A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS' SPIRITUAL

AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

Jeffery Clayton Smith, II,

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to document the lived experiences of African American (AA) students attending predominantly White institutions (PWI's). The importance of capturing these experiences is to better understand how PWIs are properly equipped to serve the needs of their AA students. This study describe how AA students are experiencing spiritual and identity development while they are enrolled at a PWI. The two guiding theories of this study are Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. These guiding theories have been paired together to address students' spiritual development during their emerging adulthood years. The primary research question that the study will address is: How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs? The sub-questions of the study are: How do AA students who attend PWIs describe their experiences with student support services? What experiences do AA students perceive as contributing factors to their identity while attending PWIs? This qualitative study will employ transcendental phenomenology as the primary methodology. The setting of the study will be PWIs located in the southeastern region of the United States. Three themes emerged: (1) Displacement, (2) Self-Reliance, and (3) Resiliency. This study helps provide possible solutions to the imbalance in the spiritual and identity development of AA students attending PWI.

*Keywords*: African American students, higher education, identity development, lived experiences, predominately white institutions, spiritual development, spirituality

**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to God, my daughter, Desilyn Grace, and my parents, Jeffery and Lillie Smith, Sr. I am nothing without their love, support, sacrifices, and prayers over the years.

**Acknowledgments**

First of all, I would like to thank my family for their love, prayers and support throughout the process. To my biggest supporters, my parents, Jeffery and Lillie. Thanks to my daughter Desilyn Grace. She is the reason for this pursuit of mine. I would like to thank the chair, Dr. Tanisha Sapp. She guided me through this process. Her wisdom, encouragement, and tough talk were just what I needed to get me through this process. Thank God for allowing our paths to cross at this pivotal time in my life. Thanks also to Dr. Todd. I would like to thank her for her insight, wisdom, and knowledge in my dissertation writing process.

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**List of Abbreviations**

African American (AA)

Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)

UCLA (The University of California, Los Angeles)

SQ1-3 (Sub Questions 1-3)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the research topic. The researcher will provide a brief background and historical outline of the existing literature of the spiritual and identity development of African American (AA) students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Next, the researcher will define the problem and purpose of the proposed study and introduce the theoretical frameworks that supported it. Finally, the researcher will summarize the importance of the study, clarify the research question, and define key terms used in the study. Chapter Two will discuss the previous literature, Chapter Three will discuss the study methodology, Chapter Four will discuss the findings of the study, and Chapter Five will conclude the dissertation.

College students reported they were more satisfied with their university experiences and their overall well-being improves when they engage in some form of spiritual activity or attend an institution with an inclusive religious climate (Bowman & Small, 2012; 2013). Additionally, there was a connection between race, spirituality, and students' higher education experiences (Park & Bowman, 2015). The theoretical, social, and historical background of the study are discussed to highlight the connections of the AA students with spirituality.

**Historical Background**

Students described that they struggled with their spiritual development during their undergraduate years (Rockenbach et al., 2012). Additionally, the demographics, backgrounds, and campus experiences of students affected their perception of their spiritual development (Lovik, 2011). While there was literature that addressed student experiences connected to spiritual development in college (Rockenbach et al., 2012), there was little known research that addressed the spiritual and identity development of AA undergraduate students at PWIs. Further,

spirituality looked different and held different cultural meaning for AA students than their other counterparts (Edgell, 2007; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Historically, spirituality and religion has been deeply influential in African Americans lives (Wood & Hilton, 2012). This connection between spirituality and AA students' culture intersected how these students experienced, conceptualized, and reflected upon their higher education experiences (Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Additionally, research showed that AA students had significantly different experiences and expectations of the institution than their peers (Gehrke, 2013). These racial disparities affected AA students' spiritual and identity development in college (Gehrke, 2013). Without proper support, minority students felt marginalized and their identity development during college was hindered (Bowman & Small, 2013). Another issue was that AA students did not have a sense of belonging at these PWIs and therefore there was a need for university faculty and administrators to understand the racial microaggressions that existed on PWI campuses that harmed AA students' growth (Hall, 2017).

**Social Background**

In relation to the study's social background, universities established culturally sensitive programs within Multicultural departments for the distinct purposes that provided support, mentorship, and a sense of belonging for AA students. Historically, universities had lacked these types of support services (Apprey et al., 2014). Support services play a crucial role in assisting the AA student population to reach higher levels of achievement. For this reason, some universities and colleges began implementing such services to increase diversity and retain students of color (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Some services included a more comprehensive orientation program for new students, strategic academic guidance, a peer mentoring program, and AA faculty recruitment strategies to enable change (Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

Despite these efforts, the spiritual development component was lacking. To assist students in connecting spiritually, not just to become better students, but also mature human beings, there must be a focus on spiritual development (Waggoner, 2016). This study explored the spiritual development angle that is often overlooked when support structures for AA students, like those which are increasingly being used in colleges and universities around the country, are put in place. The theoretical background of this study will be expounded upon in more detail.

**Theoretical Background**

Theoretically, this study was grounded in Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. Fowler's study suggested that students make progress in the development of their faith throughout their undergraduate years (Fowler, 1981). The study, however, focused on private Christian, predominately White universities. The present study used Fowler's Theory to add to the research that pushes an understanding of spiritual development at PWIs (Andrade, 2014; Parks, 1986, 2011, 2018). Erikson's Identity Development Theory grounded this study's focus on the stage of identity development of AA students. This psychosocial theory challenged the way one should think about development, especially within the present framework of higher education. Specifically, Erikson's theory was used to comprehend any underlying issues that the student participants had encountered and successfully overcome in order to advance in their spiritual and identity development.

**Situation to Self**

My personal philosophical convictions in conjunction with my professional experiences served as the motivation behind this study. The primary ontological assumption that served as a basis for this study is that AA students were underperforming in comparison to their White counterparts. Only 41% of AA students received their BA within six years compared to 63% of

White students (Banks & Dohy, 2019). This summation was based on epistemological insights

gained from the testimonies of AA students that I served as a staff member in the student affairs

office. The following rhetorical statements serve to further clarify my convictions. My

experiences an AA student affairs professional and as an undergraduate student at a PWI have

shown that AA students attending PWIs have had different experiences and outcomes compared

to their White counterparts. Therefore, part of the motivation to conduct this study was to

document and explore the need for more research into the experiences and outcomes that

manifest in the lives of AA students attending PWI's. It was equally vital from an axiological

perspective, to explore the experiences of AA students as it was to consider ways to maximize

the experiences of White students, even though AA students represent the minority. PWI's have

been charged with helping to mold the futures of all its students in the most positive way

possible, even those who are not in the majority.

Regarding my personal philosophical assumptions, I have found that what is missing in

the overall process of development among AA undergraduate students is a focus on their

spiritual and identity development. The ontological perspective behind this assumption is based

on my professional experience and other studies that confirm that AA students who have a strong

spiritual foundation and who are sure of their identity tend to navigate the challenges of being an

AA student attending a PWI more successfully than their AA peers who do not have a strong

spiritual foundation (Li & Murphy, 2018; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Park & Bowman 2015). The

following rhetorical statements serve to further clarify my assumptions. Spirituality and identity

are foundational to the human existence as humans are in fact spirit, soul, and body (Piedmont &

Wilkins, 2019). To neglect the spiritual and identity development of students in general is to

place students at an academic disadvantage, in my opinion, because students are merely humans

and largely spiritual beings. In other words, holistic approaches to practical problems often can be far more effective in helping people to overcome challenges, in my opinion. It can safely be assumed that students attend institutions of higher learning to expand their intellectual capabilities. As it would be unthinkable to neglect the physical well-being of a student in their quest for knowledge, it is also ill advised to neglect the spiritual well-being of students. In the case of AA students attending PWIs, they face unique challenges as they matriculate through their degree programs. With the added burden of being a minority with cultural differences and possibly systemic disadvantages, it stands to reason that spiritual support could encourage better outcomes. Axiologically, it could be considered immoral to neglect the spiritual and identity development of students during their developmental years. It could also be considered immoral to place AA students at an even greater disadvantage by neglecting their spiritual development in the face of the facts that they have challenges, such racism, lack of sense of belonging, lack of representation around their campuses, lack of support (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013; Karkouti, 2016; Banks & Dohy, 2019). The majority of their White counterparts do not face these same challenges so AA students may be more dependent on spirituality than their White counterparts due to cultural differences (Weddle-West et al., 2013).

The following highlights the paradigms that guided this study. Though this is a qualitative study, a positivist approach will be taken as the subject of AA students' spiritual development at a PWI is studied. Research illuminated that students have better experiences when the university environment is supportive of their spiritual development. From a post-positivism view, the theories, hypotheses, background knowledge and values of the researcher are considered. The researcher has years of experience in the student affairs

profession and has a background in theology and spiritual leadership. From a constructivist learning paradigm, conclusions will be developed in part from the baseline of the researcher's previous knowledge and experience. This study also subscribes to the participatory paradigm as the study will work closely with the AA student community to investigate their concerns and draw conclusions as to what factors could be considered in efforts to promote positive systemic changes at PWIs. In considering the paradigms that will guide this research, note that a pragmatic approach will also be taken as it is the goal of the study to highlight "what works" rather than what might be considered absolutely and objectively "true" or "real" in the final findings of the study.

Because I have a personal concern for the spiritual lives of students as well as the overall academic success of AA students, I have given personal attention to understanding how students construct the realities of their spiritual development and of the unique positionality that AA students have in a predominately White spaces. My interest stems from two areas of personal experience. First, I am an African American male who graduated from a PWI. Second, I have served both African American and White students in the university setting and remain passionately devoted to the academic success of all students given to my care. Because of these firsthand experiences, I believe I have a better understanding of what is required to address the needs of students during their undergraduate years.

Professionally, I have over 11 years of experience working in higher education in the student affairs profession. During my time working with students, I have learned that African American students have a strong propensity toward the engagement of spirituality and identity in practical matters, including in the academic setting. Through my interactions and conversations, my attention was peeked regarding the subject of AA students and their spiritual and identity

development. I realized that my experience only partially revealed the special relationship between AA students and spirituality. Thus, further study and research would be necessary to learn how to best assist them in their spiritual and identity development as a part of their individual development. The first step was to explore and understand the lived experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development at PWIs. Understanding their lived experiences can help PWIs identify supportive resources and services that may help AA students better adapt to life in an academic setting, thus having greater overall success while pursuing their undergraduate studies.

## Problem Statement

There is a need for holistic spiritual and identity support for AA students who dropout at a high rate at PWIs. (Museus, & Saelua, 2017). In 2017, 67% of White students graduated with their degrees, 52% completed their undergraduate studies at the same university, 11% transferred to another college, and 21% were no longer attending classes with a different university. The same data source showed that in 2017, a total of 46% of Black students earned degrees, 35% of Black students finished college at the same institution, 7% of Black students earned degrees from various colleges, and 35% of Black students were no longer enrolled at any other university (Museus, & Saelua, 2017). Institutional holistic support provided to AA students is one possible way to ensure that they can successfully integrate, navigate, and complete their studies at PWIs.

Earlier research looked at the total growth of undergraduate students in a variety of areas, including: emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), integration of spiritual development and student development (Astin et al., 2010; Love & Talbot, 2009), advantages for students with religious affiliations and participation (Li & Murphy, 2018; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Park & Bowman 2015), Christian college and university campuses' spiritual climates (Fosnacht & Broderick,

2018; 2020), and quantitative assessments of students' satisfaction (Pennington et al., 2018; Rennick et al., 2013). None of these studies focused on the experiences of AA students, but rather on college and university students in general. There is, however, a scarcity of research that addresses the experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development at PWIs. Only a few studies have been conducted into how the environments of PWIs affect and foster the spiritual and identity development of AA students (Weddle-West et al., 2013). The lack of insight into the subject, particularly from the perspective of the provision of spiritual and individual development support services is a problem because this information is necessary to explore plausible explanations for the differences between the experiences of AA students and White students attending PWIs. African American students attending PWIs look to their spirituality to cope with the challenges they face while matriculating through their programs (Weddle-West et al., 2013). Because of the dependency of AA students on spirituality in their individual development, it is important to close the literary gap that exists in this area, thus, providing the tools to PWIs that will help their AA students maximize academic and developmental opportunities.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. The primary aim of this study was to capture rich descriptions of the lived experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending a PWI, thereby closing the research gap created by the lack of known studies addressing this population. The theories behind this study are Fowler's Theory of Faith Development and Erikson's Theory of Identity Development,

each of which dealt with the spiritual development and identity development of college students at the time when the research was conducted.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this study hinges on the importance of students' spiritual and identity development. As previously mentioned, students' spiritual development is a part of their total identity which is a critical component for development during undergraduate years. However, this area lacked the attention and research support in the literature. Like other research, this study reinforced the theory that spiritual and identity development was indeed a significant part of a student's total identity. Unlike other studies on the subject, this study had among its goals, gained insight into whether AA students attending PWIs were receiving the nurture/support necessary for the healthy development of their spirituality that is individual to their specific needs as AAs. In the context of the global scholarship on this specific subject, this study represented further research that illuminated a perspective which has not been explored. This qualitative research study further elaborated on the spiritual and identity development of AA students attending PWIs by exploring the lived experiences of AA students on PWIs.

