NON-BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Gary Aaron Tyler

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2024

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand diversity and inclusion through the experiences of non-Black students attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Diversity referred to the integration of various racial and ethnic groups, and inclusion referred to conditions on campus that reflect practices and relationships that produce a feeling of being valued, respected, and supported by the institution and peers. The theory used in this study was Tinto's theory of integration, as it examined the existential experiences of students who integrate into an HBCU campus. This study's central research question asked: What are the integration experiences of non-Black students engaging in diversity and inclusion on campuses of HBCUs? This study implemented qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology. The participant pool consisted of 14 undergraduate students attending an HBCU in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Criterion sampling was used to create the participant pool. Data was collected using individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing. Data analysis in this study utilized Saldaña's two-cycle coding. During data analysis, six major themes emerged that answered the central research question: academic integration, social integration, coping strategy, diversity barriers, influences on college decisions, and opportunities.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, historically Black college and university (HBCU), hermeneutic, non-Black students, phenomenology

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Dedication

I want to thank my daughter, the driving force behind everything I seek to accomplish. I dedicate this achievement to her. Furthermore, I am proud to be your father, giving God the highest praise and thanks for choosing me.

To my beautiful, intelligent, and strong sister, although I am the older brother, I admire you and your get-it-done attitude. Your words of encouragement reminded me that I could do everything through Christ, who strengthens me. I thank God as well for gifting me with you as my sister.

To all who have played an integral part in my life, thank you for always being a source of encouragement and support throughout this journey. Mom, you have always set the bar high through your walk and achievements. You have always been there when I truly needed you. You have been the living witness that all things are indeed possible through Christ. Billy, Nikki, and Norman, your insight, wisdom, and conversations have been a source of inspiration. I appreciate and love you more than you know. Your walk and faith serve as an example for other men.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge and thank Dr. Perry; your enthusiasm and passion for scholarship have been inspiring and significant in my journey. Your knowledge and guidance have been invaluable, and I am grateful for the light you shed on a process I did not always comprehend. Semper Fi!

In addition, I would like to thank and recognize Dr. White for their assistance and dedication in guiding me through this process. I appreciate the time you spent co-piloting me to the conclusion of a seemingly endless journey.

To my cohort, your support, encouragement, and prayers were instrumental in my journey. Each of you motivated me to continue pressing and fighting when I felt like giving up. I wish you all the best in your respective endeavors. I pray that wherever life leads you, God will continue to bless you and open doors no man can shut.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

Black Creative Educational Experiences (BCEE)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

International Student Association (ISA)

Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA)

Minority Serving Institution (MSI)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Traditionally White Institution (TWI)

United States Office of Education (USOE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Despite the recent surge in non-Black student enrollment at historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs), a literature review revealed that studies focusing on diversity and inclusion in higher education have only examined diversity and inclusion from the perspectives of minorities attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) or traditionally White institutions (TWIs). The problem that this has created was that the diversity growth of HBCUs and the experiences of non-Black students attending HBCUs had been underrepresented and negated (Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Lee, 2015; Mobley et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2018; Snipes & Darnell, 2018). This hermeneutic phenomenological study highlighted the lived experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. In this study, non-Black students referred to students who identified with any race or group other than solely African American, such as Arab, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latin, Indigenous-African, and Native American. Chapter One provides a historical account of the creation and need for HBCUs and discusses the educational missions and social impact of HBCUs. The theoretical framework assisted in understanding the lived experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. A problem statement illuminated non-Black students' descriptions of their experiences of diversity and inclusion as the focus of this study. Finally, a concise purpose statement connected the problem addressed with the intended focus of this study. Chapter One concludes by presenting the research question that served as a guide to this hermeneutic phenomenology research.

Background

Due to the implementation of race-based segregation and Jim Crow laws in the South, student populations on HBCU campuses have been predominantly African American since their

foundation (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Carlton, 2021; Palmer et al., 2018). Anyone who is not part of the HBCU community has been impelled to envision an image of a student enrolled in an HBCU; it has been most likely that they would visualize a young African American man or woman, which would be essentially correct (Anderson, 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Mobley et al., 2017). However, over the last decade, HBCUs have become increasingly diverse, according to statistical data provided by the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Burnett, 2020; Carlton, 2021; Crewe, 2017; Hotchkins, 2021; Mobley et al., 2017; NCES, n.d., 2023; Njoku et al., 2017). As diversity and inclusion have continued to dominate discourse among higher education leaders, they have typically been discussed from the perspectives of non-White students attending PWIs, also known as TWIs (Anderson, 2017; Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Lee, 2015; Mobley et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015; Stowens, 2021). As a result, researchers and academics have not discussed the increasing diversity on HBCU campuses (Anderson, 2017; Arroyo et al., 2017; Lee, 2015; Mobley et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015). Lee (2015) argued that before any discussion on the diversification of HBCUs can occur, it must begin by acknowledging that HBCUs are a diverse collective of colleges and universities and are not monolithic. As of 2022, there were 101 HBCUs in the United States, of which 52 were public institutions, while the other 49 were private, nonprofit colleges or universities (NCES, 2022). According to the NCES (2022), 338,339 students enrolled at HBCUs during the 2020–2021 school year, meaning that 20% of all African American college graduates earned their degrees from an HBCU. In addition, the NCES (2022) reported that in 2020, 24% of all HBCU students self-identified as non-Black, showing a marked increase from 15% in 1976. The rising enrollment of non-Black students has suggested that HBCUs must establish additional

avenues to facilitate continued growth in diversity, equity, and inclusion (Pichon, 2019). Thus, HBCUs must alter, modify, and develop new institutional policies, practices, and programs that are more attractive to non-Black students.

Historical Context

Historically, HBCUs have been celebrated for fostering supportive social environments that have enhanced student development and experiences, insulated students from a society that can be harsh and racist, and produced scholars, civil rights leaders, celebrated authors, inventors, politicians, entrepreneurs, and others of notable accolades (Allen et al., 2007; Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Brown & Davis, 2001; Njoku et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2018). It was also worth noting that HBCUs rose from a tumultuous time in American history to become an effective means for educating formerly enslaved people who made significant contributions to enhance social development (Allen et al.; Anderson, 1988; Arroyo et al.; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Hughes-Kidd, 2019; Ihle, 1992; Njoku et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2018). Due to legal segregation and Jim Crow laws, an estimated four million formerly enslaved people were left without a means of receiving a formal education (Allen et al., 2007; Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Palmer et al., 2018).

In a postbellum society, Plato's fifth-century concept of a social contract consisted of government-initiated actions focused on reconciling the relationship between America and the descendants of formerly enslaved people (Brown & Davis, 2001; Hobbes, 2021; Ohlmeyer, 2022; Rousseau & Cranston, 2003). State governments were called upon to partner with American society to create formal institutions to educate the estimated four million formerly enslaved (Brown & Davis, 2009; Cain, 2020; Fanshel, 2021). As a result, the First Morrill Act of 1862 provided federal support for state education in agriculture, education, and military sciences,

and it was to be distributed without regard to race or categorization (Brown & Davis, 2009; Cain, 2020; Fanshel, 2021). The assumption was that all students would benefit from this act, especially since at least seven HBCUs were already in operation. In addition, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments required states to provide public education for people of African descent and mandated that federal funds be extended to institutions enrolling people of color (Brown & Davis, 2009; Cain, 2020; Crewe, 2017; Fanshel, 2021; Winn et al., 2017). Since southern states did not comply, congress passed the Second Morrill Act, which prohibited federal funds from being paid to any state intentionally discriminating against people of color in admission to government-supported institutions (Brown & Davis2009; Fanshel, 2021; Roth, 2023; Singh, 2021). The federal government also passed legislation approving the formation of the Freedmen's Bureau and providing financial support for the establishment of Black day schools, night schools, industrial schools, and institutes and colleges (Brown & Davis, 2009; Fanshel, 2021; Roth, 2023; Singh, 2021). In order for southern states to comply with the new federal mandates and secure access to federal funding, they fashioned a practice that separated public institutions of education by race, establishing a new legal recipient of such funding (Brown & Davis, 2009; Fanshel, 2021; Roth, 2023; Singh, 2021). In addition, the Second Morrill Act expressly prohibited payments of federal funds to states that intentionally discriminated against African Americans in their admission to government-supported institutions or states that refused to provide separate but equal facilities for White and Black students (Brown & Davis, 2009; Fanshel, 2021; Roth, 2023; Singh, 2021). This mandate fueled the founding of public land-grant colleges and universities for African Americans in the South (Brown & Davis, 2009; Fanshel, 2021; Roth, 2023; Singh, 2021).

In June 2003, the Supreme Court's decisions on the University of Michigan admissions' affirmative action cases challenged higher education institutions to reconsider their approach and make diversity a central component of educational excellence. The case of *Gratz v. Bollinger* (the University of Michigan undergraduate admissions case) banned quotas. However, the case ruling of *Grutter v. Bollinger* (the Michigan law school admissions case) maintained institutional rights to consider race as one of several relevant factors in their admissions decision (Parker, 2006). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) responded with a vision of diversity as an educational resource, not just an outcome. Of primary concern in the AAC&U's (2022) *Making Excellence Inclusive* initiative was an expanded understanding of diversity and a commitment to inclusion, defined as an active process through which colleges and universities achieve excellence in learning, teaching, student development, institutional functioning, and engagement in local and global communities. Since the early 2000s, institutions of higher learning have been challenged with creating a campus environment that is inclusive and diverse, promoting fairness, equity, and a sense of belonging among all students (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). Furthermore, establishing such an environment means creating an inclusive campus community sensitive to the cultural differences that learners bring to the campus and classroom (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). In the absence of inclusivity, non-majority students experience feelings of isolation, uncertainty, being unwelcome, and being unsupported. Moreover, students who are in the non-majority also experience marginalization and disempowerment by the political, economic, academic, and social majority. On the other hand, students who are socially and academically invested and seek to establish relationships with peers and faculty members are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and loyalty to their respective institutions (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021).

Social Context

Most discussions on diversity and inclusion in higher education have focused on minority students attending PWIs or TWIs. This would be a valid assumption looking at educational trends over the last two decades (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). However, conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion must now include non-Black students attending HBCUs. As previously stated, non-Black students referred to all students attending an HBCU who identified with a race other than solely African American. Historically, such occurrences have been few and far in between, if at all. In recent years, HBCUs have been experiencing record-setting enrollment of non-Black students pursuing post-secondary education and their degree goals (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). Some studies have suggested that the increase in non-Black students attending HBCUs has been due to an overwhelming familiarity with Black culture and traditions due to living in predominately African American communities (Arroyo et al., 2017). Many Black, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Latin families regularly exchange cultural practices and share many experiences due to social and political practices, forcing them into the same neighborhoods (Allen & Stone, 2016). As a result, children growing up in these communities are more likely to feel at home and included in an HBCU versus a PWI (Allen & Stone, 2016).

In addition to familiarity, the recent political climate has also contributed to the increasing enrollment of non-Black students at HBCUs. President Obama's, President Trump's, and President Biden's elections have all been polarizing events on the American political landscape (Williams & Palmer, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) 2022 report on hate crime, data reflected that 62% of all victims had been targeted due to the perpetrators’ bias toward race, ethnicity, or ancestry. Hate crimes against Black Americans have remained the largest category, with 2,871 incidents in 2020—a 49% increase since 2019. The

second-largest category of hate crimes was perpetrated against Hispanic or Latin Americans and immigrants. There were 279 anti-Asian incidents reported in 2020—a 77% increase since 2019, representing the third-largest hate crime category (DOJ, 2022). As a result of these growing statistics, many minority students have not felt safe at most PWIs or TWIs and were looking to HBCUs as a place of refuge from racism and violence to further their education.

Theoretical Context

The theory of student migration was one of the earliest conceptual frameworks used to analyze early trends in higher education. Seminal studies analyzed college student migration patterns from 1887 to 1958 for undergraduate, graduate, and first-time professional students between 1938 and 1963 (Steahr, 1976). Steahr (1976) examined the national patterns of outmigration from states to Black institutions and immigration to states with Black institutions. She gathered information using national surveys of college student migration conducted by the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO). Consequently, she determined student migrant status based on the criterion of a student's native state being the state of the student's permanent home address. If the student's home state differed from the state where the student attended college, they were deemed migrants. The study by Steahr (1976) identified two main areas for further research: the role of HBCUs in response to local and regional demands and the level and distribution of federal financial aid.

In another early study, Davis and Borders-Patterson (1973) moved the focus from analyzing migration patterns to integrating Black students attending PWIs. Davis and Borders-Patterson's study was part of ongoing research by the North Carolina Board of Higher Education examining avenues of and barriers to access to Black student success in TWIs and PWIs. From

this study, six significant findings emerged from the data: the proportions of Black students attending TWIs fell far below that of White students attending HBCUs despite vigorous efforts to recruit non-Black students to HBCUs; Black students enrolled in PWIs were drawn by low costs and financial aid availability, availability of particular programs, and quality of the program; encouragement from guidance counselors and math and English teachers; campus perceptions; the notion that PWIs were of higher quality or their degrees having more excellent market value than degrees from HBCUs; and Black students at PWIs became increasingly aware of their Blackness (Davis & Borders-Patterson, 1973).

Following Davis and Borders-Patterson's (1973) study, Tinto (1975) developed the student integration theory. Researchers have employed Tinto's theory of departure and the theory of integration to examine the existential experiences of students who integrate into HBCU student populations (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). Tinto's (1975) theory of departure sought to grasp the existential experience of various racial and ethnic groups attending HBCUs. In this theory, Tinto concluded that students must separate from the group that they were formerly associated with, undergo a transition, and incorporate and adopt the normative behaviors of the new group (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Peifer et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 2001). Thus, students must experience separation, transition, and integration to be successful in their pursuit of success as students at an HBCU.

The primary construct in this study focused on the importance of the existential experiences of students integrating into HBCU student populations by using Tinto's theory of integration. According to Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2019), the more positive the experiences, the more likely the students would fully participate in institutional programming and feel a part of their HBCU culture and family. Therefore, this study incorporated hermeneutic

phenomenology as the main theoretical framework to understand non-Black students' experiences on the campuses of HBCUs. One component included exploratory and evaluation research. Exploratory research dealt with how people get along in their settings (Check & Schutt, 2012). It explored the meanings students give to their experiences investigating phenomena without specific expectations (Check & Schutt). On the other hand, evaluation research determined the effects of institutional programming on students feeling a part of or included in the environment of their HBCU (Check & Schutt). Finally, evaluation research considered educational policies and programs (Check & Schutt, 2012).

Problem Statement

The problem was that non-Black student experiences have been underrepresented on the campuses of HBCUs. Previous research has negated the lived experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs while concentrating primarily on diversity from the perspective of non-White students attending PWIs (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). As a staff member at an HBCU over the last 14 years, the current researcher has witnessed an influx of non-Black student enrollment, including students of Arabic, Asian, Caucasian, Latin, and Pacific Islander races and ethnicities. Palmer and Arroyo (2018) suggested that this trend would most likely continue due to the current social and political climates within the United States. While African American students have made up most of the student populations on HBCU campuses, other demographics have also been increasing (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Dos Santos, 2019; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Mobley et al., 2022). Thus, HBCUs, such as the researcher's institution of employment, have been increasingly more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. Although racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion are not new to HBCUs, they have become the focus of conversations among educational leaders across the United States. Leaders

have been looking to intentionally increase their non-Black student populations' numbers to counter-balance dwindling retention numbers and low enrollment. Hence, more research was needed to explore the experiences of non-Black students to provide understanding and improve diversity and inclusion experiences. Therefore, HBCU faculty, staff, and administrators must find ways to honor the traditions and legacy of the past while forging ahead to the future and the newness that comes with it. Historically, HBCUs were founded to educate freed Blacks following the Civil War. Since their inception, they have remained unapologetic about their Blackness, focusing on Black pride, history, and empowerment. Today, HBCUs have been experiencing a growth in the enrollment of non-Black students; one of the outcomes as a result of this study was to provide HBCUs with insights to address and adjust to this new phenomenon on their campuses.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the diversity and inclusion of non-Black students attending an HBCU. Diversity referred to the integration of various racial and ethnic groups, and inclusion referred to conditions on campus that reflected practices and relationships that produce a feeling of being valued, respected, and supported by the institution. The theory guiding this study was Tinto’s theory of integration.

