Hall (2018) conclude that the “stress associated with minority status is distinct from general stress related to college attendance and is a unique predictor of academic achievement for
students of color” (p. 48). They further suggest that African American students attending a PWI felt that they “were often looked upon as the ‘token Black student’ and experienced stereotyping by peers” (p. 50). When participants were asked about social and academic obstacles, multiple participants detailed difficulties with white peers sharing their feelings on how white peers were more apt to success and how they struggled to fit in.

**Multiculturalism**

The concept of multiculturalism is presented in the literature related to African American students’ perception of equity. Participants defined multiculturalism as multiple cultures coexisting in the same space. According to a study conducted by Clauson and McKnight (2018), a new multiculturalism trend in the United States has influenced college enrollment. Because of this, campuses are providing multicultural centers to respond to campus diversity. Research further suggests that “The African-American Student Network was designed to attend to the social and psychological needs of Black students on a predominately White campus by providing social support and resources for coping in the college environment” (Clauson & McKnight, 2018, p. 376). While this study's participants collectively had the same understanding of multiculturalism, they had difficulty sharing vast, rich experiences of how multiculturalism was present on their PWI campuses. Palmer & Gasman (2008) found that African American students seek institutions with programs and legislative endeavors found at predominately white institutions. Therefore, the existence of multicultural opportunities is necessary for African American students.

**Access to Resources Promoting Diversity**

Access to resources promoting diversity is present in the literature, and historically African American students who can be involved in student networks have shown higher
retention and graduation rates. Having access to diversity resources profoundly impacts the psychological and academic performance of African American students at PWIs. Grier, Reed, and Wilson (2016) found that the organization of African American networks designed specifically for black students allows them to better handle situations in the PWI environment. The literature also suggests that “Higher education persistence and retention programs seek to avoid the negative consequences of attrition by offering supports for students” (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). Washington University conducted a study where minority students were able to participate in an intervention class. Students were a part of a controlled intervention group that provided resources and support for minority students on campus. Results showed that nearly 70% of students in the control group re-enrolled the following spring. Additionally, Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez (2015) conclude that by not granting access to resources promoting diversity, students feel that they can potentially earn degrees, but “not access the institutional recognition and cultural capital that would come with being a college graduate” (p. 236). When asked about access to resources promoting diversity in this study, participants detailed minimal opportunities and offerings, and no participants went into detailed descriptions or firm conviction of how their access positively affected them academically or socially.

**Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom**

The current literature addresses Opportunities for Success and Inclusion in the Classroom. Haywood et al. (2016) found that “African Americans enter college with cultural traits acquired from many sources including but not limited their families, social and physical environments, religion, and prior experiences in academic and community settings” (p. 110). The African American student’s experience at a PWI is potentially a completely different life experience except for interaction with peers during high school. While interactions with white peers would
have occurred for black students before college, being submerged in an environment where you become solely responsible for your endeavors awakens a different sense of who you must be or whom you must become. An incredibly important component to the success of African American students in the classroom is the feeling of inclusiveness. In a study conducted by Morrison in 2010, African American students entering college at PWIs felt that entering campus was frustrating, felt like outsiders, and felt that professors and peers lacked experience in dealing with diversity (Walls & Hall, 2018). Students expressed feeling like the “token Black student” (Walls & Hall, 2018, p. 50). Participants of this study detailed feelings of discomfort when addressing racially sensitive subjects in the classroom. Students felt that they were expected to answer questions from an African American perspective versus an objective perspective. Morrison’s study also found the significance of the professor’s ability to set the tone for discussions in the classroom, and that in more open environments where professors were culturally aware, it was easier for African American students to participate. However, this comfort also created an environment where African American students, at times, felt pressured to be the obligatory voice of the Black community within the classroom. While the literature suggests that race relations and inclusion in the classroom have proven to be a struggle for African American students, participants in my study felt that overall they were treated equally, and there was no substantial differentiation between races. However, other participants of this study felt that while there was no concrete difference in how students were treated, there were still little nuances of privilege displayed within the classroom. At times, though professors met students’ overall needs and were approachable, nothing was done to accommodate African American students’ specific needs, and accommodation was needed because they were, by default, the minority.
Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution

The theme of the Current Impact of Attending a Predominately White Institution is presented in the literature related to African American students’ life beyond graduation. According to The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2015), black students who graduate from HBCUs may go on to a more satisfying life than Black graduates of predominately White colleges and universities, and only 29% of African Americans who graduated from predominately White colleges and universities thought they had been well prepared for life after college. The literature on the African American student’s desire to attend a PWI finds that many students feel that by attending a PWI, they will be granted better opportunities to access resources, will receive better instruction academically based upon more university funding, will have more opportunities to engage with others from different backgrounds, and will have better job opportunities upon completion. Tinto (1987) argues that “overall differences in persistence rates between African Americans and non-minorities were primarily due to differences in academic preparedness rather than backgrounds” (p. 135). This idea has been adopted by some African American students who choose to attend PWIs. By attending, students feel that better instructional experiences will compensate for what may not have been received before college enrollment.

Implications

Implications of this study stem from the central question: How do African American graduates of PWIs describe their overall equitable experiences while attending a Virginia PWI? The research presented may affect future African American students who chose to attend predominately white institutions. This study found several implications and recommendations for theory, research, and practice.
Theoretical Implications

This study used Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) and the theory of self-efficacy as a framework. Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) was used to view participants’ experiences and determine to what degree they felt that their abilities, attributes, and willingness to adjust contributed to their successes. This theory suggests that the environment is primarily responsible for success. This theory was used to see how participants described the established environments of their PWIs. While some research suggests that success is attributed to innate desires and intrinsic motivation, Bandura (1977) focuses on efficacy.

Also relevant to this study was the self-efficacy theory. Alt (2015) states that “Self-efficacy for learning, which refers to students’ beliefs in their capabilities to regulate their learning, could determine students’ motivation and academic achievement and, therefore, is significant to the learning process” (p. 47). This theory is necessary because it responds to the question of whether or not students need institutions to provide resources for success or if this the responsibility of the individual to set goals and achieve them regardless of the environment or other factors that may create difficulties.

The goal of this study was to see if self-efficacy was a determinant in participants’ perseverance. This study found that participants had a certain level of control in determining their successes while enrolled at PWIs. Participants included in this study were determined to achieve regardless of the environmental circumstances. Participants in this study held strong personal goals for their success and ultimately overcame obstacles to achieve. Throughout interviews, they displayed an attitude of resilience and determination that may not have always been supported or encouraged by others, but one that was held within them.
Empirical Implications

This study makes some contribution to the current literature regarding student perseverance and determination. The literature suggests that students face unique challenges, experience high levels of stress due to the need to conform, feel socially isolated, and lack support. The literature also suggests a lack of diversity offerings through organizations but acknowledges the need. Participants of this study in their one-on-one interviews had limited information to share their knowledge of promoting diversity. Frustrating class environments and levels of discomfort were found in the literature (Arnett, 2015). Participants of this study noted mainly positive class experiences while few detailed tense or cold classroom experiences. Because the literature details multiple examples of division and student opinion of exclusion, it is vital for PWIs to be intentional when providing opportunities, resources, support, and experiences for African American students (Chen et al., 2014).

Practical Implications

Predominately white institutions can gain knowledge from this study to better understand African American students' difficulties when attending PWIs. Using the information, PWIs can institute programs that do not aim to include African American students for inclusion simply, but programs to include them as they allow them to maintain their authenticity while interacting with other students. PWIs must address the needs of African American students and gain knowledge of background factors that may influence their performance or lack thereof. Dancy et al. (2018) said it is essential that we understand race is the foundation on which society’s sociopolitical organization is built. Because of this, PWIs must understand this when addressing the needs of all students.
Delimitations and Limitations

Several delimitations were present in this study. As the researcher, I chose to select only participants who attended a Virginia PWI. Participants did not have to be from the state of Virginia or currently live in Virginia but were required to have attended a Virginia PWI. I chose to do this because I wanted to learn about the experiences of graduates who attended college in the same state. I was interested in their experiences to see if different colleges and universities in Virginia, while in the same state, had different opportunities for students or different priorities.