Previous studies supported the connection between undergraduate students' spiritual and identity connection and higher performance and completion rates (Bowman & Small, 2012; Li & Murphy, 2018). There was a research gap as it relates to measuring in actual percentages how much or little spiritual support services impact AA students' higher education performance and completion rates. However, the scholarship that was available is clear that a "sense of belonging" was a key impetus behind student behaviors whether social or anti-social (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). The need for belonging was referred to as a "desperate" need that can drive students to manifest negative or positive outcomes (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). This includes whether they

maintained relationships such as the relationship between them and the college or university that they may be attending. An example given included joining a church to fulfill this all-encompassing need to belong (Donahoo & Caffey,2010; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Because spirituality is a prominent part of AA culture, it stands to reason that spiritual support on predominantly White campuses would indeed promote a sense of belonging among AA students, thereby promoting better outcomes. AA students demonstrated a need for mentorship and guidance related to their spiritual development from student affairs professionals, faculty, and other staff (Craft, & Kohl, 2012; Li & Murphy, 2018; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013a; Waggoner, 2016). However, the underperformance and dropout rates among AA students at PWIs appear to be higher than their counterparts thus indicating the need for further study regarding what factors play into this phenomenon of underachievement such as the spiritual development of AA students.

As for the practical significance of the study, it was important to understand the experiences of AA students attending PWIs to see how their spiritual development affected their perceptions of whether they were able to reach their overall potential as a student enrolled at a PWI. This study served to improve the experiences of AA students attending PWI's by providing PWI's with the rich knowledge necessary to provide perspectives that will inform AA student support strategies. With effective spiritual and identity development support strategies in place, PWIs may be more effective at fostering a sense of belonging among AA students. Additionally, the hope was that the findings of this research may help with retention efforts for AA students attending PWIs. Consequently, the researcher hopes to build upon previous research of student and spiritual development theories specific to AA students.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. The overarching research question (RQ) this study addressed is: How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs? Undergraduate years are a pivotal point for students spiritually (Rockenbach et al., 2012). Additionally, AA students' unique backgrounds affected their perception of spiritual development (Lovik, 2011). The connection between spirituality and AA students' culture bears upon their higher education experiences (Wood & Hilton, 2012). As it relates to AA students' identity development while attending PWIs, AA students often had nuanced experiences of their PWIs because of the racial disparities (Gehrke, 2013). The lack of identity development and support that these students received is demonstrated by the struggle that PWIs have retaining AA students (Gehrke, 2013) and the negative experiences related to issues of marginalization, microaggressions, and no sense of belonging that AA students' report (Bowman & Small, 2012 Hall, 2017). Questions of identity for students attending PWIs is grounded in the research conducted by Baxter Magolda (2001).  This research supports the following Sub Questions:

1. **SQ1.** How do AA students who attend PWIs describe their experiences with student support services?

2. **SQ2.**  What experiences do AA students perceive as contributing factors to their identity while attending PWIs?

**Definitions**

1. *Spiritual development* - In awe of their surroundings, curious about the world, open to the inexplicable, aware and sensitive to changes in relationships, and curious about the source of their emotions (Love & Talbot, 2009).

2. *Spirituality* - as a journey for significance, purpose, and beliefs (Chickering et al., 2006).

3. *Predominately White Institution (PWI)* - an institution of higher education where at least 50% of the student population is White (Lomotey, 2015).

4. *Historically Black College and University (HBCU)* - a historically Black university or college that was founded before 1964 with the goal of educating Black people (Wade, 2021).

5. *Religious Affiliation* - the religion to which a person nominates they have an affiliation (Bowman & Small, 2012).

**Summary**

This chapter emphasized the significance of the undergraduate college experience in students' spiritual and identity development. Additionally, Fowler's Faith development theory and Erikson's Identity Development theory explained that students experienced spiritual and identity development during their college years. Although important, AA students lacked the institutional support they needed to successfully enter undergraduate programs at PWIs. (Apprey et al., 2014; Hall, 2017). As a result, AA students had higher dropout rates than other student groups at PWIs (Hall, 2017). However, there was a lack of research on the spiritual and identity development of AA students who attend PWIs. As a result, the goal of this research was to describe the spiritual and identity development experiences of AA students while attending PWIs. The researcher aimed to contribute to the existing literature by illuminating areas of

support needed to enhance the spiritual and identity development of AA students at PWIs by documenting the participants' lived experiences.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to better understand the spiritual and identity development of AA undergraduates while attending PWIs. In this chapter, the researcher will review literature on foundational theoretical frameworks to provide context for understanding the lived experiences of AA students at PWIs. At the end of the chapter, the researcher will summarize the literature review. In the next section, the researcher will begin the discussion regarding the theoretical frameworks.

## Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework included concepts connected to spiritual development in students. This study was grounded in two theories, Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. In this section, the researcher examined Fowler's Faith Development Theory, which shed light on the spiritual components that currently exist within the student development paradigm and offer insight into how individuals make progress in the development of their faith (Fowler, 1981; Andrade, 2014). Following this, the researcher explored Erikson's Identity Development Theory, which explored how students develop during their transition from adolescence into young adulthood (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968). More specifically, the researcher concentrated on the intersections of students' spiritual and identity development.

### Fowler's Faith Development Theory

James Fowler developed the Faith Development Theory. The theory originated as a study of structural-development psychology, and it built a thorough framework for understanding how people developed in their faith and spirituality. (Fowler, 1981). Fowler based the theory upon his study of 359 children and adults across their development and originated a spiritual development

theory with six-stages. One of Fowler's primary goals in developing this theory was to understand faith (or spirituality) as a tool for creating and sustaining meaning in life (Fowler, 1981). Fowler relied heavily on Piaget and Kohlberg's research on the structural phases of cognition and moral decisions, respectively. In comparison, Fowler contended that faith follows the logic of conviction rather than the logic of rational certainty. (Andrade, 2014).

Fowler (1981) identified six stages in one's faith process. A student's developmental stage could be classified as either synthetic-conventional or individuative-reflective, according to his theory. In the proposed study, these two phases were being experienced by the students at the time of the investigation. First, the synthetic-conventional stage focused on a person's capacity for abstract thought, as well as their ability to reflect on their interactions and relationships with others and become more self-aware. (Fowler, 1981). It is at this point that students establish their worldviews, philosophical frameworks, and theological pillars from people they regard as trustworthy and private sources. These trustworthy and private sources may be their peers, pastors, teachers, or parents. (Fowler, 1981). At this stage, the student could choose who has the power to affect their worldview. The students would give this authority without any doubt or question because they have chosen influencers who are reliable and trustworthy. The individiuative-reflective stage was discussed next.

When students entered the individuative-reflective stage, students sought clarification on who they were and wondered if they could be independent of the persons of influence in the earlier stage. (Fowler, 1981). This stage began the critical thinking ability development. The student meditated on their unique perspective in light of their own experiences. By the end of stage three, students had developed their own individuality and allowed their own faith to come to the forefront independently without the direct influence of

others. (Fowler & Dell, 2006). As a result of this process, students gained a deeper sense of self-awareness; they took responsibility for making their own decisions regarding their future development to fulfill their purpose. (Andrade, 2014).

Ultimately, Fowler's model informed the literature on this subject with providing a modality for investigating and analyzing spiritual development and prompted an entire body of empirical data on spiritual development (Andrade, 2014; Love & Talbot, 2009; Parks, 1986, 2011). Several studies had built on Fowler's work, specifically extending it to higher education (Andrade, 2014; Parks, 1986, 2011). Andrade's (2014) study found that while Fowler's theory was not originally designed to apart of the main theories regarding student development, the theory was both relevant to higher education and to the daily work within student affairs.

Parks' (1986, 2011, 2018) studies also extended Fowler's Faith Development Theory to higher education. Parks' (2011) study addressed spiritual development in adolescents, young adults, and college students between eighteen and thirty-two years of age, specifically young adults and college students. According to Parks (2011), spiritual development occurs in four stages: adolescence, young adulthood, tested adulthood, and mature adulthood. In this model, students were in the stage of young adulthood and the tested adulthood. During the young adulthood faith stage, students looked into the validity of their beliefs and the ways in which truth might be applied (Parks, 2018; Parks, 2011). In the midst of the complexity of the world, students felt a strong urge to define their future (Chickering et al., 2006). In the tested adulthood stage, students' commitment was put to the test, and their knowledge and way of being were solidified. They started to recognize and reconcile their place in the greater scheme of things, and they insisted on maintaining that position (Parks, 2011). According to Parks (2011), strong

networks of coaching and mentoring were necessary for young adults to succeed in their

academic careers and beyond.

While Parks' (1986, 2011, 2018) research was an extension of Fowler's Faith

Development Theory for comprehending faith development, there were challenges to these

beliefs (Love et al., 2005, Chickering et al., 2006). According to Love et al. (2005), some of

Parks and Fowler's findings centered around the "stage" model itself. Stage models were also

based on an American viewpoint that placed the greatest value on the individual and self-

governance. Chickering et al. (2006) argued that these theories assumed that individuals would

become more adept at independent and critical thinking with age because of the autonomy that

they gain with age. With this development would come a greater level of independent thinking,

greater autonomy, greater distance from family connections, and a rejection of authority

(Chickering et al., 2006). Each level of development was intended to demonstrate a higher level

of reasoning, a developing understanding of right and wrong, and a progression toward more

abstract thought. (Chickering et al., 2006).

Despite the fact that Fowler's work was essential to this understanding of spiritual

development, some scholars contended that his bias stemmed from his Christian worldview.

(Coyle, 2011; Lownsdale, 1997; Wong & Fry, 2013). The fact that Fowler's research was limited

to Christian students opened the door for more recent studies that aids in comprehending spiritual

development in a secular university environment (Andrade, 2014). However, Fowler (1981)

asserted that his model could be applied to any religious tradition. Despite these drawbacks, his

work had a significant impact on religious psychology (Chickering et al., 2006).

In response to postmodern challenges, Fowler (2001) updated his original theory to

expand its reach beyond Christian students. Coyle (2011), Daniel (2017), Neuman (2011), and

Wrench et al. (2019) all built upon Fowler's Faith Theory to also explore universal aspects of spiritual development. More specifically, Daniel (2017) used the theory in research on grief counseling. Neuman (2011) used the theory to address adolescents and youth beliefs and spiritual development. However, there were few studies that addressed the spiritual development of AA undergraduate students that was ground in Fowler's Theory (Wrench et al., 2019).

**Erikson's Identity Development Theory**

Student identity development theories served as the foundation for an in-depth investigation of students' approaches to college., as well as their transition into independence and adulthood (Lewis et al., 2015; Patton et al., 2016; Jones & Stewart, 2016; Abes, 2016; Strayhorn, 2015). Student development is holistic and takes into account students' entire identities, from their families of origin to their current age, rather than placing a lot of emphasis on any one area. Erik Erikson's Identity Development Theory (1902-1994) sparked many ideas related to student development in social science literature over the past fifty years. Erikson wrote extensively about identity, primarily about adolescence. Nevertheless, his research offered important developmental insights into how one develops their identity as children and adults. Most of the identity research contain traces of his theories. The psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson altered how people viewed the formation of identities. One of the first to propose an eight-stage psychosocial model of lifelong human development was Erikson. According to his theory, each stage had an underlying conflict or crisis that the person had to face and successfully resolve to advance in their development.

Eight stages of development were included in Erikson's (1959, 1963, 1968) theory, which chronologically covered each stage of a student's identity development. Erikson (1968) defined stage five, referred to as identity versus role confusion, as a student's "turning point" that

happened immediately following a struggle they've been experiencing internally that was brought on by their environment. This is the stage that is most relevant to the proposed current work (Erikson, 1968). In this stage, the desire to refine one's identity was more intense, and one would be acutely aware of their beliefs, values, and objectives. (Erikson, 1968). During their undergraduate years, students' identity was greatly influenced by their social and academic experiences (Erikson, 1968). One of the most difficult aspects of development, in Erikson's opinion, was identity development.

Erikson's theory has informed research on student development within the higher education context; more specifically, scholars used it to understand spiritual development in various aspects of undergraduate students' lives (Jones & Abes; 2013; Jones & Stewart, 2016; Killam et al., 2017; Nadal et al., 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Sacco, 2013; Sandeen & Barr, 2014). The insertion of spiritual development as a crucial aspect of the conversation about student development was supported by Erikson's theory. Student development, based on Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory, shed light on the spiritual components that are already evident in student development. To better understand the functions of various levels of spirituality and religion among emerging adults in the United States, Nadal et al. (2017)'s study sampled 9,495 students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five in a cross-sectional online survey. They discovered that students who scored highly on spirituality had better psychosocial outcomes, and they used Erikson's Identity Development Theory (psycho-social stages of development), which measures a person's clarity and depth of identity at the point when young adults begin to consider who they want to be. (Nadal et al., 2017).

Erikson's theory served as the foundation for Chickering's (1969) development of seven vectors of development. Erikson's stages of development and Chickering's vectors are different

because Chickering takes both the vectors' magnitude and direction into account. Chickering demonstrated that a person might be able to handle multiple vectors at once, but any evaluation should concentrate on just one main vector at a time. Erikson's stages were organized chronologically and sequentially, whereas Chickering's vectors allowed for flexibility in development by allowing people to process each vector in a variety of ways. Erikson's theory and the extensions made by other scholars like Chickering et al. (2006, 2015) supported the idea that spiritual development should be covered by student development theories and practices. According to these theories, identity development naturally led to spiritual development because a person's true self, or full humanness, is inextricably linked to their spiritual nature (Maslow, 1971).