Significance of the Study

This study examined the lived experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs. At the same time, HBCUs were institutions created out of the depths of darkness in America’s history; they have become and remained an assemblage of diverse colleges and universities (Williams & Palmer, 2021). Whereas the HBCU moniker has identified institutions with similar pedigrees, it did not capture the array of institutions covered under the title HBCU (Williams & Palmer). In

addition, HBCUs have consisted of a wide range of institutional types and sizes that offer students a variety of majors and degrees. While some HBCUs have still offered students a primarily liberal arts education, others have offered a comprehensive selection of degrees and majors, including architecture, agriculture, engineering, and pharmacy. Furthermore, HBCUs have also varied in student body size (Williams & Palmer, 2021). This study included one private HBCU with a student population of approximately 1,678 students, another private HBCU with an approximate enrollment of a little over 4,619 students, and one public land-grant student body of approximately 5,414 students (NCES, 2022). Studying the importance of existential experiences of students integrating into HBCU student populations across these diverse institutions provided a more realistic analysis of non-Black student perceptions and experiences of diversity and inclusion at HBCUs.

Theoretical

The theoretical foundations of student integration examined diversity and inclusion from the perspectives of non-Black students, whose lived experiences provided context for these concepts. The prospective outcomes of this study could significantly impact the future diversity and inclusion policies, practices, and programs at HBCUs (Palmer et al., 2018). Other HBCU institutions may use this study to address their policies and procedures to help their non-Black, non-traditional students better adjust to the culture and environment on campus. Moreover, HBCUs will gain insight from the lived experiences of this study's participants to help immigrant Black and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) students adjust to campus life, as well as students of other religions that are different from the institution's foundational religious influence (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker-Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Williams & Palmer, 2021). Using student integration, the primary

construct of this study emphasized the significance of non-Black students' firsthand experiences integrating into HBCU culture, where the belief was that the more positive the student experience, the more likely they are to completely participate in institutional programming and feel a part of the university's ethos (Booker-Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Palmer et al., 2018; Tinto; 1975; Williams & Palmer, 2021). This study investigated the meanings that non-Black students assign to their experiences.

Empirical

As this study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of non-Black students at an HBCU, it was essential to recognize that HBCUs are not homogenous. Instead, HBCUs are unique and distinct institutions that have become and continued to be a diverse collection of colleges and universities (Williams & Palmer, 2021). Furthermore, HBCUs also vary in student body size (Williams & Palmer, 2021). This study included HBCUs with student populations ranging from 1,678 students to 5,414 students (NCES, 2022). Studying the importance of existential experiences of students integrating into HBCU student populations across these diverse institutions provided a more realistic analysis of non-Black student perceptions and experiences of diversity and inclusion at HBCUs. The outcomes of this study could impact current and future institutional policies, practices, and programs on diversity and inclusion on the HBCU campus. Based on Tinto's theory of integration (1993), the primary construct focused on the importance of non-Black students successfully integrating academically and socially into HBCU student populations (Palmer et al., 2018). According to Tinto's (1993) theory of integration, the more positivity that students experience, the more likely they will be to fully participate in institutional programming and feel a part of the university's culture and family. Therefore, this study leaned more toward exploratory research on how people get along in their

settings and explored the meanings that students give to their experiences (Check & Schutt, 2012).

Practical

From a practical perspective, this study aided other HBCUs by providing current findings and perspectives of non-Black students in an HBCU. In addition, this study provided an understanding of the lived experiences of non-Black students and an insight into possible barriers unidentified by leadership and administrators. Finally, student affairs professionals also gained valuable insight into what meanings non-Black students assign to their lived experiences and perceptions of diversity and inclusion (Allen & Stone, 2016).

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the diversity and inclusion of non-Black students attending an HBCU. Diversity referred to the integration of various racial and ethnic groups, and inclusion referred to conditions on campus that reflect practices and relationships that produce a feeling of being valued, respected, and supported by the institution. The theory guiding this study was Tinto's theory of integration.

Central Research Question

What are the integration experiences of non-Black students engaging in diversity and inclusion on HBCU campuses?

Sub-Question One

How do non-Black students integrate into the academic systems of their HBCU?

Sub-Question Two

How do non-Black students integrate into the social system of their HBCU?

Sub-Question Three

How do non-Black students deal with challenges experienced at an HBCU?

Sub-Question Four

What impediments prevent non-Black students from integrating into the academic systems of their HBCU?

Definitions

1. *HBCU* – Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) founded before 1964 to educate Black men and women during reconstruction following the Civil War (NCES, 2023).
2. *Inclusion* – An active process through which colleges and universities achieve excellence in learning, teaching, student development, institutional functioning, and engagement in local and global communities (AAC&U, 2022).
3. *Integration* – The extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to the instructional rules and requirements of the institution; the institutional culture (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).
4. *Non-Black Students* – Students who identify with a race or ethnic group other than solely African American (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019).
5. *Predominantly White Institution* – Institutions of higher learning whose student body population is a majority of White or Caucasian students (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021)
6. *Social Contract* – Government-initiated actions focused on reconciling the relationship between America and the descendants of formerly enslaved people.

Summary

The problem was that some HBCUs have struggled to create, improve, or increase multiculturalism and inclusion of non-Black students (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). Historically, HBCUs have always been intentional and unapologetic in focusing solely on educating the African American communities (Arroyo et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2018). Their institutional identities have been steeped in the philosophy and practice of being unapologetically Black. From their rich traditions to athletics to their educational pedagogy, everything concerning HBCUs has focused on Blackness, pride, history, and empowerment. Nevertheless, many of these institutions have sought ways to adapt what they do and how they do it to accommodate the increasing enrollment of non-Black student populations on their campuses. There has been a dictate to change and reconsider curriculum development and implementation, programming, and social development (Arroyo et al., 2018). In North Carolina, funding was tied to new government directives and policies requiring HBCUs to address and adjust to the new phenomenon of multiculturalism on their campuses (Burnett, 2020). Accreditation renewals have been sometimes tied to an institution's ability to diversify and create inclusive environments. Changing their pedagogy could severely challenge some institutions and possibly jeopardize accreditation and funding. Therefore, the problem of HBCUs experiencing a significant rise in the enrollment of non-Black students challenges leaders to create new paths, leading to increased diversity and inclusion on campus (Pichon, 2019). This hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to describe what meaning non-Black students ascribe to their experiences of diversity and inclusion on the campuses of HBCUs. As such, diversity referred to different racial and ethnic groups, and inclusion referred to conditions on the HBCU campus that reflect practices and relationships that produce a state of feeling valued, respected, and supported.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Numerous studies have dealt with diversity in higher education; however, most have focused on the diversity of predominately White institutions (PWIs) and have given no consideration to diversity trends at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen et al., 2018; Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Burnett, 2020; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Carlton, 2021; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Elias & Mansouri, 2020; Goss, 2021; Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer & Maramba, 2018; Palmer & Williams, 2021). While there has been sufficient evidence of other races attending HBCUs, Hughes-Kidd (2019) argued that insufficient attention has been given to HBCUs and the non-Black students attending them. Therefore, this study sought to add to the current knowledge and conversation on diversity by focusing on the experiences of non-Black students attending HBCUs. Reviewing existing literature helped establish the study's worthiness on HBCU diversity. Study worthiness was supported by underscoring the related literature highlighting the need for additional studies based on the experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. Furthermore, this chapter examines existing literature to discuss Tinto's theory of student integration as the theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Diversity and inclusion have taken center stage in conversations among educational leaders across the HBCU landscape in the United States. Historically, HBCUs have focused on educating African Americans; therefore, their institutional identities have been immersed in an unapologetic philosophy in promoting the Black community's traditions, ethics, values, morals, and ideals (Arroyo et al., 2017). From its institutional history to athletics to its educational

pedagogy, everything concerning HBCUs has been centered on Blackness, pride, history, and empowerment. However, political and social shifts across the United States have increased the number of non-Black students enrolling in HBCUs due to a call for more focused practices in diversity and inclusion among all institutions of higher learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2022). As a result, institutional leaders, administrative personnel, and other educational leaders have been working intensely to change curriculums, policies, and social programming to be inclusive and sensitive to the needs of non-Black students' cultural, heritage, and ethnic differences (Arroyo et al., 2017). Theories, frameworks, and perspectives have been vital elements that helped shape new educational practices and can be valuable to the change processes undertaken by colleges, universities, and other organizations from numerous fields (Chrysikos et al., 2017; French, 2017). As one of the most widely cited conceptual frameworks, Tinto's theory of integration has generally been used to examine student persistence in four-year institutions and suggested that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; French, 2017; Karp et al., 2017; Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, students' first-year experience critically influences their determination to complete their undergraduate studies (Chrysikos et al., 2017). According to Tinto (1993), students who participate in university programs academically and socially are more likely to stay in their program (Chrysikos et al., 2017; French, 2017; Karp et al., 2017; Shin & Johnson, 2021). Engagement in learning communities has been a significant part of the student's connection to their campus. Learning communities have represented students who may take standard courses together, share a common academic interest, or live in the same residence (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Fostering learning communities

has been shown to support increased student learning and retention. Therefore, it was essential to determine how first-year students interact with and succeed in a university environment, which becomes more crucial as universities become increasingly diverse and administrators work to improve first-year students' retention and graduation rates (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Chrysikos et al., 2017).

The term integration explained the extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institution—the institutional culture (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto's academic integration has been measured by student grade performance and intellectual development and has been vital to the student's persistence (French, 2017). Academic performance has played an essential role in student satisfaction. However, social integration into the campus community has been just as meaningful as it impacts a student's commitment to their education and their institution.

Tinto (1993) based his work on van Gennep's (1960) theory of rites of passage, in which three phases occur when an individual joins a new group: (a) separation from the past; (b) transition, in which the individual begins to interact with a new setting and people; and (c) incorporation, in which the individual adopts the norms and expectations of the new group. Tinto (1993) argued that individuals must integrate into the social system to establish community membership. In higher education, integration has involved social (i.e., personal affiliation) and intellectual (i.e., sharing of values) connections.

Related Literature

Studies focusing on HBCUs had to understand that HBCUs are not monolithic (Carlton, 2021; Stewart, 2018). Four unique elements have defined HBCUs. First, HBCUs have been well-

known for cultivating a supportive, nurturing, and family-oriented environment that facilitates the social, cognitive, and psychosocial development of its students (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Goss, 2021; Palmer et al., 2018). Second, although HBCUs have not been homogeneous, many institutions have been renowned for enrolling academically unprepared students and graduating them with the skills to gain admission to some of the nation's most prestigious graduate and professional schools. Third, despite being chronically underfunded, HBCUs have earned a reputation for promoting the success of their students just as effectively, if not more so, than other types of institutions (Arroyo et al.; Booker & Campbell-Whatley; Campbell-Whatley et al.; Goss, 2021; Palmer et al.). Lastly, despite having emerged from an era of segregation, HBCUs have always welcomed racially and ethnically diverse student bodies (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2018).

Consequently, HBCUs have been, by design and mission, racialized organizations within higher education and, therefore, have been frequently neglected or ignored in conversations concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion (Arroyo et al., 2017; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2015). One of the most widely accepted reasons for this omission has been that HBCUs do not fit the dominant narrative of bringing minority students into PWIs (Howard-Hamilton, 2015; Okuwobi et al.). Unlike other institutions, HBCUs have never had a history of exclusion to overcome (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Howard-Hamilton, 2015; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2015; Wolfe, 2015). Consequently, diversity and inclusion at HBCUs have been among the least-researched topics in education, diversity, inclusion, or multiculturalism (Arroyo et al., 2017; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Goss, 2021). Nonetheless, according to Pichon (2018), several factors have contributed to the

increase in diversity at HBCUs, including the decline in Black student enrollment (Dwyer, 2006; Gasman, 2010; Snyder et al., 2018); the federal court decisions in Bakke's, Grutter's, and Fordice's cases; the introduction of new academic programs; and the shift in national demographics (Pichon, 2018).

In addition, as low graduation rates and financial issues have continued to plague these historic institutions, they had to develop inventive solutions to remain operational (Pichon, 2018). Concerns have existed regarding how HBCUs nationwide will address these underserved populations' diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. In agreement with both Pichon's and Dwyer's (2006) research, Burnett (2020) attributed the emergence of diversity at HBCUs to new policies and mandates issued by state and federal agencies. However, as Dwyer (2006) and Pichon (2018) assigned diversity to novel approaches and tasks, others have pointed to a declining enrollment of African American students, resulting in the deliberate recruitment of non-Black students (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Burnett, 2020; Goss, 2021; Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer & Williams, 2021). Pichon (2018) wrote that this diversity growth, also known as caramelization, had to be noted at HBCUs as the number of non-Black students and faculty pursuing academic and career opportunities at these institutions; this included the proliferation of both White (i.e., European ancestry) and Brown (i.e., Latin ancestry) students and faculty continuing to rise.

Dwyer (2006) examined the effect of multiculturalism on diversity outcomes at HBCUs by constructing a framework with five elements: multiculturalism in the classroom, structural diversity, pre-college experiences, internal development, and empowerment. Each factor was divided into two subcategories: HBCU institutional and individual factors (Pichon, 2018).

Based on the collected data, HBCUs have been essential in higher education, as they promote social mobility for college students who experience exclusion and marginalization. Furthermore, they have also promoted awareness, reverence for differences, and a cultural diversity distinct from the campus majority culture (Dwyer, 2006; Henry & Closson, 2010; Lee, 2015; Palmer et al., 2018). Moreover, exposure to other cultures, traditions, and students has dispelled stereotypes frequently promoted and propagated by mainstream media, social media, social norms and traditions, and prior attitudes toward race (Dwyer, 2006; Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer & Williams, 2021). Additionally, interactions between students of different races, religions, ethnicities, and countries of origin have contributed to developing educated and competent citizens and promoting learning and growth (Fosnacht et al., 2020). Therefore, institutions have established a campus community that encourages first-year students to interact with people of other ethnicities and be receptive to meeting people radically different from themselves, their families, and their high school classmates (Fosnacht et al., 2020).

Response to Tinto's Integration Theory

Tinto's (1993) theory of integration was unique to student development because it was one of the first theories that focused on explaining voluntary departure from colleges and universities as an issue with the student and the institution. Tinto (1993) argued that prior theories and research had hypothesized and tested financial or academic variables as predictors of student retention but failed to separate voluntary from involuntary departure. He argued that prior research focused on predictors of dropping out and tended to approach the issue in a "blame the victim" way. Tinto's (1993) theory focused on retention and shifted the onus of responsibility from the individual student and his or her situation to an issue under the institution's influence. The literature described the theory as an interactionist theory that looks at the person and the

institution (Tinto, 1986), while Tinto (1993) defined integration concerning social and academic connections to the campus. Social integration referred to students' perceptions of interactions with the institution's peer group, faculty, and staff and involvement in extra- and cocurricular activities. Academic integration referred to perceptions of the experiences in the formal and informal academic system resulting from interactions with faculty, staff, and students inside and outside the classroom that enhance the student's intellectual development. Furthermore, Tinto (1993) posited that the student's perceived level of integration greatly influences the decision to persist or depart. Tinto's (1993) model has been used by numerous researchers to test different aspects of integration and to tease out the factors leading to college student departure and retention. Researchers looking to apply Tinto's concepts have developed several instruments to measure academic and social integration. Tinto's initial work (1986) was mainly theoretical and did not include any methodological approach to study the integration construct. Most research using Tinto's (1993) integration model has measured perceptions of student interactions or connections to faculty, staff, and peers along with involvement in extracurricular activities (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Integration has been subject to critique, given its focus on traditional-age student populations, its lack of attention to racial and ethnic differences, and the prescriptive aspect of the model (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). For students who have not been traditional in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and full-time enrollment status, the assumption has been that to succeed in college (i.e., to persist), students must integrate into the college environment by abandoning their history, heritage, and outside interests. Another critique of the theory was that it was too focused on sociological issues and did not consider the individual psychology of students (Braxton, 2000). Tinto (1993) responded to these critiques by

noting that higher education institutions have multiple communities that attract and serve students from various backgrounds. He added that it was essential for students to find some form of community that would help them feel connected to the campus, but not that they needed to assimilate to persist (Tinto, 1993).