Another delimitation was the age group. I chose participants aged 26-49 because I wanted to see if progressions had been made by colleges to become more inclusive for African American students. By selecting participants who graduated in the 1990s and the 2000s, I was hoping to see if not just race but generational factors played a role in college experiences. For this study, both male and female graduates were interviewed. This was important because research has shown that African American males have a significantly harder time than white male and female students and black female students. Harper (2015) found that “prior studies consistently show that racial stereotypes are commonplace on many campuses, that their effects are usually psychologically and academically, and that Black undergraduate men are often among the most stereotyped populations of higher society” (p. 646). It was essential to include both male and female participants to see if females too identified with some of the barriers suggested in the literature that affects African American male students.

One of the limitations of this study was the focus group interview. During the interview, I worried whether participants would show solidarity because of the group setting and if I would have received different responses had they not been in a group setting. During the focus group interview, participants often paused and waited for a response from another participant. I noticed
that once a participant responded, it became easier for others to agree. Another limitation of this study was during the interview process and wanting to deviate from the set questions. When participants shared information, I had follow-up questions but needed to stick to the script not to sway the responses. The final limitation was whether using African American graduates of PWIs outside of Virginia would have changed the data. While I wanted to select candidates who may have shared a likeness due to location, I considered whether interviewing outside of Virginia would have allowed for additional recommendations for future research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study revealed more information regarding equity experienced by African American students at PWIs. Much of the research lists the difficulties students experience navigating through a new and different environment. While participants overall had pleasant or neutral experiences, little in the literature addresses how PWIs can specifically address African American students' needs. Participants of this study were limited in their ability to truly describe what was offered at the PWIs that were explicitly beneficial to them as African American students. Further research should be conducted focusing on specific efforts to retain African American students. Participants of this study were successful due in part to their intrinsic motivation. Information is needed on what services are provided for students outside of the social arena. While social interaction and integration are necessary, services offered to address African American students' academic, psychological, and emotional needs are necessary. Participants of this study did not express available support for their overall needs while attending a PWI. Another suggestion for further research is the presence of mentor programs for African American students on campus. Haywood et al. (2016) state that “both administrators and scholars have made great strides to explain why African American students continue to progress
at a slower pace than that of other groups academically” (p. 10). Because of this, African American students need additional support in an unfamiliar environment to be successful.

Summary

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the African American student’s perception of equity at predominately white institutions. The theoretical frameworks that guided this study were Bandura’s social learning theory (1977) and the self-efficacy theory. The chapter summarizes the findings, a discussion of findings, theoretical and empirical implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research. Hopefully, this study will add to the present body of research and show how opportunity exists for all students if given the appropriate resources and desire to achieve success. This study presented the experiences that African American students encountered at PWIs across Virginia.

This study's goal was to glean from their experiences conversations that will allow for forward-thinking and further planning to either continue or implement equitable opportunities for all students. While the African American student was used as the baseline of the study, the goal was to explore practices and refocus an equity lens so that not just African Americans but all students of color are in an environment that is optimal for their success. This study is relevant as it provides an opportunity to examine further how we view equity, diversity, and multiculturalism. Not limited to Virginia, but as a nation, all individuals' necessity to feel included, respected, and valued in institutions of learning is paramount.