By expanding on this research and looking at students' spiritual development in the future, the proposed study used these theories as a means of interpreting the experiences of the students. According to Fowler, the way a person idealizes meaning was the key to human development (Fowler, 1981). The proposed study used Erikson's and Fowler's theories as a foundational framework for understanding AA students' spiritual and identity development at PWIs. Further, spirituality looks different in AA students (Edgell, 2007). Therefore, further research is needed to address spiritual development in higher education from a multicultural framework (Paredes-Collins, 2013). Moreover, the study used the synthetic-conventional and individuative-reflective stages of Fowlers' Faith Development as a framework for understanding where these young adults and undergraduate students were in their spiritual development. The next section included a more detailed discussion of literature related to students' spiritual development at PWIs generally, and literature more narrowly focused on AA students' unique

needs; therefore, This study sought to comprehend how black undergraduates at PWIs idealized meaning in the context of higher education.

## Related Literature

In this section, the researcher summarized the related literature which detailed the impact of spiritual development in the area of students' development and the university's influence on students' spirituality. Within these constructs, the researcher further addressed the core-identity of AA's spirituality, and the AA undergraduate student's unique positionality at PWIs undergraduate students' spiritual and identity development. In doing so, the researcher used this section to connect the related literature to the proposed study. Literature on students' spiritual development in higher education was included in the first subsection, and spirituality and AA culture was covered in the second.

Many scholars in the succeeding decades built upon Fowler's (1981) theoretical framework and the literature on spirituality and religion rapidly grew (Andrade, 2014; Astin et al., 2011; Dancy, 2010; Hall et al., 2016; Jett, 2010; Weddle-West et al., 2013; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Early American higher education was heavily influenced by religion, but overtime, a pronounced foundational religious affiliation dwindled. Over the past decades, literature surrounding religion and secular education had increased, including studies that distinguished religion from spirituality (Waggoner, 2016).

Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) addressed the current role that religion plays within higher education and how students can benefit cognitively, socially, and personally when researchers pay close attention to inherent spiritual facets of higher education. Andrade (2014) study specifically explored Fowler's faith development theory and how it can be used in daily student affairs practice. This related literature provided context for the gap that this study fills. The

following review highlights the spiritual development components that exist within student development.

**Students' Spiritual Development and Identity Development in Higher Education**

Fowler's Faith Development Theory created a pathway to comprehending spiritual development and its significance to the holistic development of the undergraduate student. Several scholars explored spiritual development in undergraduate students (Astin et al., 2011; Dancy, 2010; Hall et al., 2016; Jett, 2010; Weddle-West et al., 2013; Wood & Hilton, 2012). After Fowler's theory came other similar research like Maslow's (1971) Hierarchy of Needs, Knefelkamp et al. (1978), Chickering (2006, 2015), discussed above, Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) extension of Chickering (2015), and Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory (2015). All these studies addressed the need to examine lived experiences relating to the spiritual aspects of identity development. The reason identity development is addressed here is because Maslow (1971) suggested that spiritual development cannot be separated from identity development because he makes the case that spiritual development and identity development are one in the same.  For instance, self-actualization was crucial to a person's development according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow's research, the concepts of spirituality and self-transcendence are mutually inclusive. Without taking spiritual development into account, according to Maslow, human development is insufficient. Maslow (1971) suggested that the spiritual self is a part of the "real self, of one's identity" or of one's "inner core" and of "one's species hood, of full humanness" (Maslow, 1971, p. 314). Maslow (1971) emphasized the crucial function of a person's spiritual side. This emphasis reflects the nature of current research and the need for further research to fill gaps in the literature about spiritual and identity development in undergraduate students.

Knefelkamp et al., (1978) published a study that attempted to explain how students develop. There were four questions in the study: (1) What intrapersonal and interpersonal changes should take place during a student's college years? (2) What causes this development, and why? (3) What aspects of the college environment encourage or impede growth? (4) What developmental outcomes should we pursue in college? (Knefelkamp et al., 1978). Through the use of these questions, a framework for student development and an analysis of undergraduate students' lived experiences were both provided.

By expanding on Chickering's seven vectors, Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) self-authorship theory advanced the body of research on student development. Baxter Magolda studied 101 students at Miami University to better understand this idea. The following inquiries were made in the study: (1) How do I know what I know; (2) Who am I?; (3) How do I want to develop connections with other people? (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The study by Baxter Magolda investigated how students clarified their identities when confronted with rapidly changing personal and global circumstances beyond their control. According to the research, Baxter Magolda provided a working definition for self-authorship. Self-authorship was defined as the ability to express one's beliefs, identity, and interpersonal relationships by using one's inner voice, creating an inner framework, and making an inner commitment (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Regarding students' awareness of their own authorship, Baxter Magolda identified four stages of development.  The four stages of a students' awareness of self-authorship were identified as one, engaging methods that help to fulfill the expectations of external authorities; two, coming to the conclusion that the external expectations of authorities is no-longer required to meet a student's individual needs; three, coming into ones selfhood in a way that manifests as a student's ability to label, express, and enact their values and beliefs; and four, the student

reaches the point of being internally centered. Being internally centered speaks to a student's ability to ascertain who his or she is as a person outside of the projections and opinions of other people. (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The study came to the conclusion that lack of self-awareness causes students to graduate from college with limited decision-making skills. The study argued that once undergraduate studies are complete, institutions of higher education have a duty to advise and assist their students in realizing their full potential.

Arnett's (2015) emerging adulthood theory offered fresh insights into the emerging adulthood stage. This theory considered the social and historical backgrounds that had influenced a student's development. Arnett claims that compared to students of the past, today's college-bound students are navigating a very different world with a very different worldview. Erikson's seminal theories of development were useful starting points, but Arnett argued that using the same approach with today's students would be counterproductive because both the world and students' development were changing. According to the emerging adulthood theory, those between the ages of 18 and 25 belong to a group that was neither young adults nor adults. (Arnett, 2015). Arnett found that this age group was significantly impacted by social changes while researching this age group. Compared to previous generations, these social changes included delaying marriage until after starting their careers, a more erratic world economy, which diminished job security, as well as a greater necessity for ongoing instruction and training, and increased parental financial support, which could prevent children from entering adulthood fully. (Arnett, 2015). The research of Arnett (2015) demonstrated the need for further scholarly investigation into this age group and the importance of social context. The lives of students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are more convoluted, ambiguous, and divided than those of earlier generations. The current study was distinctive because it is conducting research

in an understudied population during an ongoing pandemic around the world. This study was being conducted at a time when society and higher education are more complex than they have ever been. These theories on student development served as the framework for this phenomenological investigation.

Love and Talbot (2009) made an additional case for the inclusion of spiritual growth in identity development. Love and Talbot's 2009) seminal research influenced a working definition of spiritual development to help direct the study's progress to focus the more general subject of spiritual development. The working definition of spiritual development was described as being awestruck by one's surroundings, having been captivated by the world, being open to the unknown, perceptive to changes in relationships, or being inquisitive about the source of one's emotions (Love & Talbot, 2009). Love and Talbot's (2009) research aimed to close the gap between spirituality and spiritual development, noting that student development theories do not take these two crucial elements into account.

The concept of a student's spiritual development gained even more traction after the publication of Astin et al.,'s (2010) national longitudinal study, which the authors looked at the diverse stages undergraduate students experienced and the part that colleges and universities played in their spiritual development. For the study, information was gathered from 14,527 students who attended 136 colleges and universities nationwide. Research showed that faculty and staff can have a significant impact on students' spiritual development by encouraging them to consider questions of significance and purpose (Astin et al., 2011; Astin et al., 2010).

Recent studies have looked at spirituality as a form of diversity and the benefits of students joining religious organizations and being religiously affiliated (Li & Murphy, 2018; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Park & Bowman 2015), the spirituality found on Christian university and

college campuses, (Fosnacht & Broderick, 2018; 2020), as well as quantitative research on student satisfaction (Pennington et al., 2018; Rennick et al., 2013). But most of the research was on spiritual development at Christian colleges and universities (Bowman & Small, 2012; Bowman & Smedley, 2013; Setran et al., 2010).

In a national Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), Bowman et al. (2014) studied 3,924 first-year students from across 28 academic institutions. While students might not be fully committed to a set of religious practices, Bowman et al. (2014) discovered that their worldview or religion predicted how satisfied students were with their experiences in higher education and their academic achievement. This study produced quantitative rather than qualitative data thereby leaving a gap in the literature for more qualitative and descriptive studies.

Higher university satisfaction among students who experienced spiritual support translated into greater academic success. This was also related to university fulfillment (Li & Murphy 2018). Stoppa (2017) found that many emerging adult college students' identities were influenced by their level of spirituality and religion awareness and engagement. As students used the resources at their disposal to develop confidence in their development, their academic performance would only improve.

Students' spirituality and religious affiliation (and associated support) provided them with a further tool to combat potential academic challenges and a way to enhance their mental health while pursuing academic excellence. For example, Li and Murphy (2018) studied the religious affiliation and student performances of 714 undergraduate and 26 graduate students at a university with faiths that spanned over 5 major religions and found that students with a religious affiliation performed better in their studies. In order to examine this, Rockenbach & Mayhew (2014) conducted 27 in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and administrators in four

university settings in addition to reviewing a survey of 1,071 students from two universities. This showed how undergraduate students struggled spiritually once they arrive on campus. They discovered a link between students' satisfaction and the spiritual support they receive on campus.

In fact, college students struggle with their spirituality, and these experiences illustrate various forms of intra- and inter-religious conflict (Rockenbach et al., 2012).  Twelve undergraduate students who had gone through spiritual adversity were the subjects of a phenomenological study by Rockenbach et al. (2012). The investigation looked at how students interpret these real-world situations and how their personal experiences impact academic performance. Studies also showed a link between spirituality and life change, demonstrating the importance of health educators assisting students in developing their spirituality (Barrett, 2016; Bowman & Small, 2013; Evans et al., 2009). These studies have not addressed the spiritual development of AA undergraduate students' lived experiences or their descriptions of this process, necessitating the proposed study.

In addition to looking at the relationship between spirituality and educational outcomes, literature also addressed how the university environment influences students' spiritual development (Craft & Kohl, 2012; Lindholm, 2014; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013a; Waggoner, 2016). For example, at 264 colleges and universities across the US, Waggoner (2016) examined the spiritual identity of 8,447 tenure-track faculty members. In the study, Waggoner found that students fare better when adequate attention is given to spiritual development on university campuses (Waggoner, 2016). Furthermore, Waggoner stated that, while faculty members were often apprehensive about participating in spiritual conversations in academic contexts, it was necessary for them to do so. Waggoner further stated faculty interactions with students that encourage self-reflection, meditation, deeper exploration of questions of meaning, and other

mentorship creates positive outcomes for students including better grades, more satisfaction with their institution, increased self-assurance in, and in their spiritual development. These findings were relevant because faculty and student affairs professionals make up a large component of the University climate.

Student affairs professionals were still hesitant to interact with students in this way, despite more positive results related to the faculty's spirituality (Lindholm, 2014). According to Lindholm (2014), one reason for this reluctance could be a concern about receiving negative feedback or other related problems as a result of these interactions. Studies that examine how and to what extent the college environment affected students' spiritual development, philosophies, or faith development were still relatively understudied in the discourse.

Studies on the effect of higher education on students' spirituality revealed how little emphasis colleges and universities placed on their personal growth (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013a). Students' spiritual and religious development as well as the part that universities play in that development were examined by Rockenbach & Mayhew (2013a). The groundbreaking study of the University of California, Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 2007 was expanded upon by Rockenbach & Mayhew (2013b). While reviewing data from 112,000 students enrolled in 236 schools and colleges across the country, the original study excluded the topic of spirituality. In their 2013b publication, Rockenbach & Mayhew expanded on the UCLA study's section on ecumenism as a component of spirituality. Rockenbach & Mayhew's (2013a) study concluded by urging academic staff and administrators to think about the value of their work in developing students' spirits. In the end, they discovered that the level of emphasis placed on students' development of an ecumenical worldview varied depending on the institution's level of religious affiliation. Additionally, they discovered that there were more

opportunities for the development of an ecumenical worldview in settings where students expressed more spiritual struggles and viewpoints as well as situations in which they were directly involved with religious and spiritual issues (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013b).

The college experience as an undergraduate was characterized by numerous life transitions and was a crucial period for students' human and spiritual development (Lovik, 2011). Furthermore, post-secondary institutions focused on promoting and providing a world-class educational environment, despite the fact that college students, regardless of background, were in a neurodevelopment experimental phase in which they wanted to understand their reason for being born (Fowler, 2001; Fowler, 1981). Consequently, PWIs failed to recognize the relationship between how a student's spiritual identity affected their overall satisfaction and experience in the University. (Bowman et al., 2014; Li & Murphy, 2018).

Research on students' spiritual development suggested that higher education institutions fall short of meeting their students' needs for spiritual resources, and they backed the inclusion of spiritual development as a crucial element in the conversation about student development (Astin et al., 2010; Bowman et al., 2014; Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968; Love & Talbot, 2009; Baxter Magolda, 2001). The spiritual elements already noticeable in student development will be illuminated by student development itself. Research like Baxter Magolda's (2001) focused only on undergraduate students who were majority white and did not explore diverse student populations. The present study sought to fill this gap.