According to Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), the concepts of academic (i.e., formal) and social (i.e., informal) integration have suggested that integration is a state of being and is based on perceptions of students and how students fit within their campus communities and environments. Moreover, successful integration results in higher retention and completion rates and is crucial for first-year students. Integration calls for a reciprocal commitment between the individual and the institution. Nevertheless, students must be willing to integrate into the institution's environment, and the institution must create opportunities for student engagement. Furthermore, students must intentionally adopt the campus's cultural views, departing from their past cultural involvements and environments and integrating into a new one (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Thus, Tinto's theory of integration guided this study in highlighting the experiences of non-Black students attending the HBCU chosen as the research site. This theory was used to understand how students adjust to this university's culture and academic systems. In the end, through Tinto's integration theory, the findings provided insight into this growing phenomenon and potentially helped other HBCUs improve diversity and inclusion on their campuses.

Opposition to HBCU Diversification

Over the years, HBCUs and other institutions of higher learning have been working hard to create an environment that promotes diversity, equity, fairness, and inclusion (Arroyo et al., 2017; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2015). Administrators, faculty, and staff have been diligently seeking new ways to ensure that all students, regardless of

age, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, or sexual orientation, feel welcome on campus (Arroyo et al., 2017; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). These measures have ensured that every pupil is heard and valued (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Jones & Jones, 2022). However, Snipes and Darnell (2021) cautioned that not all stakeholders will view diversification favorably, as some will interpret it as a violation of the original institutional mission of HBCUs.

As these colleges and universities have worked to embrace a more diverse and inclusive campus, many of their constituents have not supported such efforts. Historically, HBCUs have operated unapologetically in their Afrocentric pride, resulting in Black creative educational experiences (BCEEs; Patton et al., 2022). These BCEEs are participatory and performative cultural experiences created by or for students that emphasize Black people's artistic expression, aesthetics, and engagement. When they engage in multiple forms, BCEEs can promote Black students' recruitment, retention, and graduation rates and challenge conventional research paradigms that downplay the significance of investigating emotion, feeling, and enjoyment emanating from artistic expression (Patton et al., 2022). Furthermore, BCEEs not only venerate Black cultural aesthetics but also translate into more significant contributions to humanity when their significance to the freedom and liberation of Black people is emphasized.

Nonetheless, some alumni have spoken out against the intentional recruitment and enrollment of non-Black students (Stewart, 2021). For some, the issue has centered around the notion that scholarships and grants for African American students have been given to non-Black students instead. For example, a White student who was accepted to Spelman College sparked a heated debate after posting about her acceptance on Instagram. She expressed gratitude for her acceptance and said she would use her privilege to create a more equitable and healing world (Stewart). The post went viral, with thousands of people posting comments in favor of or against

reasons for choosing to attend an HBCU; some criticized the post as disingenuous, while others argued that excluding non-Black students promotes divisiveness (Stewart). The debate sparked by this enrollment served as just one example of how racial diversity at HBCUs has become increasingly contentious as non-Black student enrollment has continued to grow (Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Stewart, 2021). In defense of recruiting non-Black students, leaders have noted that HBCUs have taken measures to recruit non-Black students to counter low enrollment numbers and insufficient government support (Burnett, 2020; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Palmer et al., 2018; Stewart, 2021). Therefore, to maintain accreditation and receive government funding, HBCUs must recruit non-Black high school seniors at predominantly White and Latin-Hispanic high schools (Burnett, 2020; Durkee et al., 2019; Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Stewart, 2021).

Still, those in opposition have believed that enrolling non-Black students violates HBCUs' mission and role as safe spaces for African American students (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker-Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Durkee et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2018; Stewart, 2021). Furthermore, it has been argued that White gentrification illustrates why Black spaces should be preserved for Black students (Stewart, 2021). On the contrary, Arroyo et al. (2019) suggested that HBCUs can enhance White students' critical consciousness while providing opportunities for African American students to experience increased social mobility.

As previously stated, the environment of HBCUs has altered considerably over the last 30 years, expanding staff and student diversity (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Goss, 2021; Mobley et al., 2018; Snipes & Darnell, 2018). The increase in teacher and student diversity has resulted in two conflicting points of view about non-Black students attending HBCUs. According to the *Changing Faces of Historically Black Colleges and Universities* report, some who have opposed

diversity have been concerned that it would jeopardize HBCUs' uniqueness. In addition, due to the growing faculty diversity, it has been questioned whether HBCUs could continue to address African American students' educational, social, and developmental demands (Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Mobley et al., 2018; Snipes & Darnell, 2018; Stewart, 2021). Moreover, many African Americans have been concerned that these institutions would lose their original educational mission and diminish the cultural and intellectual perspectives, leadership, individual efficacy, and empowerment that HBCUs have fostered in African Americans (Harrington & Thomas, 2018). Despite the assertions of many White Americans that this was a post-racial society, there have continued to be issues based on race, culture, ethnicity, and language (Harrington & Thomas, 2018). Therefore, it was crucial for White faculty at HBCUs to comprehend Black spaces, cultivate a critical cultural consciousness, and consider how their beliefs, values, and biases are communicated through their teaching and interactions with African American students.

Non-Black Student Experiences at HBCUs

While many PWIs have attempted to increase racial diversity, one might presume that HBCUs have no problem with inclusive efforts, given their decades-long emphasis on college access for Black students. However, HBCUs must now think more extensively about diversity in terms of race, sexual orientation, and globalization due to the declining enrollment of their traditional student population (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). Furthermore, HBCUs must recruit and retain members of other cultural groups to remain viable. Additionally, HBCUs must position themselves to provide a curricular and cocurricular system of education that is unmatched, as more students from diverse backgrounds pursue higher education (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). Studies have predominantly examined the experiences of White

students at HBCUs (Harrington & Thomas, 2018). For example, Closson and Henry (2008) investigated the social adjustment of White students at HBCUs. Students expressed their awareness of being a minority on campus and the racial undertones surrounding them, such as being judged as racist and feeling pressured not to offend anyone of color to the point where they could not simply be themselves (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). In addition, Harrington and Thomas cited Peterson and Hamrick (2009) in a qualitative study examining the racial consciousness of White male undergraduates attending an HBCU. Participants in the study described how attending an HBCU altered their perceptions of Black/African American students. Notably, participants in this study described classroom experiences similar to those of Black students at PWIs (i.e., experiences marked by hypervisibility, self-censorship, and race spokesperson roles; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). Palmer and Maramba (2015) investigated the interactions between Asian American and Latinx students and faculty at HBCUs in their study. Likewise, Harrington and Thomas cited a study that included one-to-one interviews with six Asian Americans and six Latinx students, who attributed their success to the positive faculty support that they received. Student perceptions of diverse faculty were that they were student-focused and cared more about their well-being than the job requirements (Harrington & Thomas). All participants reported that their interactions with faculty had been overwhelmingly positive (Allen et al., 2018; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Elias & Mansouri, 2020; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Harrington & Thomas, 2018; Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

Latinx Male Student Experience

Higher education institutions must recruit Latinx students and provide a welcoming campus culture and environment to nurture student success, as Latinx college enrollment has been rising (Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021). For Black college students, HBCUs can serve as a

second home. Several studies have attempted to comprehend the PWI experiences of Latinx students and other students of color residing in on-campus accommodations, experiencing campus engagement, and attaining academic achievement (Ponjuán & Hernández). In addition, Ponjuán and Hernández examined Latinx undergraduates' experiences at PWIs regarding campus climate and students' social and intercultural capital. For instance, positive faculty and diverse peer interactions have significantly predicted Latinx students' sense of belonging at these institutions (Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2020). Moreover, researchers have investigated the impact of Hispanic serving institution (HSI) structures and practices on Latinx student success (Ponjuán & Hernández, 2020). For example, HSIs have been more likely to modify policies, programs, and practices to be more student-centered and culturally sensitive to the needs of Latinx students (Durkee et al., 2019). Likewise, another study contrasted the engagement, satisfaction, and growth of Latinx students at HSIs and PWIs. Specifically, researchers have discovered that Latinx students at HSIs and PWIs share more similarities than differences in their experiences. Additionally, researchers have investigated the experiences of Latinx students enrolled at HBCUs (Durkee et al.; Palmer et al., 2015; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Although HBCU faculty were frequently more accessible and approachable, Latinx students experienced microaggressions from some faculty and their Black peers (Durkee et al.; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021). These studies revealed that Latinx undergraduate students at various higher education institutions share similarities and differences in their experiences.

Furthermore, some researchers have examined the educational experiences of Latinx male "achievers" (e.g., academically talented) in order to determine how their social and cultural capital influenced their academic success at PWIs (Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021). Although Latinx male achievers at PWIs were academically successful and engaged, they

attributed their success to cultural capital and helping others (Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2020). In addition, researchers have compared the ethnic identity development of Latinx males at an HSI, an emerging HSI, and a non-HSI institution. The study found that the HSI and emerging HSI provided more supportive environments for Latinx male students to investigate their racial and sexual orientation identity through cocurricular opportunities than the non-HSI (Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2020). Another study found that the personable qualities of faculty enhanced the sense of belonging among Latinx male students, but their off-campus employment obligations made it difficult for them to participate in extracurricular activities at HBCUs (Allen, 2015; Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2020). Although academicians have recently examined the educational outcomes of Latinx male students, this study focused on their educational experiences at four-year public institutions of higher education in Texas (Durkee et al., 2019; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021).

Despite creating programs and policies designed to recruit and retain other racial groups on their campuses, HBCUs have faced barriers and obstacles that hinder these efforts (Burnett, 2020; Mobley et al., 2022). Mobley et al. observed that one such barrier is that some racial and ethnic groups perceive HBCUs as inferior to PWIs. Furthermore, despite views of inferiority, those who choose to attend an HBCU often have been subjugated to backlash and criticism from family members and friends who believe that attending an HBCU will compromise their education and potentially their future (Mobley et al., 2022).

HBCUs, Accreditation, and the SACSCOC

There have been several factors leading HBCUs to increase diversity on their campuses. For example, HBCUs have been experiencing low enrollment of traditional students opting to attend a PWI or not attend college. Another factor has been the result of court cases, such as

Brown v. Board of Education and the *United States v. Fordice*, where HBCUs were mandated to create programs and policies to recruit for diversity (Burnett, 2022; Mobley et al., 2022; Stewart, 2023). Furthermore, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), current trends in higher education have increased competition for students among all colleges and universities. Burnett reported that 60% of all colleges and universities fell short of their enrollment targets, and 67% had a shortfall of targeted budget revenue. One way that these colleges and universities have countered enrollment downfalls has been to demonstrate institutional quality through accreditation (Burnett; Carlson, 2020). Being accredited through an accreditation board, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), has signaled to the public, potential students, community partners, employers, and other institutions of higher learning that a college or university is of high quality and standards, which has distinguished them from other institutions (Burnett, 2022).

According to Smith (2023), accreditation is the process through which regional and specialized accreditors extend seals of approval to institutions and degree programs that meet specific requirements for education quality and institutional stability. Accreditors, such as the SACSCOC, possess significant authority over the colleges and universities accredited by them. This authority has been coined as a quasi-governmental power, as it works on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education to maintain educational quality and act as the gatekeeper over federal funding (Smith). Boards like the SACSCOC have final authority for accreditation decisions (Burnett, 2022; Carlson, 2020; Smith, 2023).

Nonetheless, accreditation has not been mandatory; however, it has been a prerequisite for colleges and universities to access Title IV funding (Burnett, 2020; Smith, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Inevitably, accreditation has been the passageway and lifeline

to much-needed federal funding (Smith, 2023). Colleges and universities cannot survive without the tuition funding and grants received from the federal government (Burnett, 2020; Smith, 2023). This has given agencies like the SACSCOC quasi-governmental power as they work to enforce federal requirements, making them an extension of the federal government despite only being nonprofit organizations (Smith, 2023). As a result, litigation has usually been the only avenue that colleges and universities have in order to check accrediting organizations for any unjust actions the accrediting agency takes (Burnett, 2020, 2022; Smith, 2023).

The SACSCOC reviews institutional compliance per the Principles of Accreditation (Smith, 2023). The SACSCOC also has the authority to reaffirm accreditation, issue warnings, place institutions on probation, or withdraw accreditation (Burnett, 2023; Carlson, 2020; Smith). The SACSCOC is the accreditation agency for 11 southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia) and several international institutions. Therefore, more than 80% of all HBCUs have been under the SACSCOC's authority (Burnett, 2022; Crawford, 2017; Smith, 2023). However, the vast majority have faced more accreditation challenges, resulting in widespread criticism for disproportionately sanctioning HBCUs over all other groups (Burnett, 2022; Crawford, 2017).

Coercive Isomorphism

According to Crawford (2017), HBCUs have faced continual challenges to their continued existence on various levels. One of the biggest challenges has been fiscally associated with cuts to federal education funding as the higher education cost has been passed on to students and their families (Burnett, 2022; Crawford; Smith, 2023). Other financial challenges have been low endowments and questions regarding whether or not HBCUs are needed in a supposed post-racial society (Crawford). It had to be understood that HBCUs are more than institutions of

higher learning; they are cultural and economic centers in their communities (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Crawford; Palmer & Williams, 2021). The loss of accreditation can be detrimental to an HBCU, potentially forcing a closure (Burnett, 2020, 2022; Crawford; Smith, 2023). The closure of an HBCU creates a loss of valuable opportunities for students of all races and socioeconomic stations and a loss in diversity in research (Crawford). The loss of accreditation also means that HBCUs are ineligible for federal funding, a significant source of support, without which they cannot meet operational needs (Burnett, 2022; Crawford, 2017).

Moreover, most students attending HBCUs have relied on Pell Grants, parent plus loans, and subsidized and unsubsidized student loans—all hedges on accreditation. In a study drawing upon the works of DiMaggio and Powel (1983), Gonzales et al. (2018) implemented coercive isomorphism to understand how accreditation agencies, such as the SACSCOC and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), have coerced HBCUs. Gonzales et al. (2018) described coercive isomorphism as institutional pressures placed upon institutions to be similar in form and practice. As such, coercive isomorphism has been a formal and informal practice, and pressure has been applied to organizations like HBCUs by accrediting agencies, such as SACSCOC and SACS, as the practice of forcing organizations to become similar to other institutions who may receive more support from the federal and state funding (Crawford, 2017; Toldson et al., 2022). Burnett (2020) surmised that accreditation agencies like SACSCOC and SACS have exerted intense coercive pressure on HBCUs by attaching standards, policies, and mandates to federal funding support. Research has shown that accreditors tend to be stricter on minority-serving institutions, such as HBCUs, regarding financial issues than their PWI counterparts (Burnett, 2020, 2022; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Crawford, 2017; Smith, 2023; Toldson et al., 2022).