In conclusion, while some African American students can acclimate to the PWI setting, many African American students at PWIs continue to struggle to find their place. It is essential that institutions continue to meet all students’ needs while being culturally sensitive, inclusive, and attune to systemic racism in America.
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September 20, 2019

Annitra C. Leigh

IRB Approval 3951.092019: The African American Student's Perception of Equity at Predominately White Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Annitra C. Leigh,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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Appendix B

RECRUITMENT LETTER

August 15, 2019

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to examine the African American student’s perception of equity at predominately White institutions. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. You are invited to participate in this study because you fit the profile which is an African American professional who graduated from a predominately White institution in Virginia.

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire, participate in an interview (individually with the researcher), and possibly participate in a focus group. It should take approximately four hours of your time to complete the three procedures listed above. Your name and other identifying information will be collected, but the information will remain confidential, and you will not be personally named as a participant in this study.

To participate, please email Annitra Leigh at acleigh@liberty.edu and as the message heading, please type “Participant Interest”. Once you agree to participate, you will be mailed a consent document that further details information related to this study. The consent document will be
mailed to you, and you will be required to complete and return the consent document at the time of your individual interview.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a gift card selected by the researcher. Gift cards will be valued at $20.00 and will be from local restaurants for the participant’s convenience.

Sincerely,

Annitra C. Leigh
Appendix C

Investigator Agreement

INVESTIGATOR AGREEMENT & SIGNATURE PAGE*

BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, THE INVESTIGATOR AGREES:

1. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until the Investigator has received the final approval or exemption email from the chair of the Institutional Review Board.
2. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until all key personnel for the project have been properly educated on the protocol for the study.
3. That any modifications of the protocol or consent form will not be initiated without prior written approval, by email, from the IRB and the faculty mentor/chair, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the participants.
4. The PI agrees to carry out the protocol as stated in the approved application: all participants will be recruited and consented as stated in the protocol approved or exempted by the IRB. If written consent is required, all participants will be consented by signing a copy of the approved consent form.
5. That any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others participating in the approved protocol, which must be in accordance with the Liberty Way (and/or the Honor Code) and the Confidentiality Statement, will be promptly reported in writing to the IRB.
6. That the IRB office will be notified within 30 days of a change in the PI for the study.
7. That the IRB office will be notified within 30 days of the completion of this study.
8. That the PI will inform the IRB and complete all necessary reports should he/she terminate University association.
9. To maintain records and keep informed consent documents for three years after completion of the project, even if the PI terminates association with the University.
10. That he/she has access to copies of 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report.

Principal Investigator (Print) [Signature] Date

Co-Investigator (Print) Co-Investigator (Signature) Date

FOR STUDENT PROPOSALS ONLY:

BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, THE FACULTY MENTOR/CHAIR AGREES:

1. To assume responsibility for the oversight of the student’s current investigation, as outlined in the approved IRB application.
2. To work with the investigator, and the Institutional Review Board, as needed, in maintaining compliance with this agreement.
3. To monitor email contact between the Institutional Review Board and principle investigator. Faculty mentors/chairs are cc’ed on all IRB emails to PIs.
4. That the principal investigator is qualified to perform this study.
5. That by signing this document you verify you have carefully read this application and approve of the procedures described herein, and also verify that the application complies with all instructions listed above. If you have any questions, please contact our office (irb@liberty.edu).

Faculty Mentor/Chair (Print) Faculty Mentor/Chair (Signature) Date

*The Institutional Review Board reserves the right to terminate this study at any time if, in its opinion, (1) the risks of further experimentation are prohibitive, or (2) the above agreement is breached.
Appendix D

Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 9/20/2019 to

Consent Form

The African American Student’s Perception of Equity at Predominately White Institutions:

A Phenomenological Study

Annitra C. Leigh

Liberty University School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study examining the African American student’s perception of equity at predominately White institutions. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria needed to complete this study, which includes being an African American professional male or female who attended full-time and graduated from a predominately White institution in Virginia. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Annitra C. Leigh, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the African American student’s perception of equity at predominately White institutions (PWIs).