Diverse relationships that students cultivated while pursuing their academic goals helped them grow spiritually (Waggoner, 2016). Because the university climate is so important to students' development, the effect of the campus climate on spiritual development is still being researched and investigated (Waggoner, 2016). Students were generally eager to learn more

about spiritual subjects, and they anticipated the university to provide sufficient resources and staff to aid them in their ongoing quest for their life's purpose (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013b). By providing a thorough analysis of AA students' lived experiences regarding their spiritual and identity development, the current study will close the gap in the literature.

Higher education institutions can employ the findings presented in this research to make better informed decisions about academic achievement, retention, and enhancing multiple elements of the university experience that benefit both the student and the university. These explorations focused on AA students' experiences of spiritual and identity development while they attend a PWI. The current study did not make a direct determination about how much spirituality influences student success; rather, it only concentrated on gathering students' lived experiences related to their spiritual and identity development. This study also aimed to identify any support that these students might require to succeed academically.

**Spirituality and African American Culture**

This section explored the literature about religion and spirituality as important aspects of the culture of AA students. According to the history of AA culture, spirituality and religion have all influenced or shaped African religious views, practices, customs, art, social norms, and cultural expressions. (Wood & Hilton, 2012). While AA culture has distinctive elements, there was no one way that AAs express their spirituality, no one religion that they practice, and no one set of beliefs in the Black church's or other religious institutions' teachings (Wood & Hilton, 2012). However, the relationship between religion, spirituality, and AA culture did have an impact on how students conceptualize, encounter, and reflect on their psychological, social, political, economic, and other experiences. It also suggested a strong shared cultural value system that has an impact on the Black experience. (Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Additionally, the spiritual and religious aspects of the AA community had a significant influence on the kinds of relationships people choose to have and how they view the world. It also specified how they envisioned themselves integrating into sectors of society (such as healthcare, business, government, and education) that are constructed to deny AAs equivalent opportunities for advancement (Finney, 2014). This translated into the day-to-day experiences of AA students (Holland, 2016). As a result, a key context for the current study was related literature that questions this understanding. The investigation of AA students' spirituality focused on two main areas of study (Gehrke, 2013; Wood & Hilton, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Racial disparities associated with variations in expectations, efficacy, and spiritual development were one area Gehrke (2013) examined. The second broad category, higher education settings where AA students were more prevalent, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and junior colleges, was examined by Wood & Hilton (2012) and Tinto (2012). There had previously been no research on the spiritual development of AA students at PWIs.

Gehrke's (2013) study examined the racial disparities in spiritual development in college, finding that students of different cultural origins had different levels of spiritual development and expectations when they initially began attending college and by the time they were seniors. During college, AA students grew spiritually in terms of identification and search, but not in terms of serenity. What contributes to equanimity, however, is less apparent (Gehrke, 2013).

According to research, spirituality and religion were important to AAs and Caribbean Blacks' daily lives (Finney, 2014; Holland, 2016; McIntosh, 2015). When these students entered college, they frequently attempted to maintain the spiritual aspects of their lives (Weddle-West, 2013). Students frequently sought role models and mentorship from figures of authority and support networks in their new surroundings at their institutions. Being confused when joining

these PWIs without much spiritual guidance was common (Patel, 2016). Because they arrived on campus as a minority with little help navigating it, first-generation AA students frequently lacked social capital and other resources, which could negatively impact their experience with higher education (Sinanan, 2016).

Other research indicates that the greater the institutional emphasis on identity groups, the greater the potential for spiritual development in all areas (Bowman & Small, 2013). Religious minorities were studied by Bowman and Small in 2013 along with the elements that both helped and hindered their spiritual growth. They discovered that faculty support, institutional acknowledgment of their identities, and attention to initiatives that engaged, supported, and acknowledged those identities all contributed to their spiritual growth. The absence of certain factors increased feelings of dissention during college and hindered spiritual growth (Bowman & Small, 2013).

Strayhorn (2011) discovered that in a study of twenty-one AA college students at a PWI, spiritual resources played an important part in the development of students' faith. After speaking with both male and female college students, Strayhorn (2011) proposed that AA students' involvement in the choir empowered them to develop a sense of belonging, develop a deeper awareness of cultural identity, and develop resilience. PWIs that intended to provide spiritual resources to AA students subsequently created a discussion forum in which students sought and explored religion and spirituality to understand its meaning, which strengthened their dedication to their academic pursuits as well as the university. (Strayhorn, 2011).

HBCUs and junior or community colleges both contributed to the spiritual development of AA students. The review included literature on HBCUs and community colleges because this was a field of study where researchers looked at the culture of AA students (Palmer & Maramba,

2012; Tinto, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012). According to Wood and Hilton's qualitative study of 28 AA male students from 2012, spirituality was a catalyst for them that influenced their academic journeys. According to Tinto's (2012) research, 33% of junior college students would need to attend their institution for 6 years in order to earn a bachelor's degree.

The challenges junior college students faced could frequently interfere with their ability to succeed in school. In this way, spirituality served as a resource to consider difficult decisions and helped Black college students overcome challenges they face in their academic studies (Wood & Hilton, 2012). Wood and Hilton (2012) suggested a connection between perseverance and spirituality. Spiritually minded AA students would be better able to persevere through challenges as they progressed through their degree programs.

The experiences of AA students at HBCUs were the subject of additional literature. Even though the environment for higher education at HBCUs differed from that of PWIs, there was still a need for support services tailored specifically to the requirements of AA students, particularly those enrolled at PWIs. According to Palmer & Maramba (2012), not all Black college students received the best academic results at HBCUs, which explained why some AA students performed better at PWIs and others at HBCUs. Black college students wanted commitment and close relationships outside of the classroom, according to Palmer and Maramba's (2012) qualitative study. This was comparable to what AA students at PWIs need (Sinanan, 2016).

The literature spent considerable time examining the achievements of realizing how higher education and spirituality are related. The concept of "student thriving" was one that is looked at, and a trend that emerged was that students' spiritual growth significantly predicted how much they would be able to thrive in college (McIntosh, 2015). According to McIntosh

(2015), thriving referred to the intellectual, social, and psychological experiences that students had while attending college. In addition, McIntosh (2015) defined spirituality as a person's dependence on a divine entity external to themselves, which served as the foundation for their perspective on life and a source of peace during challenging times. The results of the study showed that a student's success was predicted by how much they identified as spiritual, regardless of whether they attended a secular or religious higher education institution (McIntosh, 2015).

Further, McIntosh (2015) found that AA students who were thriving at PWIs had stronger spiritual grounding than those who struggled more to manage. According to McIntosh's (2015) findings, students used spiritual practices to deal with challenging circumstances because spirituality was deeply embedded in AA culture (Dill, 2017; Schreiner, 2014). When AA students could enhance their Christian spiritual engagement to nurture and grow meaningful social interactions and relationships, they revealed that the concern of a lack of continuity and sense of belonging for them as AA students on college campuses had also improved. (Astin et. al, 2011; McIntosh, 2015; Schreiner, 2014; Small, 2014).

It would be beneficial for Universities and Colleges to provide a space that offered specifically sociocultural spiritual support for AA students, according to the literature on the spiritual needs of AA students. Offering AA students this spiritual support based on their culture could help them develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging at their institutions of higher learning (Astin et. al, 2011; McIntosh, 2015; Schreiner, 2014; Small, 2014). However, much of the theoretical literature that existed does not focus specifically on AA students' spiritual development but rather provided general frameworks for academic success for AA students like mentoring programs, recruitment, and retention (Shuford & Flowers, 2016).

The literature that was available, particularly with regard to AA students' experiences, concentrated on AA students who are enrolled in HBCUs or community colleges. The need for research into the spiritual growth of AA students attending PWIs was apparent. When examining the academic outcomes of students who attended HBCUs, the effect and influence of spirituality on academic achievement differed (Weddle-West et al., 2013).

Weddle-West et al., (2013) found that there were significant discrepancies between the students for each particular university in terms of their spiritual beliefs and spiritual behaviors after exploring 125 African American students at HBCUs and AA students at PWIs. More specifically, Weddle-West et al., (2013) came to the conclusion that AA male students at HBCUs displayed less spiritual behavior. However, there was a significant distinction between the environments at PWIs and HBCUs. The spiritual lives of each type of institution's attendees and students would likely look different as a result, as ethnic identity played a different role at each.

According to Weddle-West et al., (2013), being a minority at a PWI could be strenuous because of racial tension as well as other circumstances. Male AAs who attended PWIs were more likely to turn to their spirituality for solace. According to Weddle-West et al., (2013), spirituality served as more than just a supplement to academic excellence and perseverance. They contended that when institutional policies and politics put AA students' sense of spirituality in question, it provided a further emotional outlet (Weddle-West et al., 2013). According to a distinctive aspect of the study, AAs who attended PWIs were more spiritual than AAs who attended HBCUs. Weddle-West et al. (2013) found that the spirituality levels of HBCU students could be lower because individuals reject the concept of any other form of spiritual practice that doesn't enhance an awareness of the African self.

The phenomenon of how AA students Internalized and processed spirituality through their lived experiences needs to be thoroughly researched. However, there has not been many phenomenological studies in the past ten years that specifically addressed this problem related to AA student's experiences on PWIs. These kinds of studies would be beneficial for learning more about how AA students interact with and perceive their educational institutions. University administrators who are prepared to make the necessary adjustments to their policies and practices to help AA students realize a higher overall university experience might greatly benefit from the investigation of AA student's lived experiences. This dissertation is motivated by the idea that better understanding can result in better service.

Climates at PWIs for higher education were distinctive and very dissimilar from those at HBCUs and junior colleges (Chen et al., 2014; Weddle-West et al., 2013). AA students who attended PWIs frequently reported experiencing racism, isolation, identity loss, and a diminished sense of belonging (Hunn, 2014). One of the reasons researchers had suggested that AA students would experience some drawbacks and challenges while attending PWI was that AA students lacked faculty staff and support because of negative labels and prejudices about AA students. (Hall, 2017). According to research, PWIs had difficulty keeping AA students because they matriculated at a lower rate than their White students. (Hall, 2017). All of these unpleasant incidents, which are further discussed below, took place at a crucial juncture in the identity development of AA students (Erikson,1968).

AA students typically had to work collaboratively with faculty and staff members who had different cultural backgrounds. Depending on their hometowns and high school experiences, many of these students might not find this to be novel, but it was special for them because they were entering a new stage in their personal growth. Many of these students had left their familiar

support networks to complete their college education. These students had to navigate a new environment with fresh challenges because they were at a very different stage of their identity development. Studies indicated that one of the difficulties AA students encountered was the lack of support and guidance from professors and other faculty members, which was typically required to overcome obstacles and succeed academically (Cockrell & Shelley, 2011; Hall, 2017; Miller & Stone, 2011).

In a phenomenological study, Hall (2017) examined the experiences of ten AA and Hispanic undergraduate students who were enrolled in a PWI that dealt with microaggressions. Hall (2017) gave an example of isolation in the study where one AA male participant felt as though the faculty did not care about him and had preconceived notions that he did not work hard (Hall, 2017). Consequently, this student felt as if the professors did not take him seriously, which threatened his success. In order for these minority students, particularly AA students, to feel like they belong at PWIs, it was crucial, according to Hall (2017), that university faculty and administrators understood that racial microaggressions do exist in subversive forms. While some students might use these microaggressions as motivation for achievement, they were by no means positive. Hall's (2017) participants provided examples of experiences of perceptions of professors that assumed they would perform poorly in the course because they were athletes. Other studies showed that AA students encountered resistance and difficulties as they integrated on PWIs. To provide AA students with the resources they required to remain enrolled and advance through their undergraduate studies, some institutions created student affairs departments that only work with AA students (Apprey et. al., 2014).

In a qualitative study that looked at the impact of spirituality on student retention rates, Herndon (2010) conducted interviews with thirteen AA undergraduates who were enrolled in a

PWI and were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-six. Based on his research, Herndon (2010) argued that access to spiritual resources and support was just as crucial as having access to academic, emotional, and financial resources. The people who could most effectively help the needs of the students were those in the teaching profession, as well as mentors, counselors, family members, and churchgoers (Palmer et al., 2011). Through the highly effective medium of spiritual development, students could be engaged in a way that enabled them to obtain high levels of success academically.

The difficulties that AA undergraduate students faced in their professional and academic endeavors were more severe than those that other groups face, and the influence of religion and spirituality could assist in overcoming these difficulties (Dill, 2017; McIntosh, 2015; Schreiner, 2014). The persistence of students could be greatly influenced by their spirituality (Wood & Hilton, 2012). AA students used spirituality as a means of assisting them to make critical choices and deal with the challenges to academic success, according to Wood and Hilton's (2012) research. Spirituality can give students a sense of purpose that encouraged them to persevere in their academic endeavors (Park & Bowman, 2015). When religion and spirituality were combined, AA students possessed resources they needed to advance through their academic studies and in their career aspirations.

The purpose of this study was to fill in the gaps in the literature about the spiritual and identity development of AA students at PWIs. One phenomenological study by Hall (2017) offered such first-person accounts of students who regularly encountered racism and stereotypes in their academic experiences. However, more phenomenological research on the subject is required. In their untold experiences, there was greater strength and much deeper meaning to be

found. As a result, this study will further this research by offering a unique qualitative study that focused on the spirituality, identity, and lived experiences of AA students at PWIs.