Burnett (2020) noted that out of the 590 institutional members of the SACSCOC, 56 were taken against HBCUs facing 138 sanctions, including not reaffirming accreditation, being denied membership, or losing accreditation. Before Burnett's study, Closson and Henry (2008) revealed that changes toward diversity and inclusion in higher education were driven by increased mandates by state and federal governments. For example, due to a court ruling, Tennessee State University was ordered to increase non-Black student enrollment by at least 50%. Burnett, Crawford (2017), Toldson et al. (2022), and Smith (2023) have reported that the SACSCOC has been identified as the leading actor in sanctioning members and has faced criticism for placing disproportionate sanctions on HBCUs. In addition, HBCUs have frequently been cited on finance-related standards, have lacked large endowments, and have been underfunded compared with PWIs and public flagships (Burnett; Crawford; Toldson et al; Smith, 2023). This has been evidenced by court orders requiring North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, and others to improve and promote a racial and ethnic balance at state-funded institutions. As a result, North Carolina's five HBCUs saw a 12.5% increase in non-Black students on their campuses (Burnett, 2020; Crawford, 2017; Toldson et al., 2022).

Beyond Racial Diversity at HBCUs

Aside from racial diversity, HBCUs have also been experiencing an increase in other forms of diversity. In a study concerning diversity and inclusion at HBCUs, Lee (2015) underscored the importance of moving beyond racial and ethnic diversity to other diversity forms, including SES, sexual orientation, and international status. Following their original missions, HBCUs, since their inception, have always and continued to provide education to those who usually would not have access to higher education (Okuwobi et al., 2021). This has led to significant socioeconomic diversity among students attending HBCUs (Lee; Okuwobi et al.,

2021). One way to determine an institution's socioeconomic diversity status has been by considering the number of students receiving federal Pell Grants and student loans (Lee, 2015). According to the NCES (2022), in 2011, 49% of all college students received Pell Grants; however, when looking only at HBCUs, 71% of all students received Pell Grants.

SES

In recent years, student populations enrolling in college have become more diverse regarding social identity, culture, SES, nationality, prior educational experience, and academic ability (Rodríguez-Hernández et al., 2020). More specifically, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds increasingly have sought opportunities at HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs; Rodríguez-Hernández et al.). Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2020) suggested that to understand these changes, researchers must explore the relationship between SES and its impact on diversity and academic performance.

As this study sought to understand non-Black student perceptions of diversity and inclusion at HBCUs, it was important to acknowledge that HBCUs have had a history of providing higher education opportunities to underrepresented, marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed members of society, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, HBCUs have also been known for providing access to higher learning to those who come from low-income or impoverished communities. According to Kember et al. (2021), the days of elitism in higher education have ended. The introduction of mass enrollment in higher education has resulted in a more diverse number of students, faculty, and staff (Burnett, 2020; Campbell-Whatley, 2022; Kember et al.; Stewart, 2023). Mass enrollment in higher education has forced the admissions of those who ordinarily would not have been permitted to enroll (Kember et al., 2021). As such, admission standards have varied among colleges and universities and between courses and

programs within the institution; with this, campuses across the country have been beginning to reflect the nation's diversity (Graham-Bailey et al., 2019). Most students who arrive on campus for the first time have been challenged with engaging with other students from various social identities, presenting opportunities for cultivating personal development, critical analysis, and cultural understanding and tolerance (Graham-Bailey et al.). As first-year students adjust to their new environments, joining a new social group becomes vital to negotiating and renegotiating their identities (Graham-Bailey et al.). Adjusting to their new context requires students to consider new social group memberships and reevaluate old ones, which means that a student's social group and the degree to which they feel closely connected to that group will significantly impact and influence their behavior and attitudes toward members of other social groups (Graham-Bailey et al.). While research has linked SES to students' academic and social outcomes, there has remained little-to-no consideration of how students attending HBCUs construct identities relating to their SES (Graham-Bailey et al., 2019). Thus, there has been a need for additional research on the psychological experiences of SES as a new social class identity for first-year college students in higher education, explicitly within HBCUs.

LGBTQIA at HBCUs

Any discussion on diversity must also consider the growing presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) student enrollment and self-identification. Research on LGBTQIA students attending HBCUs has illuminated the conservative climates and ways that HBCUs have responded to the needs of the LGBTQIA community (Palmer & Williams, 2021). In addition, studies have also shown that although LGBTQIA students have been becoming more visible, they have remained a minority group and faced targeted discrimination (Winn et al., 2018). Despite this, there have been some federally

protected rights to discourage discrimination and encourage applying Title IX protections for students (Winn et al., 2018).

As previously noted, HBCUs have and will continue to play a vital role in educating students of all races, ethnicities, religions, political views, SES, sex, and gender identity. However, HBCUs have been slow to respond to the needs of the LGBTQIA community on their campuses (Arroyo et al., 2017; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Hansen & Renguette, 2021; Jones & Phillips, 2020; Lee, 2015; Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Njoku et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2018; Shiri & Johnson, 2021). Winn et al. (2018) also suggested that some HBCUs have a reputation as being unsupportive or homophobic and fostering climates prohibiting LGBTQIA students from identifying as such. Furthermore, additional research revealed that several institutions have either rejected multiple attempts from students to form a support group for gay youth or maintained dress codes that forbid men from wearing clothing that is usually assigned to women or as female attire (Mobley & Johnson, 2019; Winn et al., 2018).

However, to the contrary, Winn et al. (2018) noted that several HBCUs have taken positive steps in creating campus groups for LGBTQIA students, hosting conferences centered on LGBTQIA student needs, and updating curriculums that include both challenges and celebrations with being LGBTQIA. According to Mobley and Hall (2020), many HBCUs have been working to ensure that LGBTQIA students are fully engaged, are included in the campus community, and persist to graduation. Therefore, how HBCUs address, respond to, and support LGBTQIA students speaks positively to the African American and higher education communities. Thus, HBCUs must be intentional in ensuring that all institutional activities and services consistently include LGBTQIA students, alumni, community partners, and all other stakeholders.

Intra-Racial Colorism Among Black Students at HBCUs

In discussing diversity on the campuses of HBCUs, most studies have focused on more apparent forms of diversity, such as racial diversity, SES, and sexual or gender identification or orientation. However, another facet that has warranted attention is the intra-racial aspects of diversity at HBCUs, as several HBCUs have a growing population of African immigrant first-year students (Daoud et al., 2018; Gasman & Abiola, 2016; Hope, 2022). In addition, although there has been existing literature on the academic motivations of African American students, there has been little attention given to the motivational patterns of native-born African American students and African immigrant origin. According to Daoud et al., intra-racial stratification and colorism have resulted from complexion, privilege, and color biases among African American students at HBCUs. Gasman and Abiola stated that colorism discriminates based on skin tone, affording privileges to light-skinned Black students and unfairly penalizing dark-skinned students. Other factors leading to discrimination among Black students have included eye color, type of hair or hair texture, SES, prior experiences, and education (Daoud et al.; Gasman & Abiola). The principle behind colorism has centered on the idea that people with lighter skin and White European features have been preferred and disproportionately advanced over people of darker skin (Daoud et al.). Examples of this idea of superiority or color-based discrimination have been evident among HBCU fraternities and sororities, homecoming royal court competitions, and student leadership positions (Daoud et al., 2018; Gasman & Abiola, 2016).

The ideology behind colorism has its foundation in slavery, where those who could pass for White have been treated better (Gasman & Abiola, 2016). Preferential treatment was given to lighter-skinned, house-enslaved people, opposite the harsh treatment of dark-skinned, field-enslaved people. After the fall of slavery, lighter-skinned Black people used their complexion,

informal education learned while working inside the plantation house, and adoption of "White values" as a form of assimilation to their advantage and to separate themselves from the "less desirable" (Daoud et al., 2018; Gasman & Abiola, 2016; Hope, 2022).

For HBCUs to combat colorism, Gasman and Abiola (2016) called for leaders to consider four recommendations. First, departments should provide regularly structured opportunities for students' engagement in discussions on colorism and intra-racial stratification. Second, leaders must acknowledge and include colorism and intra-racial stratification in campus-wide spaces. Third, leaders should create professional development opportunities for staff and faculty centered on colorism and intra-racial stratification (Gasman & Abiola). Furthermore, research has revealed that colorism can influence student self-esteem and self-efficacy. Gasman and Abiola suggested that such training opportunities would help staff and administrators in student support centers be more attentive to the challenges of students. Fourth, leaders must embark on critical institutional self-studies, as the collected data can reveal existing patterns of colorism among students (Daoud et al., 2018; Gasman & Abiola, 2016).

Native Black Students and Immigrant Black Students

According to Palmer and Williams (2023), there has been a false impression that HBCUs are not diverse or that diversity at HBCUs has been limited to racial diversity only. Until now, most research involving diversity and Black students has focused on Black students at PWIs (Mobley et al., 2017; Palmer & Walker, 2019; Palmer & Williams, 2023). Although growing research has focused on diversity at HBCUs, a literature review revealed a limitation of studies examining diversity among Black students attending HBCUs (Mobley et al., 2017).

Palmer and Williams (2023) suggested that despite sharing racial characteristics with Black students born in the United States (i.e., native Blacks), "Black" student immigrants have

distinct ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and traditions. These ethnic backgrounds and cultures have influenced and shaped how Black immigrants view their racial and ethnic identities within the American cultural context (Mobley et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2017; Palmer & Williams, 2023). Although Palmer and Williams (2023) wrote that Black immigrants start with a solid connection to their homeland and cultures, they transition to an identity, then a pan-national identity, and finally, to a pan-ethnic identity. Initially, ethnic differences distinguished Black immigrants from native Blacks until the U.S. system of racial stratification imposed its expectations and stereotypes based solely on racial identity (Palmer & Williams, 2023).

Student Involvement as a Diversity Outcome

According to Harris and BrckaLorenz (2017), student engagement has been participating in educationally effective practices inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, student engagement has tended to lead to college persistence (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Chrysikos et al., 2017; Considine et al., 2017; Crewe, 2017; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Palmer et al., 2018; Pichon, 2018; Tinto, 1993). Student engagement has consisted of the time and effort students put into educational practices and the time and effort colleges and universities put forth to engage students outside the classroom (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Palmer et al., 2018). Commodore and Njoku (2020) suggested that educational policies and practices could influence student engagement, resulting in student learning and personal development. Therefore, as suggested by Carter and Fountaine (2012), student learning and personal development have been directly related to involvement quantity and quality. Such engagement has been displayed in the performance of an activity, in emotional engagement demonstrated through enjoyable states of mind, and by physical arousal or stimulation, as displayed in physical engagement.

Moreover, Mobley et al. (2022) suggested that student engagement has also been shaped by their previous experiences, family background (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and parental influences), and community origin. Finally, Mobley et al. (2022) wrote that the influences on the individual have not been part of the student's immediate environment, including organizations and structures where the student is not physically present but indirectly influences his or her immediate environment. These outside influences have included governments, foundations, policymaking bodies, organizational structures, norms, laws, regulations, and educational or labor force credentialing systems. Those factors may emerge from different sources when preparing for college readiness students. They can influence the individual student at different points in their journey or simultaneously exert multiple influences on the student's experience (Mobley et al., 2022).

Lewis and Shah (2021) examined how Black undergraduate students attending a PWI assess and interpret their institution's diversity and inclusion efforts in light of their lived experiences with campus-based racism. They implemented critical race theory (CRT) to highlight how Black students attending a PWI interpret their university's implementation of diversity and inclusion policies to meet their goals. Lewis and Shah (2021) wrote that student engagement has been influenced by the institutional implementation of policies regarding diversity and inclusion based on the work of critical legal studies scholars who want to address the persistence of racism in the legal system and how society continues to perpetuate and sustain various forms of inequalities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, as cited in Lewis & Shah, 2021).

Sense of Belonging

According to Gillen-O'Neel (2019), the desire for a sense of belonging is a basic human need. Most have agreed that having a sense of belonging is critical for maintaining motivation

and succeeding in college, mainly if one is a non-majority student, such as a non-Black student attending an HBCU. Studies have also suggested that for most college students, having a sense of community (i.e., feeling connected to one's college or university and with students, staff, and faculty) has directly correlated with positive outcomes (Gillen-O'Neel). As suggested by Gillen-O'Neel and Campbell-Whatley et al. (2021), students who have a strong sense of belonging are usually more self-confident, motivated in their studies, able to adjust academically and socially, and reach higher achievements (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Gillen-O'Neel). In addition, studies have also linked a sense of belonging to higher retention and completion rates among non-majority students, particularly non-Black students attending HBCUs (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). As HBCU campuses have continued to become increasingly diverse regarding social identities, such as age, race, gender, sexual identification, and religious affiliations, sameness or a one-size-fits-all approach has no longer been appropriate (Duran et al., 2020). Therefore, how students interact and respond to their campus climate has varied accordingly (Duran et al., 2020).

In most cases, a campus environment can impact student outcomes in critical thinking, moral development, persistence to completion, and a sense of belonging (Duran et al., 2020). This sense of belonging among college students, especially non-Black students at HBCUs, has been expressed as a student's perception of social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or the experience of feeling being cared about, accepted, respected, and valued by peers, administrators, staff, and faculty members on campus (Duran et al., 2020). In contrast, according to Campbell-Whatley et al. (2021), when students' experiences have been negative, they experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty that have often led to feeling unwelcome and unsupported. From a multicultural educational perspective, students who have been different from the majority have experienced marginalization and disempowerment at higher rates, more

so for non-White students attending PWIs than non-Black students attending an HBCU (Campbell-Whatley et al.). Nevertheless, students who actively participate in social and academic activities on campus and intentionally seek to build relationships with other students, administrators, staff, and faculty have a better chance of experiencing a sense of belonging (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). In addition, Gillen-O'Neel (2019) suggested that when an environment is constructed to facilitate belonging, students are more likely to internalize the environment's values and ethics and engage in behaviors consistent with those values and ethics.

Inclusive Excellence

Numerous scholars in higher education throughout the United States have examined the relationship between educational activities and student outcomes, emphasizing key metrics, such as learning or mastery of curriculum and student retention (Williams et al., 2022). Williams et al. found that most of this research on practices promoting student success and inclusivity has focused on PWIs. In addition, most have utilized a one-size-fits-all approach, negating the diversity in campus cultural backgrounds. Williams et al. (2022) also noted that existing literature has highlighted the need for intentional practices geared toward marginalized groups.

Glasener et al. (2019) wrote that while colleges and universities have taken steps to encourage diversity and inclusion, legal judgments and new laws have restricted colleges and universities' ability to meet diversity and inclusion outcomes. As such, institutional leaders have been challenged to create alternatives to develop new strategies to promote diversity and inclusion on their respective campuses (Glasener et al.). In addition, literature has shown that scholars and researchers have explored the legal philosophy used to defend or resist affirmative action by examining how the court's decisions impact diversity (Considine et al., 2017; Glasener et al., 2019).

In June 2003, the Supreme Court heard the *Gratz v. Bollinger* case (i.e., the University of Michigan's admissions affirmative action case), which challenged the affirmative action policy in college admissions (Considine et al., 2017). The court's decision aimed to make diversity and inclusion a central component of educational excellence (Considine et al.). Although the 2003 ruling in *Gratz v. Bollinger* forbade quotas based on race, a subsequent case in the matter of *Grutter v. Bollinger* (referred to as the Michigan law school admissions case) upheld the rights of universities to consider race as one of several relevant factors in the admissions decision (Glasener et al., 2019). Glasener et al. wrote that in response to the high court's decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the AAC&U responded by developing the concept of making diversity an educational resource, not just an outcome (Considine et al.). The AAC&U's initiative included an expanded interpretation of diversity and a commitment to inclusion (Considine et al.). This newly launched initiative defined diversity as individual differences, such as personalities, learning styles, and life experiences (Burnett, 2020; Considine et al.; Glasener et al., 2019). From a social perspective, diversity has included group or social differences, such as race or ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, culture, political stance, religious practices, and affiliations (Considine et al.). The AAC&U's version of inclusion called for an active, intentional, and ongoing commitment to diversity in the curriculum, co-curriculum, and communities intellectually, socially, culturally, and geographically (Considine et al., 2017).