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a brief open-ended questionnaire. This will be submitted electronically to the researcher. This questionnaire should take no longer than 15 minutes.

2. Complete an interview of 23 questions with the researcher in this study. The interview is estimated to last between 1 and 1 ½ hours. Participants will be audio recorded.

3. Participate in a focus group discussion. The focus group will be formed based preferably on participants who graduated the same year or within three years of each other. This will take approximately two to three hours, and the discussion will be audio recorded.

**Risks:**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits for participants related to this study.

While there are no direct benefits to society as a whole, this study may potentially benefit the multicultural planning measures at predominately White institutions.

**Compensation:**

Participants will receive a gift card for completing this study. Participants who fail to complete this study will receive a gift card of half value of those completing the study. Gift cards will be local restaurant gift cards valued at $20.00 for those who complete the study and valued at
$10.00 for those who do not complete the study.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you.

- While the researcher will know who the participants are, participants in the study will be identified as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Hard copy data will be stored in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher will have access. After three years, all electronic data will be deleted. Hardcopy data will be shredded.
- Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Participants involved in this study should be aware that members of the focus group may share information with non-participants.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and not included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Annitra C. Leigh. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 434-579-0926 or acleigh@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. Leldon Nichols, at lwnichols@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

__________________________
Signature of Participant

__________________________
Date
Appendix E

Questionnaire, Interview Questions, and Focus Group Questions

Open-Ended Questionnaire

As a participant of this study, please complete this brief questionnaire prior to your scheduled interview. Your participation is appreciated.

1. Please share your definition of multiculturalism.
2. In your opinion, how did your university address multiculturalism?
3. When considering race relationships, how would you describe the campus climate of your PWI?
4. Please describe, in your opinion, the treatment of African American students by staff and other non-African American students.
5. How would you describe the equitable opportunities for African American students on campus?

Interview Questions

The following will guide the interviews:

1. Please tell me about your family and your childhood.
2. Please describe your experiences in elementary, middle, and high school.
3. What factors (academically, socially, or culturally) influenced your decision to attend a PWI?
4. As an African American student, did you consider an HBCU? Please explain.
5. Upon acceptance, what were your initial thoughts on what this experience would be like?
6. How did your initial thoughts change from your first semester to your first complete year, to your final year on campus?

7. How would you describe your social experiences while on campus?

8. What campus services and activities did you participate in?

9. How would you describe the academic experience you were a part of while on campus?

10. How would you describe the cultural experience you were a part of while on campus?

11. What experiences and services provided on campus did you feel were specific to your needs as an African American student at a PWI?

12. In your opinion, how would you describe your relationship with your professors, academic support, and other figures of authority while enrolled?

13. How do you describe the relationships you held with other African American peers on campus?

14. How do you describe relationships you held with White peers on campus?

15. Looking back, what do you feel was a benefit of attending a PWI?

16. What do you feel were the obstacles, both socially and academically, as a result of attending a PWI?

17. How do you think your academic and cultural experiences while enrolled compare to those of your current acquaintances who attended an HBCU?

18. While in your undergraduate program, what would you say your definition of adversity was?

19. Presently, what is your definition of adversity?

20. How would you define equity?
21. What is your current professional role?

22. How do you feel your decision to attend a PWI has impacted your professional role?

**Focus Group Questions**

The following questions will be used for the focus group.

1. Please share your name, age, and graduation year.
2. Please share which Virginia predominately white institution you attended.
3. Please describe your undergraduate major and your current field of work.
4. Please share with the group any social organizations you were a part of while enrolled as an undergraduate student.
5. Please share with the group your classroom experiences.
6. Please share your campus experiences outside of the classroom.
7. During your undergraduate experience, what did you learn about diversity on your campus?
8. Please share with the group what you feel your definition of equity would have been as a freshman.
9. Please share with the group your current definition of equity.
10. If you had to redo your college experience, would you still attend a PWI? Why or why not?