## Summary

The theories of the study were covered in this chapter, along with related literature on the function of spirituality in undergraduate students' daily lives. A working theoretical framework for spiritual and identity development was introduced (Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1981). The connection between spirituality and student identity development among AA students were identified. When scholars and higher education institutions considered the role that spirituality and religion played within higher education spaces, studies had shown that students benefited cognitively, socially, and personally (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Waggoner, 2016). Studies also revealed that the university environment, including faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals, had an impact on students' spiritual development (Craft, & Kohl, 2012; Li & Murphy, 2018; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013a,b; Waggoner, 2016). Within the literature it is recognized that African-American students had unique needs requiring specific kinds of support on college and university campuses (Bowman & Small, 2013; Finney, 2014; Gehrke, 2013; Holland, 2016; McIntosh, 2015; Patel, 2016; Sinanan, 2016; Stayhorn, 2011; Weddle-West, 2013; Woods & Hilton, 2012).

Much of the research focused specifically on AA students' needs focused on HBCUs and community colleges (Tinto, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012). However, there was a difference between PWIs, junior college, and HBCU (Chen et al., 2014; Weddle-West et al., 2013). The literature was lacking in regards to qualitative phenomenological studies that concentrated on AA students' actual lived experiences of receiving support for their spiritual and identity development at PWIs. This study aimed to fill a research gap regarding the spiritual and identity

development of AA students at PWIs by grounded in Fowler's faith development theory and Erikson's identity development theory.

The stories of the students that this study aimed to document gave one a glimpse into their struggles and victories, all of which are particular to their status as minorities at PWIs. These student experiences also revealed how they approach academic challenges, as well as how much and how they incorporated spirituality into their pursuit of their objectives. The stories that were uncovered in this study will be used, among other things, to help future student groups with similar identities and spiritual needs. The methodology used to investigate how AA students experienced spiritual and identity development at PWIs were covered in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

One rule for phenomenological research is that the investigation must center on the participants' actual experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. The phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it allowed the researcher to reveal rich descriptions and distinct meanings of lived experiences associated with AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. The researcher will also provide information about the participants, methods, recruitment, data collection, and analysis of the study, as well as discuss ethical considerations and trustworthiness.

**Design**

In this qualitative study, transcendental phenomenology was used. A qualitative design was chosen in order to fully understand the psychological and other lived experiences of students in universities as well as the development of their spiritual identity (Moustakas, 1994). This type of qualitative approach, as opposed to other qualitative methodologies, could therefore be used to explore the phenomenon of AA students' lived experiences related to their spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs.

For this study, a number of qualitative approaches were taken into consideration to see which would best achieve the study's goal. For instance, the ethnographic method was best for identifying the commonalities among a cultural group (Mannik & McGarry, 2017). This method was inappropriate because the study did not center on culture. Although a case study approach was taken into consideration, it was ultimately abandoned because it was best suited for the creation of portrayals and analysis of multiple or single case studies (Hyett et al., 2014). The

current study, however, concentrated on actual lived experiences. Finally, the grounded theory

approach aimed to create a formal or substantive theory form analysis of the data gathered,

which was not the aim of the current study and was therefore inappropriate (Schwandt, 2015).

Because it was successful in capturing the depth and complexity of emotion, meaning, structure,

and lived experiences of the diverse participant perspectives, phenomenology was chosen for this

study (Sherman, 2014). Furthermore, phenomenology acknowledged that each person's

experience was unique and subjective, so different people might have different experiences of

the same phenomenon. This research followed a common design that was frequently used in

studies of education (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology was a more focused method that falls under the

qualitative phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is a sophisticated and multifaceted

philosophical approach (Schwandt, 2015). This type of research methodology's primary

objective is to provide understanding of how people conceptualize the world and space as they

experience it, and this methodological approach aids in capturing this lived experience and its

universal essence in relation to particular phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2014). The

phenomenological approach's transcendental component heavily depends on how participants

describe particular experiences connected to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Edmond

Husserl was credited with creating phenomenology (Urban, & Schortman, 2019). Because

psychology used techniques from the natural sciences to try to understand human problems,

psychology was criticized by Husserl as a science that had become corrupt. Husserl created the

phenomenological approach to address this (Husserl, 2012). Phenomenology puts emphasis on

an individual's experiences rather than research as something distinct from the individual (Valle

et al., 1989). Consequently, the researcher's goal was to accurately depict and interpret the descriptions of what participants experienced through their individual interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Three main elements make up transcendental phenomenology: epoch, which is the act of putting aside judgment and concentrating on seeing the ordinary in fresh ways; reduction and the imaginative variation, which is the act of distilling a phenomenon to its essential meaning and essence from an individual's experiences of self (Moustakas, 1994).

The use of transcendental phenomenological investigation was also particularly relevant to the current study because it enabled for the gathering of detailed and rich depictions of the experiences of the participant as well as the identification of the problems with spiritual and identity development that AA undergraduate students who attend PWIs face. This study's goal was to shed light on the particular problems with spiritual and identity growth for AA students enrolled in PWIs. The purpose of the study was to describe the spiritual and identity development lived experiences of AA students attending PWIs. The current study aimed to use these experiences to inform PWIs' support strategies for AA students in order to increase AA students' sense of belonging. The information from the investigation of AA students' experiences, combined with previous spirituality and identity theories, could be used to strengthen AA undergraduate students' retention on PWIs.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study was How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs? Additionally, the following sub questions are:

1. **SQ1.** How do AA students who attend PWIs describe their experiences with student support services?

2. **SQ2.** What experiences do AA students perceive as contributing factors to their identity while attending PWIs?

**Setting**

The setting of the PWIs in this study were found in the southern part of the United States. Due to the sampling methods that were employed, this allowed for a diverse population of participants at the chance to participate. The different settings allowed for diverse experiences to be shared in attempts to capture the phenomenon taking place.

**Participants**

The participants in this study included 11 AA participants who attend a PWI. The deepest thoughts and ideas along with deep reflections are found in five to twelve participants who are experiencing the same phenomena (Jackson et al., 2018). If the sample size is too large, there may be some risk that arises. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed for this study. All participation was voluntary. All participants in this study identified as AA. This was established through each participant's demographic questionnaire. Informed consent forms were also required of the participants. Saturation was achieved because the objective was to ensure that the sample was sufficiently representative of the population to provide a thorough account of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon is said to be grounded in the data once the saturation level was identified (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Table 1: Description of Participants

| Name | Gender | Academic Year |
|------|--------|---------------|
| Jasmine King | F | Senior |
| Deborah Jackson | F | Junior |
| Samantha Lockett | F | Sophomore |
| Ashley Pierce | F | Senior |
| Tiffany Edwards | F | Senior |
| Kim Anderson | F | Junior |
| Roger Langford | M | Junior |
| Vanessa Matthews | F | Senior |
| Colby Andrews | M | Senior |
| Amanda Trent | F | Senior |
| Heather Robertson | F | Senior |

**Procedures**

The recruitment of eligible participants began after the approval of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). The location of recruitment occurred online via student and professional-facing listservs and social media. The timing of the recruitment included initial outreach immediately after IRB approval and lasted approximately 1-2 months. The recruitment process took place on social media platforms, flyers (printed), and professional-facing email listservs (Appendix B) student-facing email listservs (Appendix C). The researcher posted the social media recruitment document to social media platforms (Facebook groups and LinkedIn). Flyers were placed on public bulletin boards in the local libraries and stores in the

researcher's area. No permissions were needed for these public spaces. Lastly, the researcher posted the recruitment letter to student-facing email listservs. The digital flyer (Appendix D) and recruitment letter were posted to professional-facing email listservs.

Once potential participants learned and participated in the study, they would distribute the details to others who might be qualified to take part in the study. Additionally, as other professionals learned about the study, they passed the information on to students who might be eligible to participate in the study. Potential participants who viewed the social media post or recruitment letter would click a link provided to access the demographics questionnaire (Appendix E) via Qualtrics. Prospective participants who viewed the printed flyer would email the researcher with interest in participating and would receive a link to complete the demographics questionnaire in an email from the researcher.

Once the demographics questionnaire was completed, if eligible, potential participants would be emailed the informed consent document (Appendix F) and asked to sign it digitally. Once consent was given, participants were asked for their contact information to schedule an interview. Once the researcher received completed documents and contact information, the researcher contacted prospective participants to schedule an interview.

Each interview approximately lasted forty-five to sixty minutes to garner the lived experiences of the students. All interviews were conducted within a month period based on the students' schedules. After all the participants were interviewed, the interviews were transcribed and annotated by the researcher. During this part of the process, it was determined if a follow-up interview was necessary for further clarification. All participants were interviewed on Zoom; a video-based meeting platform. The interviews were recorded electronically due to the

participants being located in different parts of the country. Participants were not provided with any writing or editing assistance for the analysis and results themselves.

**The Researcher's Role**

The researcher's function was to adhere to the correct procedures in order to produce a reproducible and trustworthy transcendental phenomenological study. In order to do this, it was necessary to obtain Liberty University's IRB approval, recruit students, obtain the required consent and release forms, be aware of and fully disclose one's own perspectives and biases, collect and analyze data, and then produce a synthesized narrative of the phenomenon with rich, thick description that documented the core of the participants' lived experiences. The researcher was a human instrument that was an extricable part of the research process as the researcher was responsible for interpreting and making meaning of the ways in which participants experience the phenomenon of spiritually developing at the chosen PWI (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). One way of protecting the study from researcher bias involved the detailed documentation of a journal. Because the researcher employed a phenomenological study approach, the researcher was intentionally and consciously chosen to utilize the process of bracketing or epoche; the researcher chose to practice phenomenological vigilance to set personal judgments and perspectives aside to focus on the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994).

Because of their own observations gained from working as student affairs professionals, the researchers' interest in the phenomenon of spiritual development was sparked by these experiences. In this position, the researcher advised and mentored AA students and through these interactions, the researcher found that many had a desire to move past a foundational understanding of spirituality, spiritual development, and self within the context of attending a

PWI. By having a professional position as a student affairs professional and by being an AA

black male working at a PWI, the researcher recognized there might be personally held biases

and unique perspectives in relation to the phenomenon. As such, the researcher chose to journal

throughout this study to bracket personal judgments and practice phenomenological vigilance as

it pertained to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Collection**

Specific data collection was required for qualitative studies, which necessitated paying

attention to a number of factors, including: deciding who would collect the data, where the data

would be collected, when and how saturation was achieved, timing for data collection, types of

data collected, how they were obtained, how consent was obtained, developing a sampling plan,

gathering and storing data, follow-up procedures, and avoiding ethical pitfalls (Creswell & Poth,

2016; Moustakas, 1994). The gathering of the data was crucial step that needed to be planned

carefully just like the selection of the research design (Patton, 2014). Focus groups, document

analysis, in-depth interviews, field observations, surveys with open-ended questions, surveys

with open-ended questions, surveys with open-ended questions, and surveys with open-ended

questions may all be used in a qualitative study (Patton, 2014). The methods of data collection

used for this study were listed below.

**Individual Interviews**

Zoom, a cloud-based video and audio communications application, was used to conduct

semi-structured interviews with each student participant and collect the data. In order to allow

students to focus on both the research topic and exhibit a "disciplined naturalness" while taking

part in the phenomenological study, a semi-structured interview format was chosen (Giorgi,

1985). Each interview was between 45 and 60 minutes. Both audio and video was used to record

each interview. Every communication channel must be recorded in order to be transcribed and added as information to the hermeneutical phenomenological interpretation. Every interview has a transcript.

Each interview was conducted by the researcher using a set of open-ended questions from an interview guide.  This type of questioning enabled the participant to go in-depth with their answers and build upon them. Having the student participant recreate their experience within the phenomenon being studied was one of the main goals of using this type of interview protocol (Lapan et al., 2012). Every interview began with an all-inclusive introduction and a light-hearted conversation to build rapport. After the participant answers, the researcher asked follow-up or probing questions to allow for further elaboration and detailed examples before moving to the next question. The researcher proceeded in this manner until all topic areas and questions were addressed. The interview was meant to be conversational; the questions were a guide to assist the interviewer in developing probing questions (Josselson, 2013). This interview method was used to grasp the intricate experiences of the student participants without imposing any pre-categorization or bias that might obstruct the range of inquiry (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

**Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Spiritual Development

The first set of questions will focus on your spiritual development.

1. Please describe your spiritual or religious background growing up.

2. Describe any current spiritual activities or practices you engage in.

3. What experiences at the university have shaped your spirituality?

4. What is your awareness of student support services available on your campus?

5. Describe the interactions you have experienced with student support services on campus.

6. How has student support services contributed to your spiritual development?

7. How has your university contributed to your spiritual development?

Identity Development

I want to switch gears and focus on your identity development.

8. Tell me how do you know what you know?

9. How did you learn who you are?

10. How has being an African American student impacted your experiences with Student Affairs?

11. How has being an African American student impacted your experiences with university leadership?

12. Describe your experiences with faculty as an African American student.

13. Define the word microaggression.

14. Describe a time where you experienced microaggressions at your university.

15.  How do you define cultural representation on campus?

16. Describe how you see your culture represented on campus.

17. How do you see yourself represented on campus?

18. How have your campus experiences been influenced by your race?

19. What do you believe your University contributed to your identity development?

20. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences that I have not asked?