To achieve these goals, the AAC&U called for inclusive excellence to help institutions of higher learning recognize the benefits of diversity and inclusion and the positive impact on institutional quality (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). Also, several studies on student success within various contexts have highlighted practices that foster desired outcomes for institutional excellence (Glasener et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2022). These practices have included pre-

college counseling and support for transitioning into higher education, advancing teacher effectiveness, and improving departmental cultural awareness (Piepenburg & Fervers, 2021; Williams et al., 2022).

Therefore, in conjunction with Piepenburg and Fervers (2021), to help HBCUs specifically, inclusive excellence has involved creating a welcoming campus environment while attending to the cultural differences that learners bring to the educational experience (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021). Furthermore, as a methodology, inclusive excellence has entailed affirming student identity, enhancing student and faculty diversity on campus, examining and re-examining curricular choices, and evaluating instructional methods (Campbell-Whatley et al.). Like Campbell-Whatley et al., Cook-Sather et al. (2021) surmised that inclusive excellence focuses on a student's intellectual and social development, with the intentionality to develop and utilize the institution's resources to enhance student learning. Inclusive excellence has recognized the cultural differences that students bring to the campus and the classroom (Cook-Sather et al.). Inclusive excellence has aimed to create a welcoming environment that engages diversity to support student success (Cook-Sather et al.). Furthermore, as cited by Cook-Sather et al., Dewbury, and Brame (2019) argued, instructors should build a pedagogy around their students' voices and lives by invoking dialogue to create inclusiveness in the classroom. This approach was first introduced by Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1970) argued that faculty should try building a pedagogy centered around the voices and experiences of their students. Likewise, Cook-Sather et al. (2021) suggested that a student-faculty pedagogical alliance where students are co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers with faculty, staff, administrators, and fellow students has the potential to create more significant equity and inclusion opportunities. The student-faculty partnership has made it

possible to bridge gaps between different groups. Thus, students and faculty can work collaboratively to transform the classroom and campus climate (Addy et al., 2020; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Considine et al., 2017; Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Dewsbury & Brame, 2019).

Theory of Departure

Among the theories widely cited for explaining the student departure process in higher education, Tinto's (1993) theory has been one of the most widely cited. Tinto's theory stated that student departure has resulted from a lack of institutional commitment to the student and the inability of the student to integrate into the academic environment. He also argued that academic and social integration have been significant predictors of student retention. Thus, institutions must focus on supporting students to help them integrate better into the academic setting. As a result, it has reached a near paradigmatic status in higher education (Braxton et al., 2000). To further illustrate the importance of student integration, the higher education community has widely accepted and adopted the concept of Tinto's theory. It must be noted, however, that despite the historical popularity of the theory, empirical research has supported only a modest level of its propositions (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton & Lee, 2005). In addition, critics have suggested that because the theory failed to consider cultural variables as influences in learning, it has been particularly problematic when it has been applied to minority students (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Moore & Upcraft, 1990; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999). In the literature on higher education, Tinto (1993) asserted that students must break away from their previous associations and traditions in order to be able to become integrated into the college's social and academic realm. This has been a critical cultural limitation of the theory, which has been well established.

According to Tierney (1992), van Gennep's (1960) transitional model, from which Tinto (1993) derived this concept of breaking away, did not apply to minority college students because it was designed to describe the development of a culture rather than assimilation. Instead, it was intended to describe the development of a culture within a culture. It has been argued that this mistaken extraction of van Gennep's theory could be detrimental to minority students in the sense that it encouraged their separation from cultural traditions and supportive relationships, given the fact that minority students' cultural backgrounds have often been different from the Eurocentric frameworks that have guided norms and values at PWIs. Therefore, Tierney argued that this mistaken extraction could harm minority students. There have also been criticisms that this aspect of Tinto's theory, which was rooted in the Western paradigm of assimilation and enculturation, ignored the concept of bicultural integration, which was the fact that minority students can succeed in college while belonging to both the majority and minority cultures (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon et al., 2000).

Scholars and researchers have developed several theories to understand why students choose to apply to college, why some students leave college, and why others persist until graduation (Choi et al., 2019). Tinto's (1993) theory of departure was a derivative of Durkheim's suicide and cost/benefit analysis theories (Choi et al.). Tinto proposed that a student's background shapes and influences college decisions and academic and social interactions (Choi et al.). Specifically, Tinto suggested that a student's decision and commitment to attend college have been influenced by family background, pre-college schooling, and attributes (Choi et al.). Part of the schema underlying departure theory was that while students matriculate through college, interaction within the educational and social systems involves interactions with peers, administrators, faculty, and staff (Choi et al.). According to Tinto's theory, the more

academically integrated students are, the more likely they will be to persist to graduation (Choi et al.). According to Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2019), academic integration also included grading evaluations, enjoyment of the curriculum, and understanding their role as a student. Hence, the more socially integrated a student is, the more likely they will develop a sense of belonging, strengthening their commitment to stay and graduate (Choi et al.). Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2019) also supported the notion that positive and engaging interactions with faculty, student support services, academic advisors, and administrators have been pertinent indicators of how connected students are to their institution. In addition, according to Choi et al. (2019), Tinto (1993) distinguished between voluntary student exits, when a student transfers to another college or university but is still committed to completion, and forced departure (i.e., dismissal or academic probation), where students who experience academic difficulty are more likely to drop out or be dismissed.

Campus Climate Theory

A welcoming campus climate has entailed accepting the acceptance of non-majority institutional members who bring varied perspectives, experiences, attitudes, and styles that positively affect the campus environment (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). That said, diversity, inclusion, and campus climates have been significant concerns and topics of conversation on HBCU and PWI campuses across the nation (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2012). Diversity, inclusion, and campus climate have influenced conversations among the leadership of institutions of higher learning, including HBCUs (Booker & Campbell-Whatley). African American students have comprised at least 80% of the student population on every HBCU campus (Booker & Campbell-Whatley). Nevertheless, many diverse experiences on HBCU campuses have affected students' sense of belonging (Booker & Campbell-Whatley).

Race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation have all been elements that, in some way, have impacted learning and influenced the cultural environment on HBCU campuses (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). According to Campbell-Whatley et al. (2015), sustaining and ensuring a welcoming environment while integrating a diversity of voices, knowledge, and lived experiences into the educational process has been of the utmost importance on college and university campuses (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). Campus climate has been the interchange between people, processes, and institutional culture and has represented the perceptions and expectations of the campus community (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015).

Early research on campus climate by Rankin and Reason (2005) revealed that some students experience their first interaction with persons of other races on a college campus. Hence, the environment of that campus has impacted learning and social outcomes, which validates the importance of including campus climate in the study of diversity and inclusion. Studies of diversity and inclusion on PWI campuses also showed that non-White students had experienced offensive, hostile, and intimidating behavior, which disrupted learning at higher rates than non-Black students attending an HBCU (Rankin & Reason). Research has also suggested that racial diversification is enhanced when education intentionally addresses issues of race (Rankin & Reason). Furthermore, positive learning and social outcomes will result when the curriculum is culturally sensitive. According to Rankin and Reason, completing a diversity education program decreases racial bias and increases the quality of student experiences, enhancing the overall climate on campus (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

As noted, intentional education has been pivotal in changing and shaping the campus climate. For over 100 years, HBCUs have been very deliberate and focused on using education

to address racism and inequities in society (Crewe, 2017). In this way, HBCUs have continuously used their resources to improve the quality of life for all, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation (Crewe, 2017). According to Jones and Phillips (2020), most studies surrounding the topic of campus climate assessment have revolved around PWIs. Jones and Phillips employed a critical paradigm in their approach to campus climate. The goal was to uncover dominant perspectives that may serve to minimize, undermine, or devalue HBCUs within the discourse of assessment in higher education. Jones and Phillips (2020) aimed to raise awareness and provoke action by highlighting language, approaches, and attitudes that privilege and disempower.

On the other hand, there have also been benefits to the critical paradigm employed by Jones and Phillips (2020). By uncovering dominant perspectives, researchers can identify areas where HBCUs may be disadvantaged. This information can then be used to take action to improve the situation for HBCUs. Additionally, this approach can help raise awareness of the issues facing HBCUs and encourage people to support these institutions.

Summary

While there has been a noticeable increase in research, there has remained a need for additional research on student diversity and inclusion experiences at HBCUs. According to the literature reviewed in this chapter, a significant void has remained in fully understanding non-Black students' lived experiences as students attending an HBCU. Thus, this literature review established that Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration was the ideal framework for examining student persistence to graduation. This theory suggested that students who socially integrate into the campus community are more likely to persist to graduation. Any study focused on HBCU diversity must begin with the acknowledgment that HBCUs have not been monolithic

institutions. Thus, while they all have similar beginnings, they are not a one-size-fits-all ideology.

Furthermore, this literature review revealed that while some Latinx students have experienced microaggressions from peers, faculty, staff, or administrators, most have attributed the personable qualities of faculty, staff, and administration as foundations for a sense of belonging and student success. This literature review also uncovered the disproportionate amount of HBCUs sanctioned by accreditation agencies like SACSCOC and SACS. Examined literature also suggested that HBCUs have experienced coercive isomorphism more than any other type of institution of higher learning. Lastly, this literature review showed that diversity went beyond racial diversity. Other forms of diversity have included SES, sexual orientation and identification, and intra-racial diversity. Future research in diversity and inclusion at HBCUs should provide information that will help institutions address issues on campus climate, student engagement, and inclusion. Future research will also help HBCUs address how students at various academic levels learn about, apply to, and enroll in HBCUs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the diversity and inclusion of non-Black students attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU). This chapter includes a description of the research methodology, design, rationale for the study, role of the researcher, participant selection, instruments, and research procedures. It also defines the data collection instruments, data analysis plans, data synthesis, validity, and reliability and addresses any possible ethical issues for this study. The chapter concludes by discussing procedures for establishing this study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Research Design

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was employed to research the lived experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. Qualitative research was conducted because a problem or issue needed to be explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), exploration was needed to study a group or population, identify variables that could not be easily measured, and hear silenced voices. A qualitative study provides a complex, detailed understanding of a particular problem; in the case of this study, it was ideal to explore and understand the meaning that non-Black students attending an HBCU ascribed to diversity and inclusion experiences at HBCUs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, qualitative research was chosen for this study because it allowed for natural articulation in the participants' language, utilized image data, and implemented various designs.

The qualitative design used in this study was phenomenology, influenced by the works of Saldaña (2021) and van Manen (1994, 1997). Phenomenology allowed an exploration of how

multiple people experienced and interpreted the same phenomenon (Biemel & Spiegelberg, 2017; Birt et al., 2016; Cassara, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1994). Conducting phenomenological research helped to describe the phenomenon's universal essence from individual experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; van Manen, 1994). Furthermore, according to van Manen (1994), phenomenology aims to understand everyday experiences by investigating how it feels to experience a particular phenomenon and describing how humans experience the world without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it (van Manen, 1994). This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to illuminate descriptions and personal meanings of the life experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dowling, 2007; Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 1994).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the integration experiences of non-Black students engaging in diversity and inclusion on campuses of HBCUs?

Sub-Question One

How do non-Black students integrate into the academic systems of their HBCU?

Sub-Question Two

How do non-Black students integrate into the social systems of their HBCU?

Sub-Question Three

How do non-Black students deal with challenges experienced at an HBCU?

Sub-Question Four

What impediments prevent non-Black students from integrating into the academic systems of their HBCU?

Setting and Participants

This section describes where this study was completed and any personal or organizational conditions that may have influenced research participants' experiences within the setting that influenced research results (Check & Schultz, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020). Describing the site in sufficient detail assists the reader to visualize the setting, understand the intended participant profiles, and articulate the criteria for participation in this study (Peoples, 2020).

Site

The chosen site for this study was a private four-year, degree-granting HBCU in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, with an enrollment of approximately 1,170 undergraduate and graduate students. The leadership structure consisted of a board of trustees who oversaw the university's management and advised the university president. The university president acted as chief executive officer (CEO) and was assisted by a chief operating officer (COO) and an executive leadership council. At the time of data collection, this university was ranked among the top 50 of all HBCUs in the United States (U.S. News College Ranking, 2022). In addition, there was a 16:1 student-to-faculty ratio, as 64% of all classes had fewer than 20 students. This site was chosen due to its proximity to the researcher and ease of access to students, staff, and administrators. Moreover, it had a long history of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

Participants

All participants had experiences with the phenomenon at the center of this study; as with most phenomenology studies, general demographic considerations included age, race, religion, ethnic and cultural factors, gender, and political and socioeconomic factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this instance, the criteria for participation centered

around age, enrollment status, and race. Hence, all participants were enrolled full-time in an undergraduate degree program, between the ages of 18 and 24 years, identified with a race other than African American, and lived on campus. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the ideal participant pool ranges from five to 25 participants in a qualitative study. The minimum primary sample size required by the School of Education of Liberty University was 10 participants. This study aimed to collect data from 12–15 non-Black, full-time students attending the institution who were selected to conduct this research.

Recruitment Plan

The researcher implemented a criterion sampling plan to recruit student participants for this study. He set specific criteria by stating explicit inclusive and exclusive criteria that included specifications on setting or location, sample size, age, race, and enrollment status (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Suri, 2011). The location was a private, four-year, degree-granting HBCU in the mid-Atlantic. The targeted participant pool for this study was 12–15 students between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Participants for this study were enrolled full-time as students and self-identified with a race other than African American. The researchers distributed approved flyers (see Appendix A) in common areas and on bulletin boards in each academic building and library.

In addition to posting flyers, the researcher requested assistance from the admissions office and student support services to help identify 10–20 students to create a total participant pool of 15 students for this hermeneutic phenomenology study. From this pool of 15 participants, 14 students were asked to participate in the person-to-person phenomenological interviews. Before students could participate in one-on-one interviews, they went through a prescreening via in-person, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom. Each volunteer participant was informed of the study's purpose and received a consent form (see Appendix B) to sign before participating.

Researcher's Positionality

Most of my educational experiences have been in racially, economically, ethnically, politically, and religiously diverse settings. I served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 8 years after high school. Upon arrival at MCRD Parris Island, I again found myself in a racially, economically, ethnically, politically, and religiously diverse setting. Thus, diversity has always been a part of my life until college. I am a three-time graduate of an HBCU in a mid-Atlantic state. As a 55-year-old man of African American and Native American ethnicity, I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion and Philosophy, a Master of Divinity, and a Master of Arts in Christian Education, each earned from an HBCU. In addition, I have 13 years of employment at an HBCU, which I had chosen as the site for this study. As an HBCU alumnus and current staff member, I recognized that my experiences as a student gave me a unique understanding of HBCU culture, history, practices, pedagogies, and traditions. In addition, as a staff member of the university's library, I had unlimited access to students and resources. My previous experiences as a student in an integrated public school system and as a Marine who served with men and women from all walks of life influenced my perceptions of diversity and inclusion in education. My experiences as an undergraduate student gave me a unique understanding of what it means to be a student at an HBCU. However, my experience as an HBCU student, and not as a student in an integrated public school system, gave me valuable insight into what it was like to attend an HBCU as a non-Black student. Although I could relate in many ways to dealing with financial aid matters, living conditions in the residence halls, eating in the café, and dealing with faculty and staff, I could relate to what it was like attending an HBCU as a non-Black student. Thus, this study provided understanding and insight into the experiences of non-Black students

attending an HBCU. More specifically, this study provided perspectives on diversity and inclusion based on the experiences of non-Black students.

My initial interest in this study's topic of diversity and inclusion grew as I observed increased enrollment of non-Black students each year at the start of each fall semester, with a significant increase in Caucasian, Asian, and Latin students. These trends in enrollment and a reflection on my lived experiences as a source of ontological meaning have also contributed to an increased interest in the growing diversity trends on the campuses of HBCUs. In addition, my university transitioned into a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and an HBCU in the last 2 years. Witnessing the backlash from alumni, community partners, stakeholders, and a small number of current students has also led to the worthiness and need of this study on the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU.

Interpretive Framework

This study sought to illuminate the perceptions of diversity and inclusion of non-Black students attending HBCUs. Therefore, this study's interpretative framework was based mainly on social constructivism with borrowed aspects of a transformative framework and pragmatism. According to authors Creswell and Poth (2018), a social constructivism framework seeks to understand the world in which people live and work. The goal of a qualitative researcher was to gain meaning through the students' life experiences by interpreting constructs as given by the students. Pragmatism allowed for diversity in approach, analysis, and the study context (Creswell & Poth). Approaching this study's topic from a transformative framework allowed for possible solutions to the problem addressed in the study (Creswell & Poth). As a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the focus was on the lived experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. Therefore, incorporating social constructivism as a framework allowed the

participants to provide meaning and constructs based on their positive or negative experiences and actively define a solution (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

I believe that God has a plan and a purpose for everyone. In Jeremiah 29:11, God said, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (*New International Version Bible [NIV]*). We all have a divine purpose and plan customized in alignment with our God-given gifts and talents. Romans 8:29 explained that God, who foreknew us, also predestined us according to His plans and purposes for our lives. Our responsibility as believers was to seek God’s revelation and clarify that calling. We can either act as a conduit to God’s plan or as an obstruction to someone else’s purpose. Every institution, faculty, and staff member in higher education must be a conduit for empowering students and ensuring student success, which begins with creating a campus environment that is welcoming and inclusive of everyone and promotes diversity and inclusion. The goal was to give meaning and validate the multiple realities constructed through students' lived experiences and interactions while honoring their values (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

As Creswell and Poth (2018) described, the ontological assumption is the nature of reality and its characteristics. From a general ontological perspective, multiple realities have based on a study's participants' understanding of reality based on their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth). In this study, each participant had a different perception of their reality and how they imagined student life would be attending an HBCU (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, ontological assumptions implied that different perspectives would be reported as themes developed in the study.

My ontological assumption was that God has a plan and a purpose for our lives, to prosper us and not harm us (*NIV*, 1995, Jer. 1:26–27). In God's will, each of us prospers as believers; however, we have the free will to choose this or that, to go right or left, and so on. God has not and does not act as a puppet master controlling our every action or thought; instead, God allows us to make choices. Often, these choices have hinged on one's knowledge base and logic. For example, for non-Black students, the decision to attend an HBCU may be based on their familiarity with customs and traditions in the African American community. For others, the proximity of the college or university may have served as the basis for their decision. Finally, some students have based their decisions on researching the best fit. In either case, the freedom to choose for ourselves has been the understanding that our choices have consequences, positive or negative. As a Christian, I believe every decision should be made in consultation with God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Epistemological Assumption

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative researcher's assumption calls for the primary investigator (i.e., the researcher) to become as close as possible to their study's participants. Both Cassara (2020) and Creswell and Poth suggested that knowledge is known through an individual's subjective experiences. Therefore, as the researcher, I conducted this study in which the participants lived and studied (Creswell & Poth). Furthermore, Creswell and Poth suggested that the researcher must rely on quotes from participants as evidence and spend quality time with the study participants. Spending quality time with participants in their context has been the best way to understand their patterns and perceptions. Doing so helped me understand the why of a particular thought or perception as a researcher. As Creswell and Poth

(2018) recommended, embedding and immersing myself in my participants' space was an excellent way to gain firsthand information.

Axiological Assumption

In axiological assumptions, the researcher acknowledges that biases exist concerning the study context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In quantitative research, the researcher's values and biases are not disclosed, leaving the reader unaware of their presence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). On the contrary, researchers reveal their values and potential biases in qualitative studies. Researchers identify their positionality within the context and setting of their research. With the awareness that this study concerned HBCUs, personal biases and value-laden thoughts and perceptions were acknowledged. At the same time, this study considered the experiences of non-Black students on HBCU campuses and the possibility of being influenced by personal experiences as a graduate of an HBCU. Nonetheless, it was understood that personal experiences during that time differed from those of the students in this study. Therefore, any personal biases and values were made known in my research and bracketed in reporting others' realities.

Researcher's Role

As a phenomenological qualitative researcher, I acted as an unbiased human instrument interviewer, investigator, group facilitator, and conductor of an ethical study. As a researcher in this study, I employed a rigorous data collection procedure and analyzed the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, my role included thoroughly discussing and disclosing the purpose and use of collected data (Creswell & Poth). Finally, I protected participant anonymity, built trust, respected site restrictions, and minimized potential disruptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After all the interviews and group discussions, I analyzed student interviews and focused on group data.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers must protect participants' identities from identifiable information during data analysis. Furthermore, the bible instructed all believers in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, which employed us to aim for what is honorable in the Lord's sight and the sight of man, to show themselves in all respects to be a model of good works and, in our teaching, show integrity (*NIV*, 1995, 2 Cor. 8:21, Titus 2:7). Therefore, as a Christian researcher, I protected my participants during data collection and analysis.

Procedures

I conducted this hermeneutic phenomenology study in seven steps. First, after successfully defending my proposal, I applied to the institutional review board (IRB) for approval from Liberty University (see Appendix C). Second, I sought written approval from the IRB of the university where I conducted my study (see Appendix D). Third, upon receiving site approval and final IRB approval, I solicited student participation as set forth by the criteria outlined in Chapter Three's participant section. I used emails (see Appendix E), flyers (see Appendix F), and social media posts (see Appendix A) for recruitment. Fourth, I then informed prospective student participants of the study's purpose and provided a clear understanding of their role in the study. I also provided each participant with a consent form (see Appendix B) that outlined the purpose of the study and their role as a participant in greater detail, revealing measures put into place to protect their identity. Fifth, I conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews with students on the campus of the study's chosen site. Individual interviews featured open-ended questions (see Appendix G) and were video-recorded to capture nonverbal cues and voice inflections to ensure transcription accuracy. I then transcribed each interview with the aid of Otter.ai transcription software. Sixth, after conducting individual interviews, I conducted a

focus group interview, which allowed participants to provide additional information forgotten during their initial individual interviews.

Participants were asked open-ended questions to create dialogue (see Appendix H). Group interviews were also video-recorded to capture body language, facial expressions, and voice inflections, revealing possible shifts in emotions. Seventh, participants kept a prompt-led journal for 1 week (see Appendix I). Each participant responded to each prompt using 500 words or less. At the end of the week, journals were collected and transcribed. Each participant was given a chance to examine their transcription for accuracy. The seventh and final step involved analysis and coding data collected from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and prompted journals. From this data, I identified patterns, themes, and insights discovered during data collection that contributed to the study's findings.

Data Collection Plan

Before the data collection began, I informed all participants of the study's purpose, roles, measures to protect their identity, and ethical guidelines. I gave each participant a consent form to sign, after which the data collection began. The data process consisted of one-on-one interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing. A total of 14 students from the sample participant pool participated in one-on-one interviews. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was video-recorded for subsequent transcription. Next, seven students participated in a 45-minute focus group interview, which was video-recorded for subsequent transcription. In the last data collection method, all students participated in protocol writing by responding to a writing prompt in 500 words or less. The instruments used in this study consisted of semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix G), semi-structured focus group interviews (see Appendix H), and protocol-writing prompts (see Appendix I). The researcher used semi-structured

interview questions for all participants (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Harris, 2021). The data collected documented participants' experiences as non-Black students attending an HBCU.

Individual Interviews

Gathering data typically utilizes interviews, according to van Manen's (1990) data collection approach (Barreto et al., 2018; Zahavi, 2020). Central to van Manen's data collection was the call for researchers to avoid asking guiding or leading questions. Although the objective was to understand how students experienced events and life occurrences, it was vitally important to the process to allow them to express themselves authentically without being unduly influenced or constrained by the researcher's/interviewer's research agenda (van Manen, 1990; Zahavi, 2020).

This study's approach to individual interviews involved semi-structured interview questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions used during individual interviews focused on the participants' cultural context, family influences, reasons for attending college, and expectations as non-Black students attending an HBCU. Table 1 shows the individual interview questions asked of each participant.

Table 1

Open-Ended Individual Interview Questions

1. What is your cultural background? SQ1
2. Please describe your experiences prior to enrolling in college. SQ1
3. Tell me about your reasons for attending an HBCU. SQ1
4. How would you describe your experiences on campus? SQ4
5. What opportunities do you find in attending an HBCU? SQ4
6. What activities do you engage in that allow you to integrate into the campus environment socially? SQ2
7. How do you integrate into an HBCU academic environment? SQ1
8. What have your experiences been like in the classroom? SQ1
9. Describe how your professors manage inclusion in the classroom. SQ1
10. What has your institution done to promote cultural diversity and inclusion? SQ4
11. What activities or programs would you recommend to create an environment for non-Black students to thrive socially? SQ2
12. What activities or programs would you recommend to help non-Black students thrive in the classroom? SQ1
13. How do you cope with the challenges you experienced as a non-Black student attending an HBCU? SQ3
14. What kind of social environment would you recommend to leadership to attract and benefit non-Black students? SQ4
15. What kind of academic environment would you recommend to leadership to attract and benefit non-Black students? SQ4

16. Describe any support you have received from your institution to integrate socially into an HBCU environment fully. SQ4
17. Describe any support you have received from your institution to integrate academically into an HBCU environment fully. SQ4
18. What else would you like to share regarding our discussion on your experiences as a non-Black student attending an HBCU that we have not discussed? CRQ

The questions presented in this interview aimed to understand and provide meaning to participants' lived experiences on an HBCU campus as non-Black student body members. The first three questions set a foundation for understanding the participants' cultural background, beliefs, influences, and possible biases. Questions 4–7 were used to obtain information on participant descriptions of their campus experiences in the classroom (i.e., formal experiences) and on-campus social experiences (i.e., informal experiences). Questions 8 and 9 reiterated participants' student-to-student and faculty-student interactions in the classroom. Questions 10–12 focused on institutional roles in creating opportunities for diversity and inclusion. Lastly, Questions 13–18 asked for recommendations to improve diversity and inclusion opportunities from a student perspective.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were one of the most efficient ways to collect data, and according to Peoples (2020), they provided distinct advantages over individual interviews in the sense that participants behave differently around their peers than alone during a one-to-one interview. Focus groups also served as a source of validation or conflict depending on what participants shared within the group (Peoples, 2020). In this study, a focus group interview allowed participants to draw on each other's experiences, which allowed for a more open discussion of

topics, which led to more rich data being collected. Additionally, focus groups provided insight into how the opinions of a group may differ from the opinions of individuals. Researchers need to remember that when using focus groups as a source of triangulation for individual interviews, the focus group protocol may need to be modified after the study is underway to follow up on the initial data findings from individual interviews as effectively as possible. This way, researchers can ensure that the focus group can explore individual opinions more deeply and thoroughly. The focus group can also provide a platform for individuals to express their opinions in a safe and open space. For instance, the focus group in this study created a space where participants could openly discuss the topics they were most passionate about without fear of judgment or ridicule. Table 2 shows the focus group questions.

Table 2

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. What made you decide to choose a college? SQ1
2. What role did your family play in choosing a college to attend? SQ1
3. What ultimately led you to choose an HBCU? SQ1
4. What have you experienced in the classroom? SQ1
5. How does your professor make the classroom experience inclusive? SQ1
6. What has your institution done to promote cultural diversity and inclusion? SQ4
7. What activities or programs would you recommend to create an environment for non-Black students to thrive socially? SQ2
8. How do you cope with the challenges you experienced as a non-Black student attending an HBCU? SQ3
9. What kind of academic environment would you recommend to leadership to attract and benefit non-Black students? SQ4
10. Describe any support you have received from your institution to integrate socially into an HBCU environment fully. SQ4
11. What can the university do better to improve diversity and inclusion on campus?

These questions allowed me to take note of any issues that emerged and expand the dialogue to gather additional information not shared during individual interviews. This focus group interview provided an opportunity to highlight relatable stories and perspectives while avoiding embellishing to ensure the integrity of the research. Questions 1–3 provided an understanding of what went into the participants' decision-making processes, the family’s role and impact on the decision to attend college, and enrollment choice. Questions 4–6 explored

participants' knowledge of HBCUs and expectations before their arrival on campus. Questions 7–11 were used to gauge students' perceptions of the university's programs and the implementation that enhanced or hindered diversity and inclusion for non-Black students.

Protocol Writing

The third data collection method was protocol writing. According to van Manen (1997), the most straightforward way of researching a human experience is to have individuals write their experiences. Protocol writing generated original text where I obtained firsthand descriptions of human experiences, complementary to the individual and focus group interviews. According to Seguin et al. (2022) and van Manen, protocol writing proved to be an excellent accompaniment to individual interviews, as it enriched participant experiences by giving them more time to write, edit, and submit responses to prompts. In this study, each participant provided rich data through reflection, capturing nuances that may not have been captured during one-on-one or group interviews (van Manen, 1997).

To implement this data collection method, I recruited students using emails (see Appendix E) and flyers (see Appendix A). The sampling method used to select students was criterion sampling, using the exact requirements I used to recruit individual and group interview participants. I met with each selected student face-to-face to discuss the study's purpose, their roles as a participant, and expectations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seguin et al., 2022). Students confirmed their participation by signing the participant consent form. Each student participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and the integrity of the study (Creswell & Poth; Seguin et al.; van Manen, 1997). Students had 1 week to respond to the writing prompt (see Appendix I) describing their experiences regarding diversity and inclusion on campus and review, reflect, and rewrite (Seguin et al., 2022). At the end of the week, I

collected all the journals, organized them, and secured them in a locked file cabinet (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was a sample protocol-writing prompt:

> In 500 words or less, describe your experiences as a non-Black student attending an HBCU. Please include classroom experiences and interactions with other students, professors, administration, faculty, and staff. Describe your level of comfort socially and academically. Also, based on your experiences, describe what the university can do better to improve diversity and inclusion on campus.

Data Analysis

As presented in the preceding section, three data collection methods were utilized to collect data; therefore, this hermeneutic phenomenological study of diversity and inclusion at HBCUs employed Saldaña's (2021) two-cycle coding to analyze data collected during individual and focus group interviews. As suggested by Saldaña, the first cycle implemented eclectic coding by employing in-vivo coding to concentrate on the words and phrases of participants and process coding, which identified participant activities with gerunds (i.e., words ending in "ing"). These terms or short phrases guided the next cycle of two-cycle coding, which used descriptive coding to compress data from the first cycle into sets, themes, or categories in the second cycle. Data patterns were frequent occurrences and regularities. This strategy went beyond pattern recognition to generate meanings encapsulating the phenomenon's essence (Saldaña, 2021).

As for the third data collection method, protocol writing, after rereading and rewriting participants' journals, I returned each transcription to each student to review for accuracy (Birt et al., 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Through member checking, participants validated the integrity of their statements. Next, I implemented Saldaña's two-cycle coding by employing descriptive and pattern coding in the second cycle. I categorized the codes from the second level of codes, and

from the categories, I identified emergent patterns that led to the discovery of themes (Saldaña, 2021).