The interview questions prompted answers that would satisfy the inquiries of the study's larger research question that explores how AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. Interview questions 4-7 were significant to SQ1 and interview questions 8-11 were relevant to SQ2. Interview questions 14-16 also related SQ2 and was grounded in the research done by Baxter Magolda (2001). All these questions provided an opportunity for the participant to give a textual description of their experience of spiritual and identity development at their PWI. The final question was an open-ended one that provides the opportunity for the student participant to share anything about his or her story that was not covered in the interview. Literature supported the line of questions about spirituality (questions 1-3, 5,6) as it shows that undergraduate college years are an important period for students' spiritual development (Rockenbach et al., 2012), especially for AA students (Lovik, 2011; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Questions (8-13) were related to AA students' identity development while attending PWIs were also supported by literature that showed that there were racial disparities including issues of marginalization, microaggressions, and no sense of belonging that affect AA students' experiences of their PWIs (Bowman & Small, 2013; Gehrke, 2013; Hall, 2017).

**Research Journal**

Throughout the duration of the study's data collection phase, the researcher kept a research journal. The phenomenological approach required the researcher to bracket and set aside any biases, so using this journal as a vehicle for the Epoche process was favorable (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). To make sure that any personal judgments were not influencing the descriptions of the students' lived experiences that they produce, the researcher took copious notes at every stage of the process, reviewed them, and compared them to the experiences of the student participants. An essential component of data collection was having

genuine interactions with students and maintaining heightened awareness of and preconceived notions that the researcher might bring into the process. (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis**

Due to the phenomenological methodology used in this study, describing student experiences rather than attempting to make sense of them was the focus (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas' methodology, this study used epoche, listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, validation, and textural-structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche or bracketing was the first step in this study to practice (Moustakas, 1994). This step occured before any engagement with the participants, then begins and continues throughout the entirety of the study. Epoche required the researcher to refrain from judgment, which allowed the researcher to be aware of any prejudgments and allow for the conscientious setting aside of any such prejudgments, thus allowing for authentic engagement in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used a journal to record thoughts, biases, and experiences because this method called for transparency. Additionally, the researcher made an effort to conduct this procedure in quiet areas both before and after engaging the phenomenon.

Next, the researcher then employed listing and preliminary grouping as a way to grapple with the data. To assist with analysis, each interview was transcribed and electronically filed. This stage involved the researcher combining all of the student participants' accounts into a single overarching description. The researcher used textural-structural description, clustering and thematizing, validation, and phenomenological reduction and elimination in the following steps to create general narratives, or clusters of meaning, based on the situated narratives and removed

redundant or off-topic expressions (Moustakas, 1994). The results were then summarized by the researcher.

## Trustworthiness

Establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability was a necessary step in developing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of this study was addressed by conducting member checks and composing comprehensive descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton 2014; Schwandt, 2015). Below, each of these approaches to addressing trustworthiness was discussed in more detail.

## Credibility

By conducting member checks or reviewing the results with the study's student participants, the study's veracity was confirmed. Each participant had the chance to read the written analysis of the study's interpretations and offer any feedback they had regarding the way their story was told. The participants did not have access to the raw data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

## Dependability and Confirmability

In order for a reader to write an appropriate review, the researcher's commitment to meticulously documenting the study's methods addressed dependability and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). Due to the extent to which each step of the process was meticulously described, anyone would be able to replicate this study by following the steps and procedures. The theoretical foundation for the study will also be available for review by any third party. Any third party will also be able to examine any of the study's raw data to assess the validity of its conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). A third party could

examine this study and determine whether the methodology was reliable and sound, and whether the interpretations were confirmed.

**Transferability**

Finally, providing thick descriptions of the student participants' lived experiences and addressed transferability, offering the reader a way to identify similarities from the phenomenon and transfer them to another site (Schwandt, 2015). Phenomenology requires the understanding and uncovering of the nature of the meaning of student participants' experiences. This process occurs when the thematic attributes of the phenomenon are uncovered, which then results in rich, thick descriptions from the participants' perspective (Moustakas, 1994). These detailed, in-depth explanations and insights may be drawn from the participants' lived experiences as students, and they may be comparable to those of other groups in similar positions and circumstances. However, one should take into account the environment, participants, and other experiences before generalizing the study's findings (Moustakas, 1994). The themes and broad overview of this phenomenon provided some helpful information for those looking to support students' spiritual growth and provided direct academic support systems to help retain and champion AA students.

**Ethical Considerations**

Two techniques were used in this dissertation research to address threats and reliability. The first step was getting the study's host institution and the Human Subjects Review Board's approval. This guaranteed that the proper protocol was followed in accordance with the IRB, such as disclosing the study's nature to all participants and giving them the option to stop participating or decline to answer any questions. The second involved the use of rich descriptions, which entailed giving a very thorough account of the student's actual experiences

and setting any themes and patterns in their proper context without revealing any personal information. Confidentiality was maintained for both the participants and the study's institution. All participants were given pseudonyms and any identifiable information was removed from any final work products. The data was stored securely with the utmost care.

### Summary

A thorough explanation of this transcendental phenomenology methodology was given in the methods chapter. This qualitative approach was used to investigate how attending PWIs has affected the spiritual and identity development of AA students. The participant pool consisted of eleven students. To ensure that patterns and themes were sufficiently saturated, eleven interviews were conducted. A phenomenological analysis of the data was performed. New themes were investigated and evaluated against pertinent literature. The following chapter goes into more depth on these themes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of African American (AA) students' spiritual identity development while attending predominantly White institutions. In this chapter, the researcher will present the results of the data analyzed during this study. The researcher will also provide a rich description of each participant and discuss the themes that emerged during the data analysis. Finally, the researcher will conclude the chapter with a summary.

**Participants**

For this study, 11 participants identified as AA students and were interviewed. There were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. All participants were currently enrolled in a four-year undergraduate PWI at the time of their interview. There were nine female participants and two male participants. The year ranking classification of each participant was seven seniors and four juniors. The rich, detailed descriptions of each participant are provided below using their ascribed pseudonym.

**Samantha Lockett**

Samantha was ending her sophomore year and entering her junior at the PWI at the time of her interview. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. Her current spiritual activities include prayer, bible studies, listening to gospel music, and occasionally attending church on Sunday. She mentioned that " …it's really hard to make time and be intentional about going to church being a college student. So I'm trying to be better about that." She describes her upbringing as attending a Baptist church and attending an all-girl Catholic school from 4th grade to 12th grade.

**Heather Robertson**

Heather was an entering senior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She also participates in religious and spiritual activities about once a week.  Her upbringing was very religious. She describes her upbringing as being in a United Methodist Church. She attended church three times a week by the time she was a senior in high school. Her current spiritual practices include prayer, Bible reading, observing Lent, and communication with her home church pastors and leaders.

**Amanda Trent**

Amanda was an entering senior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She participates in religious and spiritual activities about two to three times a month. Her parents raised her in a Baptist Church and they attend the same church to this day. Her current spiritual practices include Bible reading and attending church via Facebook Live. She reports that while she is back home, she serves and helps in Sunday school or even volunteers to read scripture or pray. She is not currently active in a church due to her being at a predominantly White institution.

**Vanessa Matthews**

Vanessa was a senior at the PWI she attends in the Southern part of the United States. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She participates in religious and spiritual activities several times a week. She had a unique perspective based on her upbringing. She grew up in a different country and the church denomination was Baptist. When she arrived in the United States, she attended a non-denominational church. While she lived in her home country, her parents lived in the United States but that did not stop her parents from instilling the principles she needed. Her spiritual

practices include attending church and bible studies on weekly basis. She also reported that she is the president of a ministry at her PWI that focuses on worship nights where they sing songs from other cultures.

**Roger Langford**

Roger was an entering senior at the PWI he attends in the southern part of the United States. His age range is 20-21. He identifies as a Christian and participates in religious and spiritual activities two to three times a month. He grew up in an Episcopalian denomination and his parent would take him to church every week. He reported that "even though I was in the church, I would never engage because I did not possess the mental capacity to engage yet". He did not consider himself religious and he was not sure whether he was spiritual. Even with that mindset now, he seeking to meditate and read the Bible frequently in order to grow in his spirituality.

**Kim Anderson**

Kim was an entering senior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. Her family is from a different country, so they are very religious. She recounts from a very early age that she was in church. Her family initially attended a Catholic Church but since then has transitioned to the Baptist denomination. Her family still attends that Baptist church today. She participates in religious and spiritual activities several times a year. Her spiritual activities include praying which she attempts to do once in the morning and once in the evening. She is currently working on reading the Bible consistently to gain a better understanding of the principles within it.

**Tiffany Edwards**

Tiffany Edwards was an entering senior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She grew up in an Episcopal church and she grew up around a lot of Jewish students which gave her a diverse view of spirituality. Her family was very active in attendance at church. She gives credit to her grandparents as being the most influential in her spiritual development as they were very active, supportive, and intentional in making sure she understood the tenets of her faith. She participates in religious and spiritual activities about once a week. Her current spiritual activities include being involved in an Episcopal fellowship as well as doing some independent theological practices and studies.

**Ashley Pierce**

Ashley was an entering senior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 20-21. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She grew up in a Pentecostal church. She describes the church as "I like to say it's the Hallelujah and loud people of Christianity. So very lively services. Being that we're Black, we dress up every Sunday for church, so no jeans. A lot of drumming, upbeat music, a lot of dancing as well and spoken word." She participates in religious and spiritual activities about two to three times a month. Her emphasis is on worship. She enjoys singing and she feels that "songs can say things that words can't." Her current spiritual activity is prayer.

**Deborah Jackson**

Deborah was a junior at the PWI she attends. Her age range is 24-25. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She participates in religious and spiritual activities several times a week. She was raised Christian and a part of the United

Methodist denomination. In order for her to stay active in spiritual activities, she attends a Bible study weekly with some friends that goes to her PWI. She also attends church every Sunday which is very important to her. She also prays and does a daily devotional.

**Jasmine King**

Jasmine was a junior that attends a PWI in the southern region of the United States. Her age range is 26 and older. She identifies as a Christian and considered herself to be religious and spiritual. She grew up in a Southern Baptist church and has attended church all of her life. She uses prayer to truly communicate with God and she incorporates fasting as a means to center herself. Her grandmother was very influential in her early life. She participates in religious and spiritual activities about once a week.

**Colby Andrews**

Colby is a senior that attends a PWI in the southern region of the United States. His age range is 22-23. He identified as a Christian and considered himself to be religious and spiritual. He had a very unique and diverse religious background. He grew up Baptist as well as Pentecostal. His grandparents were intentional in growing his faith. He reported that his grandfather initially identified as a black Israelite. Some of those teachings and traditions are still embed with Colby. He participates in religious and spiritual activities several times a week. His main spiritual activity is prayer and meditation. He actively reads his Bible and is seeking to be more consistent in attending church.

<div align="center">

**Results**

</div>

In this section, the researcher presents the codes, subthemes, and themes from the research data. Three themes emerged from the analysis: *Displacement, Self-Reliance, and Resiliency*. Four subthemes were found: *lack of representation, lack of advocacy, lack of active*

*contribution, and unrealistic expectations*. The researcher describes the process of theme

development in the next section.

**Theme Development**

According to Moustakas (1994) the first step, the researcher had to bracket or practice

Epoche. The researcher took notes and had to be intentional in bracketing himself due to his own

experiences with attending a PWI. The researcher journal was instrumental in documenting and

suspending personal feelings and emotions to fully analyze the participants' experience. Before

and after each interview, the researcher would take notes in order to bracket and suspend their

own impressions of the participants' experiences. After the interviews were finalized and

transcribed, the data analysis began (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher became immersed

in the data reading all transcripts multiple times. Following this step, the researcher combined all

of the participants into a single overarching description.

During the data analysis process, the researcher reviewed the research questions,

highlighted relevant passages, and grouped statements under appropriate labels for those

questions. The researcher then ended up going through each transcript, underlining text passages

that were relevant to the research question (Moustakas, 1994). Next, the coding process was then

carried out. The researcher created a brand-new code after identifying and choosing such

paragraphs. This allowed for the researcher to organize the data in thematic clusters using the

process called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). This gave each narrative equal weight. As a

result, the researcher was able to quickly collect all related text passages in order to identify

trends and relationships. From the codes and thematic clusters and consistent reviewing of the

transcripts of the lived experiences of the participants, the themes began to emerge. Three themes

emerged: *displacement, self-reliance, and resilience*. As the data was analyzed even further,

subthemes emerged: *lack of representation, lack of advocacy, lack of active contribution, and unrealistic expectations*. Table 2 lists the themes, and subthemes.