Data synthesis in this study integrated interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA), which emphasized individual experience investigation (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1997, 2016). The central tenet of the IPA method was to investigate individual experiences before producing generalizations. The utilization of IPA allowed me to synthesize the results of previous analyses by integrating and comparing codes, themes, subthemes, narratives, and categories on a higher level to identify and investigate emerging nuances (Noon; Pietkiewicz & Smith; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1997, 2016). Integrating and cross-comparing data allowed me to create a coherent and comprehensive account and interpretation of the experiences of the study's participants. Through this synthesis process, I looked for answers to the study's central research question and purpose (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; van Manen, 1997).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the foundational concepts and terminology that established the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. These terms were credibility: the extent to which a study's findings accurately describe the phenomenon as experienced and described by the participants; transferability: showing that the findings apply to another context; dependability: the findings of this study are consistent and easily duplicated in other studies; and confirmability: the extent to which the study's findings result from data received from participants and not researcher bias, agendas or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility referred to the audience's belief that the way a researcher conducted the study and the analytic processes and outcomes of the work have resulted in findings that make sense and persuade readers that an influential or trustworthy job has been performed (Saldaña, 2021). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility referred to the extent to which a study's findings accurately describe a phenomenon as experienced and described by the study's participants. I established credibility through triangulation during this study, generating detailed, thick descriptions, performing member-checking, and utilizing prolonged engagement. Lastly, I used self-reflection to evaluate my findings and interpretations for potential influence as an alumnus and current employee of an HBCU (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Triangulation

In qualitative research, triangulation uses multiple methods or data sources to understand a phenomenon (Natow, 2019) comprehensively. Triangulation helped increase this study's credibility and ensured its quality (Natow, 2019; Renz et al., 2018). Thus, I incorporated triangulation using multiple data collection methods concerning the same phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 2014, 2016). The methods chosen for this study were in-person interviews, a focus group interview, and prompted journals.

Generating Rich Descriptions

I used detailed and thick descriptions of participants and the study's setting to establish credibility. By generating a detailed, thick description of the participants and the study's setting, I transported readers to the setting and gave the discussion an element of shared experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results were more realistic and richer

using detailed descriptions of the participants and the study's setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member Checking

Member checking was another qualitative research technique to establish credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data, interpretations, and conclusions were shared with the participants to maintain data integrity (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell; Lincoln & Guba). Member checking allowed this study's participants to clarify their intentions, correct errors, and provide additional information as necessary (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell; Harris, 2021; Lincoln & Guba). Therefore, member checking built confidence in this study's truth. Thus, I employed member checking, which was used to explore the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell; Lincoln & Guba; Lindsay, 2018). In addition, member checking helped to ensure that the data results aligned with participants' lived experiences as non-Black students attending HBCUs (Harris, 2021; Lincoln & Guba). Furthermore, member checking also allowed participants to recant their statements concerning their lived experiences shared during their interviews (Birt et al., 2016; Harris, 2021; Lincoln & Guba; Lindsay, 2018). Finally, member checking allowed participants to check or contest their understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Harris, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged Engagement

Long-term engagement entailed establishing rapport with study participants and the site's gatekeepers, learning the culture and context, and checking for misinformation from distortions introduced by themselves or informants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My position at the study's site provided ample time to observe and

interact with participants, immerse in the context, and spend a significant amount of time with the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merrian & Tisdell, 2015).

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is synonymous with generalizability or external validity. Transferability is a technique used by ethnographic researchers; however, other qualitative researchers have also used it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ness, 2020). Researchers establish transferability by providing readers with evidence that the study's findings apply to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Creswell & Creswell; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1997). In this study, I established transferability using thick descriptions that provided a robust and detailed account of the lived experiences collected during data collection. Thick descriptions were used to make explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts of the experiences described by my student participants. For instance, I provided details about the site and settings where the interviews occurred, the participants, and the methods used in data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1997).

Dependability

Dependability addressed whether this study’s methodology was consistent and reliable over time and among other researchers and methods (Miles et al., 2020). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), creating credibility is a primary means of establishing dependability. I determined the study’s dependability by instituting rigorous data collection and analysis procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al.). The plan for data collection utilized triangulation by conducting individual interviews, a focus group interview, and prompted

journals. I used member checking to ensure the accuracy and dependability of this study's credibility. In addition, an inquiry audit helped to ensure study dependability as well. In this case, my dissertation committee, which was not involved in data collection or analysis, examined the data collection, data analysis, and research results to affirm the accuracy of the findings and ensure that the collected data supported the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability denoted that the interview transcripts and participant journals interpreted and represented participant perspectives and experiences described during interviews and written in their journals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To determine the confirmability of the study, I included an inquiry audit trail (Creswell & Creswell; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kimotho & Macharia, 2020). Two college professors were asked to audit the research process and findings to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Creswell; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kimotho & Macharia). The audited data consisted of the raw data from the interviews and journals, as well as transcriptions of each (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kimotho & Macharia, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This study's ethical considerations concentrated on protecting the rights and identities of the participants, preserving the reputation and brand of the study's site, and maintaining the integrity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1997). This study's ethical considerations included acquiring IRB approval from Liberty University and the proposed site. The recruitment of student participants involved using preapproved emails, flyers, and social media posts. After establishing an ideal potential pool size of participants, I met with each student to explicate the study's topic, the purpose of conducting the study, and their

role as participants in the study (Creswell & Creswell; Creswell & Poth; van Manen). I disclosed potential risks, if any, and informed each participant of their right to quit the study at any time without penalty (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen). According to van Manen, as a researcher, I remained aware of the possibility that my research may have triggered specific effects on the students participating in the study. As a result of their participation, there was a possibility that some may have experienced discomfort, anxiety, false hope, guilt, and self-doubt, and the research method used in this study could have lingering effects (van Manen). As for the research site, recruitment practices, retention policies, and student engagement practices may have changed due to the study's findings (van Manen, 1997).

Permissions

The permissions required for this study included applying to Liberty University's IRB and obtaining initial approval (see Appendix C). I then requested site approval from the gatekeepers and IRB approval (see Appendix D). Initially, I received verbal approval, then full approval after receiving IRB approval from Liberty University. According to the proposed site's gatekeepers, I could apply for full site approval with conditional approval from Liberty University's IRB. Once I received the study site's written approval (see Appendix D), I applied for and obtained Liberty University's full study approval. To complete this study, I was also required to receive signed consent forms from all the student participants.

Other Participants Protections

During each preliminary interview with each participant, I informed them that their involvement in this study was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw without penalty at any moment. I only referred to the site of this study as *this institution, in this institution, at this institution, this HBCU*, or *at this HBCU* to maintain institution confidentiality.

Student participants were assigned a pseudonym for use in this study to maintain the confidentiality of their identity. Furthermore, I used a locked safe in my office to store and hold audio cassettes, videotapes, and written journals used in protocol writing for potential use in the future expansion of this study.

Summary

This study sought to investigate and gain knowledge of the lived experiences of non-Black students currently enrolled in an HBCU. Once I had obtained the necessary approvals, I conducted individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing as the data collection techniques. As a result, triangulation was then achieved. The collected data was evaluated and synthesized in the ensuing steps, enabling me to discover and report this study's findings. The findings shed light on the research phenomenon that served as the basis for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU) in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The purpose of this chapter was to present the study's findings attained through data collection and thorough analysis. This study provided a descriptive summation of each participant, themes, and subthemes. The data was collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and responses to a protocol-writing prompt answering the central research question. The responses from each participant, who recounted personal experiences as non-Black students attending a small private HBCU, revealed the following themes: academic integration experiences, social integration, and stress management. The findings attained from the investigation are summarized in the concluding section of this chapter.

Participants

Criterion sampling was implemented to recruit student participants for this study. I explicitly articulated exclusive criteria to generate a pool of prospective participants. Fourteen undergraduates enrolled in a private, four-year, degree-granting HBCU in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region were chosen to participate in this study. All participants identified as other than solely African American and were enrolled full-time, as required. Demographic information about the participants included their age, gender, classification, and racial identity. Nine females and five males comprised the participant pool. Table 3 provides demographic information about the participants.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Classification	Race/Ethnicity
Amma	20 years	Female	Senior	Ghanaian
Anabella	19 years	Female	Freshman	Multiracial
Antonio	21 years	Male	Sophomore	Hispanic/Latino
Bart	21 years	Male	Sophomore	Caucasian
Beth	19 years	Female	Sophomore	Caucasian
Celia	20 years	Female	Junior	Multiracial
Colton	19 years	Male	Freshman	Pacific Islander
Gabriela	24 years	Female	Senior	Honduran
Hana	21 years	Female	Freshman	Caucasian
Hyiab	23 years	Female	Senior	Eritrean
Katerina	24 years	Female	Senior	Caucasian
Kevin	18 years	Male	Freshman	Biracial
Lisa	21 years	Female	Senior	Biracial
Pierre	19 years	Male	Freshman	Bahamian

Amma

Amma was a 20-year-old Ghanaian female and a senior. Amma moved to the United States at 14 years old with a trusted family member. Growing up, Amma was considered intellectually advanced for her age. She skipped over a couple of grades per her academic aptitude. Her advancement caused her problems when enrolling in high school in the United States. Amma stated that because she was only 16 years old in her senior year of high school, teachers often accused her of cheating and tested her over and over because they did not believe that she was where she was supposed to be academically for her age.

Anabella

Anabella was a 19-year-old, first-year freshman and self-identified as a multiracial female of African American, German, and Native American ethnicities. She grew up in a predominately White community and attended a diverse suburban high school. According to Anabella, making friends was difficult because of their family's blended ethnicities. As a result of the racism and treatment she received in high school because of having multiple ethnicities, Anabella was diagnosed with depression, for which she received counseling.

Antonio

Antonio was a 21-year-old male, sophomore Latino whose parents were of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent. Antonio stated that he grew up in a small, tight-knit family and community. He was the youngest of three siblings and grew up in an area where the temptations to go down the wrong road tested him daily. To avoid the same pitfalls that many of his friends gave in to, Antonio structured his life around football to escape his environment.

Bart

Bart was a 21-year-old sophomore who identified as a White male of French, German, and Norwegian descent. He was also a member of the marching band and grew up in a small, rural, predominately White town of approximately 300 residents. His high school comprised a 50/50 mix of White and Black students. When asked what influenced his decision to attend an HBCU, Bart indicated that his high school band director had a close relationship with his current director, as the two bands worked together often. Following his acceptance into the school, he received a scholarship for the band.

Beth

Beth was a 19-year-old Caucasian female sophomore on the university's softball team. She grew up in a small, racially mixed, middle-class, rural community where she attended a predominantly Black public high school. She stated that throughout her academic journey, she was always in the minority. When asked what influenced her college decision, Beth stated that softball was the main reason. She was initially recruited to play softball for another university, but as things did not go as hoped, she decided to transfer to another school. As Beth looked at other schools to transfer to, she said that she had prior relationships with some of the athletes, which led her to transfer to this university.

Celia

Celia was a 20-year-old junior, who self-identified as a multiracial female of African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Native American ethnicities. She grew up in a small rural town and attended a predominately White high school. Initially, she did not know anything about HBCUs. When asked what influenced her decision to attend an HBCU, she indicated that it was the better choice financially, having received an academic scholarship to attend.

Colton

Colton was a 19-year-old freshman male of German, Irish, and Filipino heritage. His mother was Caucasian and German, and his father was Filipino. Colton stated that his birth certificate identified him as a Pacific Islander. When asked to describe his previous experiences, Colton stated that he grew up in a suburban community that was racially diverse. The high school he attended was equally as diverse as his neighborhood. He described himself as an energetic kid who got along with everyone, which he attributed to growing up in a diverse

community and attending diversified schools; he stated that this was pivotal in his being able to navigate his way through life.

Gabriela

Gabriela was a 24-year-old senior from Honduras. At 12 years old, Gabriela and her family migrated to the United States. She was a first-generation college student. As a child, Gabriela had difficulty linguistically adjusting to her new home. The language barrier also made attending school difficult. She stated that she liked the campus environment, the programs offered, and the student-to-teacher ratio that this institution offered.

Hana

Hana was a 21-year-old freshman, who self-identified as a female of Caucasian, Korean, and Lithuanian heritage. As a child, Hana grew up in a diverse community and was the oldest of three siblings. She was an honor student and participated in an International Baccalaureate Organization (IB) program, which offered college-level courses that earned the highest weighted GPA for students. Hana's placement in the IB program allowed her to attend a different high school from the one for which she was zoned, which turned out to be a predominantly urban Black high school. Hana also received an athletic scholarship for softball, which undoubtedly motivated her enrollment into an HBCU.

Hyiab

Hyiab was a 23-year-old female senior from Eritrea, the middle child of three siblings, and a first-generation college student. Hyiab's oldest sibling was born in Eritrea, and she and her youngest sister were born in the United States. She grew up in a mixed community and attended a diverse high school. Hyiab was initially enrolled in 2019 and withdrew in 2020 due to COVID-19. She described her initial experience as unique, as there was much to do on campus.

Katerina

Katerina was a 24-year-old senior, who self-identified as a Caucasian female of Germanic, Yugoslavian, and Czechoslovakian heritage. She was a second-generation American citizen and a first-generation college student majoring in music. She grew up in a multicultural community and attended a diverse suburban high school where she participated in the marching band. Katerina initially enrolled in a PWI but withdrew after the first semester, citing having financial constraints, lacking support, not liking the culture, and feeling like she was just a number.

Kevin

Kevin was an 18-year-old freshman male whose parents were from the Caribbean and was a theater and visual arts major. He was also a member of the university's marching band. According to Kevin, the marching band served as an outlet that allowed him to integrate successfully into the social environment on campus. From an academic standpoint, Kevin conveyed that the professors made it comfortable for him to learn and get to know them.

Lisa

Lisa was a 21-year-old biracial female who identified as other or mixed race. Lisa grew up in a mixed, urban neighborhood and attended a diverse school. She was a first-generation college student. When asked about her decision to attend this HBCU, Lisa cited the availability of resources and her family and friends. Initially, Lisa planned to attend college at an institution on the West Coast but concluded that she did not want to move that far away from her family and friends back home.

Pierre

Pierre was a 19-year-old freshman male from the Bahamas. Although Pierre grew up on the islands, he described his childhood as heavily influenced by British culture and customs. He stated that many Bahamian laws and traditions aligned with the UK's. Pierre said he and his family would travel to the United States every 2–3 years. As for his educational experiences, Pierre described them as being up-to-par with the U.S. educational systems, but since his country was once a British colony, things were more British-centric. The schools were not mixed, as the large island population was Black, and the schools were also predominantly Black. Pierre received a full academic scholarship covering all his expenses.

Results

This section of Chapter Four covers three major themes and seven subthemes derived from the data acquired through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing. Each method produced rich data from which each theme and subtheme was revealed. The three major themes that emerged were academic integration, social interaction, and stress management, which resulted from careful transcription, evaluation, and data analysis. Each theme aligned with Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration, with academic and social integration as the central tenets of this theory. Participant and focus group interviews were recorded securely, free from interruption, and maintained participant anonymity. Each interview was transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. Saldaña's two-cycle coding implemented eclectic coding using in-vivo coding that concentrated on words and phrases. Participants' responses to the protocol-writing prompts were written using Microsoft Word and emailed using Microsoft Outlook. After carefully reading and rereading interview transcripts and protocol-writing responses, a transcribed copy was returned to each participant for member checking for

accuracy and then uploaded into NVivo 14. Each transcription and writing response was uploaded to NVivo 14 to organize the first- and second-level codes. The comprehensive categorization of this chapter's main themes and subthemes was based on the protocol responses, focus group interview, and individual interviews that addressed the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending a private, mid-Atlantic HBCU. Table 4 presents each theme and subtheme identified during data analysis (see also Appendix J).

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Academic Integration	Academic Commitment
	Classroom Environment
Social Integration	Extracurricular Activities
	Previous Diversity Experiences
	Prior Connections and Friendships
Stress Management	Alone Time
	Staying Busy
	Talking to Someone They Trust

Academic Integration

Using data triangulation, academic integration was identified as a significant thematic element influencing students' intellectual growth, academic achievement, and classroom satisfaction (Tinto 1973, 1995). A total of 98 academic accomplishments and integration codes were identified, with 13 of the 14 participants in this study citing experiences associated with academic integration. As non-Black students attending a private mid-Atlantic HBCU, students commented on their experiences during the focus group, individual interviews, and protocol-

writing submissions. A detailed examination found two subthemes supporting academic integration as a significant theme. These themes were academic commitment and classroom environment.