Table 2 : Codes, Themes & Subthemes

| Codes | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| **Lonely, Isolated, Sad, Hostile, Misunderstood Disconnected, Not effective, Challenging, Not favorable , Overlooked, Tokenized** | Displacement | Lack of representation Lack of advocacy Lack of active contribution Unrealistic expectations |
| **Initiative, Indirect, No contribution, Self-seeking, Motivation, Contentment, Self-happiness** | Self-Reliance | |
| **Awareness, Life experiences, Community, Observations, Family History, Motivated, Interpersonal interactions, Exposure** | Resiliency | |

**Displacement**

Displacement was a prominent theme that emerged from the AA student participants' interviews. Displacement was attached to their attendance at their respective PWIs. While interviewing the students, many described their experiences with their PWI as "lonely," or communicated that they felt "overlooked," and described the environment as "hostile." They did

not feel as if they belonged when it came to their spiritual identity development when trying to gather with those of other races within Christianity. Colby Andrews describes a time when he attempted to join a predominantly white faith-based organization as a freshman. He remarked, "in order for me to be a good little Christian, I had to compromise and neglect my identity and who I was." Vanessa describes her experiences related to displacement in the following way:

> "when I was in the ministry, I felt I had to be an imposter and worship a certain way and do things a certain way. And that just made me feel uncomfortable. And I felt like I was not going to be accepted."

This was a common experience that was expressed from this theme.

**Self-reliance**

The second theme that presented itself in the data was self-reliance. The students all shared that they relied on themselves to take the initiative to seek out resources necessary to grow in their spiritual identity development at their PWI. While their PWI may have provided them with a place to do so, it did not actively contribute to their growth in this area. Many of the students described their PWI as "pushing them away," or remarked that they felt "misunderstood", and "disconnected" and it was up to them to be either continuously seek community or even create their own separate from their university. Amanda Trent describes her experience as "a lot of trial and error" when it comes to finding the place where she needs to engage spiritually and where she can from the identity that has been a part of the student's familial background for quite some time. Heather describes her experience:

> "I think that coming to university that had a lot of different spiritual backgrounds and people from different social backgrounds, although not that diverse, but pretty diverse. Nonetheless, I was kind of forced to take control of my own spiritual journey. And I was

confronted with this idea that not everything that I necessarily think to be true is

necessarily true."

**Resiliency**

The final theme that emerged was resiliency. The students, even having experienced

feeling displaced and having to rely on self to continue their spiritual journey, felt a sense of

resilience knowing that no matter what, their PWI left them feeling empowered. This resilience

came despite the students' experiences of a "lack of representation" and "lack of advocacy" and

of being "overlooked" at their PWI institutions. Notwithstanding all the hindrances, most of the

students interviewed were able to find support in the Black Community. Others were able to find

a space at their institution where they did not feel misunderstood or overlooked. Some felt

contentment about and motivated to step into their spiritual identity as an AA students from their

interactions with others within their safe community spaces. Deborah shares that

> "even though there are some negatives things that my PWI has taught or tried to teach
>
> me, it's made me stronger mentally. My experiences have made me that much more sure
>
> of how I want to actually be or what I actually believe in regards to my values that I
>
> have."

**Research Question Responses**

In this section, the researcher will present the participant responses that shed light on the

main research question and the two sub-questions concerning the experiences of the spiritual and

identity development of AA students at PWIs. The primary aim of this study was to capture rich

descriptions of the lived experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while

attending a PWI, thereby closing the research gap created by the lack of known studies

addressing this population.

**Central Research Question**

The center research question of the study was: How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs? The participants described their experiences of spiritual and identity development at their PWIs as one that was taking place but without any active contribution by their PWI. Interestingly, the participants acknowledged that they experienced spiritual identity formation during their time at the PWI, and while the PWI made no intentional contribution, their experiences at their PWI indirectly affected their spiritual identity development. For example, Roger describes the contribution of his PWI to his spiritual development as "No, not at all. Not at all. I'm going end it there." This was the sentiment of every participant that was interviewed. There was a sense of *displacement* and an experience of not being able to connect with the White student population due to differences in theology, worship, and community. The sub questions are described and answered in more detail in the next section.

**Sub-Question One**

The first sub question asked was **"**How do AA students who attend PWIs describe their experiences with student support services?" The AA students describe their experiences with student support services and Student Affairs as there being a *lack of representation*, and *lack of advocacy*. The Universities that they attend do have many offices and organizations that seek to provide resources to their students to help them through their academic journey. However, while these resources are vast, they are not easily accessible and the students find themselves lost or not knowing whom to connect with and trust to help them with their specific needs. The participants had to be *self-reliant* to gather resources necessary to navigate the university. This led to frustration and even a sense of isolation when the participants were actively seeking

solutions. The participants felt that there were *unrealistic expectations* placed to gain access information regarding resources available to them.

It also seems that through adversity and difficulty finding community, the students are growing in their spiritual development. Jasmine describes her experience with student support services and Student Affairs:

"When it comes to Student affairs, I feel like I'm a little overlooked. I feel like there's no good advocacy for me, there's no one in my student affairs, as far as my programs concerned, a direct go to people that looks like me. And that's discouraging. It really is."

Heather describes her experiences with student support services as positive yet simply for academic support and more peer-to-peer support. When sharing her experiences of support when it comes to spiritual identity development contributions, she shares, "Admittedly, I don't think they have."

## Sub-Question Two

What experiences do AA students perceive as contributing factors to their identity while attending PWIs? The participants shared that interactions with AA faculty and staff helped them navigate difficult times and situations. Many showed *resiliency* and felt empowered, despite knowing that there was a *lack of active contribution* from their PWI in their spiritual and identity development. Colby describes that "I think my PWI does not do a good job of vocalizing the faith-based organizations or groups that aren't white". And because of this reality that Colby faces at his PWI, the University indirectly "continues to push me to be vocal and present when it comes to displaying my faith and my kind of spiritual reality".

The participants reported that they were even more passionate in their pursuit of spiritual growth because they know they must take the initiative themselves. Tiffany Edwards eloquently shares this regarding the contribution of her PWI to spiritual and identity development:

"I came to a predominantly white school that really tries hard to push away religious and spiritual practice, but I grew in my spirituality and found more community in my racial identity. The university contributed to that by creating a necessity for people in those communities to find and create their own communities that are self-sustaining, but I would say that they have not actually actively contributed."

### Summary

The participants' experiences of spiritual identity development at their PWI were grouped into three themes: displacement, self-reliance, and resiliency. The participants that shared their experiences were all content with their spiritual development journey to this point and had taken the initiative, without institutional support, to pursue their spiritual and identity development during their emerging adulthood years. Each student placed a lot of emphasis on the connections they made with AA faculty and staff, as well as in their communities. They shared their frustrations about the hindrances they experienced with regard to their spirituality and the related effects. These students further expounded upon what it meant to be an AA student seeking to commune with other races who practice Christianity and the experience of not feeling a sense of belonging, even with shared beliefs, because of racial and cultural schisms. Several of the AA students who were interviewed suggested how PWIs might better streamline resources for AA students to grow in their spiritual identity development. They also spoke at length about Student Affairs offices with programming specifically focused on AA students and the ways the students felt they were being desensitized to the struggles they were facing.

The research findings and analysis of the information derived from the Zoom interviews were presented in this chapter. The process of data collection and analysis was presented along with rich descriptions of the AA students who were interviews using pseudonyms for confidentiality. Finally, a result section was presented and provided a description of theme development and a section that displays research question responses. Finally, a summary was given of the chapter. The next chapter provides a conclusion and summary of the findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The findings of this study expanded and explored the experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs. In this chapter, the researcher will provide the summary of findings, implications, limitations, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. AA students attending PWIs looked to their spirituality to cope with the challenges they face while matriculating through their programs (Weddle-West et al., 2013). Because of the dependency of AA students on spirituality in their individual development, it was important to close the literary gap that exists in these areas. Finally, the researcher will provide a summary of the study.

### Summary of Findings

In this section, the researcher will discuss the findings from the results shown in Chapter Four. The themes, *Displacement, Self-reliance, and Resiliency* emerged from the researcher's collection and analysis of participant data. The sub themes that emerged were *lack of advocacy, lack of representation, lack of active contribution, and unrealistic expectations*. The overarching research question presented by this study was: How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs? The participants' experiences of spiritual and identity development at PWIs as one of feeling displaced when in comparison to their white counterparts. Their experiences also brought out the theme of *self-reliance* and *resilience* once they were able to create and find a community where they could connect with other AA students, faculty, and staff. Many of the participants shared that due to the lack of resources, sense of *displacement*, and contribution to their spiritual identity development, they were challenged to lean on their spiritual roots and grow in a way that they were not required to do in any other environment.

The first sub question sought to answer how do AA students who attend PWIs describe their experiences with student support services? The participants felt that their experiences with student support services had a *lack of representation* and there was a *lack of advocacy*. Many of the PWIs that they attended have resources heavily related to academic support, but they felt the provided resources did not take into account AA students' needs and were not accurately communicated or marketed. The participants felt lost and overwhelmed when faced with having to be *self-reliant* in seeking and finding the appropriate resources when faced with challenges that their PWI could not provide within its student support services. It created an uncomfortable environment and experience for all the participants.

The second sub question sought to answer what experiences do AA students perceive as contributing factors to their identity while attending PWIs? Due to the *lack of representation*, the participants used *resiliency* in order to seek out the necessary relationships and communities needed to cultivate their identity development. The interactions that the participants encountered with their White counterparts and professors created a lack of sense of belonging and often marginalized. Despite knowing that their PWI did not actively contribute to active their identity development, the participants shared that they are even more passionate in their pursuit of identity development through finding representation and relationships from other AA students, faculty, or staff. The descriptive narratives created in this student illuminated how necessary spiritual and identity development for AA students who attend PWIs.

## Discussion

The empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two will be discussed in detail in this section. Following the discussion of the empirical and theoretical literature, the

researcher will explore how this study expanded upon the current literature while also confirming and corroborating previous research.

**Theoretical Literature**

This study was grounded in two theories, Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. The results of this study and the stages of the students interviewed in this study are in line with the stages outlined in Fowler's Theory.

Fowler's Theory suggested that most college students are in the synthetic-conventional stage and the individuative-reflective stage (Fowler, 1981). First, the synthetic-conventional stage focused on an individual's level of brainpower to think in abstract terms and their ability to be more reflective and aware of how they interact and build relationships with others. The participants shared and demonstrated that they are aware of how to build relationships and interact with others. This is also where students establish their foundations of faith from those who students deem as reliable and confidential sources (Fowler, 1981). The participants were able to identify reliable and confidential sources *e.g.*, AA faculty, staff, or students so they could grow in their spiritually in a safe community.

Erikson's (1968) Identity development Theory also provided eight stages for college students. Erikson (1968) described stage five, called *identity versus role confusion*, as a student's "turning point" that occurs just after they processed through an internal struggle triggered by their surrounding environment. Many of the participants experiences of identity development were triggered by the environment of their PWI. Many of the interactions with the population at large prompted these participants to find the internal strength to find a safe space and environment to grow and become the best versions of themselves. The participants shared that they felt overlooked, tokenized, and even victimized simply due to their AA identity. The person

that these participants became are a result of their social and academic interactions at their PWI.

The participants became more resilient and empowered to seek identify refinement (Erikson,

1968).

**Empirical Literature**

The findings of this research study were also aligned with the findings from the empirical

literature. In Astin et al.'s (2010) longitudinal study that examined the various stages students

experience during their undergraduate years. The authors found that faculty and staff could play

an integral role in students' spiritual growth (Astin et al., 2011; Astin et al., 2010). One of the

areas that was shared and experienced by the participants at their PWIs were that either they

were able to find faculty and staff that could relate or resembled their culture, or they wished

they could connect more with AA faculty and staff to have the deeper conversations that help

define meaning and purpose. One of the participants even made the suggestion of having these

institutions provide a spiritual advisor on their campus to help facilitate spiritual conversations.

Additionally, Waggoner (2016) found that students fare better when adequate attention is

given to spiritual development on university campuses. Waggoner (2016) further reported that

while faculty were often reluctant to engage in spiritual discussions in academic settings, it was

necessary for them to do so. As well, Waggoner (2016) stated faculty interactions with students

that encourage self-reflection, meditation, deeper exploration of questions of meaning, and other

mentorship creates positive outcomes for students including better grades, more satisfaction with

their institution, greater self-confidence in their academic abilities, and in their spiritual

development.

This study confirmed and corroborated the research and literature, yet it extended the

research to focus primarily on the voices and experiences of AA students who attend PWIs,

which are often misused and overlooked. This study clarified the notion that PWIs fall short in offering essential resources for spiritual development to help AA students. AA students were self-reliant and resilient to seek out or create these communities and resources from a peer-to-peer relationship. The findings of this study allowed one to gain insight into students' struggles and achievements, all of which are distinctive to these students' status as minorities at PWIs. The experiences of these participants also provided potential insights into how they manage their academic lives and how much and in what ways spirituality emerges as they persevere in achieving their objectives.

## Implications

The implications of the findings from this study are discussed in this section**.** In terms of theory, the participants' attentiveness of their own spiritual and identity development corroborated with the focus of this study. From an empirical perspective, the literature revealed that college students have a need for spiritual and identity development, but the research lacked when describing the lived experiences of AA students attending PWIs. This study shed light that real changes to the spiritual and identity development experiences of AA students at PWIs are necessary.

### Theoretical Implications

This study adds additional data to Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. Both theories are key components of the literature supporting and surrounding the spiritual and identity development of undergraduate students. As a conceptual framework for understanding AA students' spiritual and identity development at PWIs, this study draws on the theories of Erikson and Fowler. The results of this study expanded upon the certain stages that college students enter as they transition through their emerging adulthood years. It

also helped expand Fowler's Faith Development Theory because it specifically captures the experiences of AA students attending PWIs, which previous literature had not done. This study also relied on Erikson's stages of Identity Development theory to understand how AA students experience identity development at their PWI.

**Empirical Implications**

Previous studies explored the holistic development of undergraduate students in a range of areas such as: emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), integration of spiritual development and student development (Astin et al., 2010; Love & Talbot, 2009), benefits for students who participate in religious organizations and with religious affiliations (Li & Murphy, 2018; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Park & Bowman 2015), spirituality on Christian college and university campuses (Fosnacht & Broderick, 2018; 2020), and quantitative explorations of students' satisfaction (Pennington et al., 2018; Rennick et al., 2013). None of these studies focused on the experiences of AA students, but rather on college and university students in general. However, there is a lack of research that addresses the experiences of AA students spiritual and identity development at PWIs. Only a few studies have been conducted into how the environments of PWIs affect and foster the spiritual and identity development of AA students (Weddle-West et al., 2013). The lack of insight into the subject, particularly from the perspective of the provision of spiritual and individual development support services, is a problem because this information is necessary to explore plausible explanations for the differences between the experiences of AA students and White students attending PWIs. AA students attending PWIs look to their spirituality to cope with the challenges they face while matriculating through their programs (Weddle-West et al., 2013). Because of the dependency of AA students on spirituality in their individual development, the result of this research helped to close a literary gap that exists in this

area, thus, providing the insights to PWIs of how AA students experience their academic journey in regard to spiritual and identity development.

## Delimitations and Limitations

The limitations and delimitations of the current study are discussed in this section. Limitations are described as defects, conditions, and influences that the researcher cannot control and put restrictions on the methodology and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Delimitations, on the other hand, are the decisions made by the researcher and should be mentioned. Delimitations describe the limits imposed on the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### Delimitations

The delimitations of this study included the choice of the study population to be represented. This study was seeking to interview AA student who were age 18 or older, self-identify as Black/African American, and were currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a 4 year Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in an on-campus or traditional program. In order, these requirements were necessary to ensure that the participants had experienced the phenomenon. Another delimitation of this study was the sampling method used to acquire the participants. Convenience and snowball sampling was employed. This allowed for participants to be aware of the study and would like to participate in the study. Snowball sampling made room for other potential participants to gain knowledge that the study was taking place from participants who had already interviewed or were scheduled to be interviewed. Both methods helped provide an organic interest for participants to participate.

### Limitations

A limitation of the study included the number of participants interviewed. Eleven participants were interviewed but the maximum number of participants was fifteen. This

rationale was to ensure data saturation was reached. Once the degree of saturation takes place, the phenomenon is grounded in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A second limitation of the study was the amount of males that participated in the study. A third limitation was that the participants were mostly upperclassman. With an increased number of participants, there could be more freshman and sophomore participants. Finally, a fourth limitation was the religious affiliation. All eleven participants identified as being a part of the Christian spiritual background.

## Recommendations for Future Research

The suggestions for future research are discussed. The methodology chosen for this study regulated the convenience, snowball sampling, and sample size. There was little known research regarding the spiritual and identity development of AA students and thus represented a research gap, which was one of the main factors in the methodology's selection.

It is also recommended that the study be replicated at one specific institution. There should be a look into more secular PWIs to compare with PWIs that are faith based. This can ensure transferability. Since all participants attended a PWI in the south region of the United States, it is recommended that future research be done in a different region of the United States. This would help explore and determine if the study's findings are specific to a region. Future studies could be expanded to include more than one race of students and possibly different aspects of spirituality since Christianity was the focus here. Universities could use the data in in hopes of creating the necessary support the spiritual identity development of AA students.

PWIs need to revisit their diversity and recruitment plans to ensure that AA students have a sense of belonging, welcoming and a secured sense of safety when attending these universities. There must be an intentionality in making sure AA students receive all the resources needed to be matriculate through their academic careers. This calls for improving PWIs' retention and

recruitment plans of AA faculty and staff so AA students can relate to those who are in authority over them. Student support services whether that is a Multicultural Center or African American Office, these spaces need to include a spiritual component. This would allow for AA students to freely engage in spiritual conversations with other students and AA faculty and staff in a safe and meaningful way. AA students desire to connect with AA faculty and staff and engage in meaningful conversations as they are experience different challenges like racism, injustices, and marginalization. A better way to recognize and communicate these resources to their AA population is also essential so demonstrate that this subset of the student population is valued and appreciated.

The findings of this study suggest that PWIs are not properly contributing to the spiritual and identity development of their AA students. All the participants in this study identified as Christian. Another qualitative study would be done with a different faith background. Also, a quantitative study could be done as well. One of the limitations discussed in the previous section was the lack of males. Expanding the male perspective would clarify the experiences AA males at PWIs in spiritual and identity development. These suggestions for future research can help expand and capturing the lived experiences of AA students spiritual and identity development at PWIs.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to document the lived experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development while attending a PWI. The importance of capturing these experiences was to understand better how PWIs of higher education might be able to holistically serve AA students. The two foundational theories of this study were Fowler's Faith Development Theory and Erikson's Identity Development Theory. In

order to address students' spiritual and identity development as they approached emerging adulthood, these guiding theories were combined. The primary research question that the study addressed is How do AA students describe their experiences of spiritual and identity development while attending PWIs?

The results of this study brought to light that while the PWIs are not actively contributing to AA students' spiritual identity development. AA students are feeling displaced, heavily self-reliant and are having to be resilient in their pursuit of spiritual and identity development.  The participants lived experiences granted access to the experience or lack thereof confirming the research. If the implications of the study are applied at PWIs, then the gap in literature regarding AA students' spiritual and identity development would be filled. There must be more retention and recruitment of AA faculty and staff. While this study demonstrated that PWIs were failing AA students, AA students were still finding ways to grow in their spirituality and in their identity, which is not present in the literature. The findings of this study demonstrated a need to expand the resources necessary to contribute to the lived experiences of AA students' spiritual and identity development at PWIs.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**
IRB Approval Letter

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# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 5, 2022

Jeffery Smith
Tanisha Sapp

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY21-22-703 A Phenomenological Study of African-American Students' Spiritual and Identity Development at Predominantly White Institutions

Dear Jeffery Smith, Tanisha Sapp,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: May 5, 2022. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

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.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

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**

**Appendix B**
Permission Request Letter

Dear Sir or Ma'am,

My name is Jeffery C. Smith, II and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Community, Care, and Counseling Program at the Liberty University.  I am writing to ask your assistance in the recruitment of potential participants.

The purpose of my research is to gain insight into the spiritual and identity development of African American students while attending predominately white institutions. Through these shared experiences, participants will be able to provide insight into the services currently provided and/or needed to address the unique needs of African American students during their undergraduate academic experience. Please share this information with your students who may fit the criteria outlined below. Their participation is voluntary. To participate, they must:

1. *be 18 years of age or older*
2. *self-identify as Black/African American*
3. *currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a Predominantly White Institution (defined as having 50% or greater white student enrollment) in an on-campus or traditional program.*

If they agree to be in this study, I will ask them to do the following things:

1. Participate in an online, 60-90 minute audio/video recorded, semi-structured, individual interview. The interview will be conducted remotely, and recorded, via Zoom.
2. Review their interview transcript via email, which allows the researcher to confirm the information they gathered from their interview. It is an opportunity for them to ask any questions or make corrections to the information shared by the researcher. This will last approximately 10 minutes.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.
If they would like to participate, please have them click the link here, <u>survey</u>, or email me at ███████████████ .
Thank you for your consideration and assistance. If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact me at ███████████████ . You may also contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Tanisha Sapp, at ███████████████ .

IRB has been approved by LIBERTY UNIVERSITY (#IRB-FY21-22-703, 5/5/22).

Sincerely,
Jeffery C. Smith, II
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

**Appendix C**
Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Student:

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to gain insight into the spiritual and identity development of African American students while attending predominately white institutions, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

To participate, you must be age *18 or older, self-identify as Black/African American, and currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a Predominantly White Institution (defined as having 50% or greater white student enrollment) in an on-campus or traditional program.* Taking part in this research project is voluntary. If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an online, 60-90 minute audio/video recorded, semi-structured, individual interview. The interview will be conducted remotely, and recorded, via Zoom.
2. Review your interview transcript via email, which allows the researcher to confirm the information they gathered from your interview. It is an opportunity for you to ask any questions or make corrections to the information shared by the researcher. This will last approximately 10 minutes.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here to complete the demographics questionnaire to determine your eligibility.

Once the demographics questionnaire is complete, eligible participants will be directed to review and complete the consent document. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate in this research, you will need to sign the consent document. Upon receipt of your eligibility and signed consent form, you will receive a confirmation email inviting you to schedule an interview. Contact me at ███████████ for more information.

Sincerely,

Jeffery C. Smith, II
Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-703
Approved on 5-5-2022

**Appendix D**

# Research Participants Needed

## A Phenomenological Study of African-American Students' Spiritual and Identity Development at Predominantly White Institutions

- Are you at 18 years of age or older?
- Do you identify as Black/African-American?
- Are you currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in an on campus (traditional) undergraduate program?
- Do you attend a Predominantly White Institution (defined as having 50% or greater white student enrollment)?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in this research study.

The purpose of the study is to gain insight into the spiritual and identity development of African American students while attending predominately white institutions. Through these shared experiences, participants will be able to provide insight into the services currently provided and/or needed to address the unique needs of African American students during their undergraduate academic experience.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
- complete an online, 2-3 minute demographics questionnaire;
- participate in an online, 60-90 minute video-recorded interview via Zoom;
- review the interview transcript via email for accuracy (approximately 10 minutes).

If you would like to participate, please click here to complete the demographics questionnaire.

A consent document is provided after the questionnaire if you are eligible to participate in the study.

IRB has been approved by LIBERTY UNIVERSITY (#IRB-FY21-22-703, 5/5/22).

Jeffery C. Smith, II, a Doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
**Please contact Jeffery Smith at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for more information.**

**Appendix E**
Demographics Questionnaire

**QUESTIONS:**

1.What is your age-range?
☐ Under 18
☐18-19
☐20-21
☐22-23
☐24-25
☐26 and older

2. Which is your racial identification?
☐Black
☐African-American
☐Multiracial
☐ Biracial
☐ I do not identify as Black or African American

3. Are you currently enrolled in a campus-based undergraduate program at a 4-year University?
☐Yes
☐No

4. Do you attend a Predominantly White Institution (defined as having 50% or greater white student enrollment )?
☐Yes
☐No

5. Is your university designated as a Historically Black College & University (HBCU)?
☐Yes
☐No

6. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
☐Full-time
☐Part-time

7.What year are you currently ranked?
☐Freshman
☐Sophomore
☐Junior
☐Senior

8. To which gender identity do you most identify?
☐Male
☐Female
☐Gender Diverse
☐Non-binary
☐Non-conforming
☐Not Listed
☐Prefer Not to Answer

9. Do you have a religious or spiritual affiliation?
☐Yes
☐No

10. If yes, what religion or spiritual belief do you most identify with?
☐Jewish
☐Muslim
☐Christian
☐Hindu
☐Catholic
☐Atheist
☐Agnostic
☐Other (Please specify)

11. Do you consider yourself to be religious?
☐Yes
☐No
☐Don't know

12. Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?
☐Yes
☐No
☐Don't know

13. How often to you participate in religious/spiritual activities?
☐Never
☐Less than once a year
☐Once or twice a year
☐Several times a year
☐Once a month
☐2-3 times a month
☐About once a week
☐Several times a week

[INSERT CONSENT DOCUMENT]


MINIMUM-ELGIBILITY CRITERIA MET

You have met the minimum eligibility criteria. In this next step, the researcher will collect your name and contact information to contact you and schedule the interview portion of the data collection.

Name (First and Last):

Telephone Number (best contact number):

Email Address:

Best time of day to reach you:
☐Morning 9am-11am

☐Afternoon 12pm-2pm

☐Evening 6pm-8pm

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study.


Sincerely,


Jeffery C. Smith, II
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

**Appendix F**
Informed Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of African-American Students' Spiritual and Identity Development at Predominantly White Institutions
**Principal Investigator:** Jeffery C. Smith, II

## Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be age 18 or older, self-identify as Black/African American, and currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a Predominantly White Institution (defined as having 50% or greater white student enrollment ) in an on-campus or traditional program. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

## What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to gain insight into the spiritual and identity development of African American students while attending an undergraduate program at predominately white institutions. Through these shared experiences, participants will be able to provide insight into the services currently provided and/or needed to address the unique needs of African American students during their undergraduate academic experience.

## What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an online, 60–90-minute, audio/video recorded, semi-structured, individual interview. The interview will be conducted remotely, and recorded, via Zoom.
2. Review your interview transcript via email, which allows the researcher to confirm the information gathered from your interview. It is an opportunity for you to ask any questions or make corrections to the information shared by the researcher. This will last approximately 10 minutes.

## How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing knowledge and awareness about the services needed to meet the unique needs of African American students during the undergraduate academic experience, and insight into areas where improvement may be needed to ensure African American students receive adequate support and services to promote positive spiritual and identity development while attending predominately white institutions.

## What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

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

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Jeffery C. Smith, II. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ██████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Tanisha Sapp, at ██████████████.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

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.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records.  If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*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 and video record me as part of my participation in this study.


_____
Printed Subject Name


_____
Signature                              Date