Academic Commitment

Academic commitment emerged as a subtheme across all three data collection methods by 13 out of 14 participants, and 39 codes were identified during data analysis. Academic commitment as a subtheme offered valuable insights into the participants' intellectual growth, academic achievements, and positive encounters. Every data acquisition method revealed students' commitment and discipline to achieve their objectives and succeed. For instance, Amma, Antonio, Hyiab, and Katerina were all first-generation college students who performed at high levels throughout their education. Each challenged themselves and remained committed to performing at the same level of excellence, and as first-generation students, they each expressed an unwavering desire to make their families proud. Therefore, receiving anything lower than a "C" was unacceptable, as failure was not an option. Each of these participants demonstrated an unwavering determination to achieve academic excellence. Both Amma and Katerina conveyed a profound enthusiasm for acquiring knowledge and a thirst for new knowledge. Antonio stated during his interview, "I was excited about this opportunity. It allows me to complete something my siblings were not necessarily incapable of doing but lacked the motivation to do." As a young man, Antonio's mother reminded him that his place in the world would be determined by how he confronted challenges and his willingness to accept criticism. During her interview, Amma said, "I always wanted to be a doctor, an ophthalmologist. As a child, I was born with strabismus; as a result, I did not have peripheral vision and had to turn my head to see instead of just side-eyeing." Her parents never trusted doctors to fix her problems until she moved to America,

where she was able to have surgery to correct her vision. When asked by her professor to think about something that impacted her life and how it influenced her career goals and future, she instantly thought about her experience with strabismus. This life experience served as a reminder of why she chose to become an ophthalmologist and as motivation to remain focused and committed to her academic goals.

Hyiab shared that her parents were stringent regarding education. She and her siblings were constantly reminded that they were not in school to make friends but that they were there to get an education, and that was it. Hyiab and her siblings were not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities if their grades did not meet their parent's expectations. The study habits that Hyiab developed during high school followed her into her college experience, where she continued to perform at a high level. When describing her aspirations to achieve academic excellence, Hana stated that she had always enjoyed learning. Her love and quest for knowledge resulted in her acceptance into several honors programs. Hana was accepted into the Advanced College Academy for Social Sciences and the IB program. Each of these programs was designed to provide students with an education that enabled them to make sense of the world's complexities and equip them with the skills needed to take responsible actions for the future (IB Organization, 2019). Hana described, “Due to the type of student I am, I always asked and answered many questions; for instance, if our science teacher asked a question and the class was silent, I would give it a minute and then answer it.” Hana stated that her classmates referred to her as a know-it-all. Like Hyiab, Hana carried her study habits and commitment to excellence from high school into her college experience, where she has been on the dean's list since her first year. Participant academic commitment was also evidenced by the fact that 10 of the 14 participants were awarded scholarships. Data analysis revealed that Amma, Antonio, Bart, Beth,

Celia, Colt, Hana, Katerina, Kevin, and Pierre received academic-based scholarships. In addition, Katerina, Kevin, and Bart each received scholarships for their participation in the band. Colton and Antonio also received additional scholarships to play football, while Hana and Beth received additional scholarships to play softball. Amma, Celia, and Pierre were the only participants to receive scholarships based on their academic performances in high school.

Classroom Environment

The second subtheme that emerged from data analysis focused on the classroom environment, which supported academic integration as a significant theme. Eight of the 14 participants directly referenced the classroom environment as a critical factor in their academic integration. There were 59 codes generated across all three data collection instruments. According to these participants, the small class sizes made it easier to adjust to being a minority in the classroom and the college curriculum. Bart and Pierre noted that the most significant benefit that helped them was having a small class size. According to Amma, Beth, Hana, Hyiab, and Pierre, the student-to-teacher ratio provided them with more access to their professors, where they could receive additional assistance as needed. Because of such access to professors, Hana acquired an internship with a professor because the student-to-teacher ratio allowed her more access to her science professor to the point where her work in her class stood out. Lisa replied that teachers created a more favorable learning environment with relatively few students in each class. Anabella wrote in her protocol response that she loved that her professors did not discriminate, as they were not concerned with her color but solely with educating her. Beth also stated that every professor she has had has been kind and compassionate, creating an environment where everyone was accepted and encouraged to share. Participants agreed that the faculty made no distinction between herself and her classmates, which she truly valued and

appreciated. Pierre wrote in his protocol response that his professors were always available and that he never had to wait longer than 48 hours to receive a reply to his emails or messages. Pierre pointed out that small class sizes made connecting with professors and creating solid bonds easier versus classes with more than 20 students.

Class Participation. The classroom environment created by the faculty encouraged class participation. During data analysis, participants referenced class participation as essential in creating an atmosphere in the classroom where all students fully participated in the learning process. Class participation allowed students to develop ideas and work together to solve problems. According to the theory of student integration, the more students are engaged in class, the more likely they will succeed (Tinto, 1973, 1995). Through class participation, there were times when students became the teacher, and the teacher became the student, enriching the learning experience (Freire, 1970). Amma and Pierre agreed, saying they gained the most out of class when everyone participated. Participants did note that at the beginning of the semester, professors would make class participation mandatory by making it count toward their grades until it became second nature to the class. Amma remembered one of her professors telling the class that everyone would start with an "A," but to finish with an "A," they had to contribute to all in-class discussions. Celia added that one of her professors would go down the attendance roll and call on every student to reinforce class participation.

Positive Experiences with Professors. Classroom participation also led to positive experiences with professors, which surfaced during students' accounts of their classroom encounters. The relationship between students and professors had a direct effect on student achievement. Students' performances were enhanced by their ability to establish meaningful connections with their professors, as they perceived that they were invested in their growth. It

also deserved to be noted that participants who developed a positive relationship with their professors preferred those classes over those with no connection. As a result, participants typically worked harder and put forth more effort in those classes. As previously stated, Hana obtained an internship with a professor with whom she shared a strong relationship. Amma, Katerina, Anabella, Celia, and Antonio observed that most of their professors were considerate and sympathetic. Amma shared a personal experience following the death of her uncle, who was also her guardian. As a result of his death and because she had no other family in the United States with her, she had to provide for herself through exhausting employment that caused her to miss class. Amma stated that following her uncle's passing, she went to the office of a trusted professor and shared what she was going through. At the time, she said that she was deeply distressed and highly embarrassed. She explained that the situation was causing her to miss classes because she was required to work long hours during the same time her classes were scheduled. After hearing her story, Amma stated that the professor provided her with a list of resources, including links to counseling services, rent assistance resources, and other contacts for help. The professor also persuaded her other professors to give her incompletes instead of failing her, which allowed her additional time to complete any missing assignments. Celia shared an experience where a professor candidly addressed their feelings as minority students, recognizing that they were dealing with other concerns outside of class as non-Black students on campus. Celia said that her professors were empathetic and sympathetic to their emotions and concerns. Celia expressed her gratitude to a professor for permitting her and her classmates to ask questions regarding personal matters, including their academic trajectory and familial relationships. During the group interview, Celia, Katerina, Kevin, and Lisa concurred that most of their professors were genuinely concerned with their mental and emotional health.

Furthermore, Amma, Anabella, Antonio, Colt, Kevin, Lisa, and Pierre's positive interactions were supported by their professors' ability to foster an inclusive classroom environment by ensuring that everyone was given space to express their opinions and feel valued and respected. Amma said that one of her professors addressed pre-med students as doctors with their last names to sow positive affirmation and speak life into their potential. Antonio recounted how one of his professors required every student to stand up and give the class their name, state, degree and major, personal interests and hobbies, and classification. At the start of each class, the professor would randomly call on a student and ask them to provide the class with the name of a classmate, their hometown, their principal, two of their interests or hobbies, and their classification to create peer-to-peer connections.

Social Integration

Data from individual interviews, the focus group interview, and protocol-writing responses supported social integration. During data analysis, all 14 participants discussed their social integration experiences as non-Black students at an HBCU. When asked to share their experiences integrating into the campus environment, 127 codes were clustered to generate themes and subthemes. These subthemes emerged from the data: extracurricular activities, previous diversity experiences, and prior connections and friendships. These subthemes supported social integration and how it impacts the quality of student life, student success, and student retention.

Extracurricular Activities

A recurring theme that emerged during data analysis was social integration. According to Tinto's (1993) integration theory, students must separate from the group that they were formerly associated with, undergo a transition, and then incorporate and adopt the normative behaviors of

the new group (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Peifer et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 2001). The data in this study revealed ways in which students could adapt, assimilate, and socially integrate into the campus environment. Students achieved social integration through extracurricular activities, including sports, university-sponsored events, and student organizations.

Sports. Students-athletes are constantly under the spotlight, making them susceptible to criticism, ridicule, and scrutiny, whether they like it or not. However, such exposure can have a positive effect as well. For example, the participants described how people you do not know are willing to help or assist you more. Making friends is easier, as most people want to be associated with you. Organizations want your endorsement by associating with them. In most cases, it works out in favor of the student-athlete because people want to associate with and befriend you just based on being a student-athlete. During data analysis, five participants and nine codes acknowledged that athletics made it extraordinarily easy to integrate into the university's social culture. With softball as her main outlet and means of social interaction, Hana acknowledged that being that “popular White girl” on the softball team, people she did not know wanted to be friends. In Antonio’s case, participation on the football team also allowed him to make friends on campus. However, Antonio did not care for the fame on campus, as football was about helping his family back home. He viewed social popularity as a simple byproduct of being a student-athlete on a small campus. Kevin, who played intramural sports and was also in the marching band, said that intramural sports allowed him to befriend students outside the band. He stated that having more opportunities in E-sports and intramural sports would be great, as it would bring more like-minded people together.

During the focus group interview, several participants suggested that expanding sports would help existing students on campus with social integration and allow the university to improve diversity. At most institutions of higher learning, athletics has significantly impacted enrollment, retention, and budgets, and it has been the same for HBCUs. Seven of the 14 participants in this study cited athletics as the main reason they chose to attend an HBCU. It was suggested that if the university fielded teams in additional sports, it could attract more non-Black students to the campus. Participants suggested adding sports where non-Black students tended to participate more than African Americans. Katerina, Kevin, and Bart admitted that the marching band was their main reason for being here. Softball was the deciding factor for Hana, as she was highly athletic during her junior and senior years of high school. She was forced to stop playing due to the concussions she received during her senior year. After she was cleared, she gave up the opportunity to play at a PWI, opting to play with her friends instead, who were already members of the softball team. Beth also stated that softball was her main reason for choosing this university. She had been recruited and played for another institution before transferring. She was offered a scholarship to transfer, and she did. Antonio and Colton said their decision was based on the opportunity to play football. Colton said that he visited a couple of times and received much love from the coaching staff and current players each time. The coaching staff made a great impression on him and his parents. Antonio, who structured his life around football and making it to the professional level, had a few opportunities to play football at other institutions but elected to finish his collegiate career playing here.

University-Sponsored Events. University-sponsored events were another source of socialization for many students outside of sports, student clubs, or associations. There were 13 out of 14 participants in this study who referenced the university-sponsored events as an

excellent opportunity to meet and network with other students. Celia noted that the homecoming events, such as the Greek step show, first-year-student seminars, cookouts, and the spring fair on campus, provided ways of getting more involved in the social aspects of campus life. These events allowed Celia to find her footing and acclimate to college life at an HBCU. Bart added that these events, as well as the young professionals fair, international food fair, and student organization fair, provided great opportunities to network with people interested in the same things. Gabriela and Hana agreed during the group interview that if they knew there would be many people at an event, they would ensure they were there. During his interview, Colton shared that chapel services allowed him to meet people of the same faith. Antonio said events like Taco Tuesday, Fried Chicken Wednesday, Fried Fish Friday, and cookouts were great opportunities to meet people and make new friends because they attracted the largest crowds. Sometimes, student affairs would host Heritage Pride Day in the café that featured foods from different cultures, where students were encouraged to dress according to their cultural traditions. Students like Amma, Lisa, and Beth, who preferred academic-based events, said that student debate competitions, book signings, and author lectures allowed them to connect with other students who were more like them. Amma, Lisa, and Kevin also mentioned in their protocol-writing responses that prayer meetings and bible studies were another source of integration, as they allowed people of the same faith to come together.

Student Organizations. On any college campus, one of the best and easiest ways to socially integrate into the campus culture has been through student organizations. This has been especially true of HBCUs, whether private or public. The data collected across individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing supported the theme of integration and socialization through student organizations. Eight of the 14 participants in the study reported that

their involvement in a student organization helped their socialization; 21 codes were identified in the data regarding student organizations. Katerina shared that most of the friends that she made were in the marching band and that joining one of the band's sororities allowed her to meet and make friends and expand her network with sorority members at other institutions. In many instances, band members were just as popular as well-known student-athletes on the football and basketball teams. As a marching band member, Bart said it was his only social outlet. Anabella established her integration opportunity by participating in the university's choir, which performed in the weekly chapel service. In addition to singing in the choir, Anabella was a member of a social club for young women that encouraged entrepreneurship, taught leadership skills, and provided empowerment among young women. Through this club, she was able to network with other like-minded young professional women. Celia integrated socially as a member of the student activities committee. She and her roommate were both active members and attended every event on campus. For Pierre, the International Student Association (ISA) was his point of social interaction. Pierre met fellow international students as a board member, although not all were born overseas. Amma, who also participated in the ISA, added that her participation in the ISA provided an opportunity to share her culture and heritage with the campus community and to learn about other cultures and traditions.

Previous Diversity Experiences

In addition to extracurricular activities, participants also stated that their previous experiences with diversity made adjusting to an HBCU campus easier. During data analysis, 12 out of 14 participants attributed their social integration success to previous experiences in diversity. There were 48 codes referencing previous experiences as preparation and learning moments regarding socializing. Katerina, Anabella, Celia, Bart, Hana, Gabriela, Colton,

Antonio, and Amma stated that their experiences in diverse high schools prepared them for the environment of an HBCU. In addition to their high school experiences, diversity within their families also prepared and taught them how to interact with people from other racial and ethnic groups. During her interview, Katerina shared that she came from a diverse family with several ethnicities in Eastern Europe. Although her high school had a majority of African American students, there were also Asian, Indian, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual **(**LGBTQIA) students. Anabella added that her family included Germans, Italians, and Native Americans. She also attended a diverse-student school, where African Americans, Caucasians, and Hispanics were the three main groups making up the student population. Anabella replied that as she grew up, people did not know if she was Black, White, or Hispanic. She added that it had been the same since she had been on campus. Bart, whose family consisted of Norwegian, French, and German heritage, also attended a diverse high school. For Bart, participation in the marching band allowed him to interact with students from various backgrounds and ethnicities. It taught him lessons in teamwork and that people were the same. Colton, whose family was Filipino and White, grew up in a diverse suburban community. His high school was a White-only high school until the early 1970s. Initially, it was by law, but it remained that way as the communities that fed the school were still predominately White. Colton explained that by the 1980s, neighborhoods had become more residentially diverse. By the time he entered high school, the student population had become even more diverse, with a 50/50 split between African Americans and Caucasians. Having had a stellar year playing high school football as a senior, Colton was recruited to play football at the collegiate level. Upon reporting for the first day of training camp, Colton admitted feeling nervous, as this was his first time in an environment where all his teammates were African American. However, once camp started, he

felt like it was just another day for football. Antonio shared that in his early childhood, he felt comfortable in that environment no matter where he went. Beth declared that during her middle and high school years, she was always in the minority. Therefore, in coming to an HBCU, there were some things that she was already aware of and expected from an HBCU environment, having been immersed in "Black culture." Amma grew up in New York and lived in a community she felt was a big melting pot. In her high school, there were Caucasians, Africans, African Americans, Dominicans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, and Italians. Nonetheless, she admitted that although she was around such diversity, she was still excited and nervous to be at an HBCU.

Prior Connections and Friendships

During individual interviews, Bart, Katerina, and Kevin indicated they already had friends or existing connections on campus. According to Katerina, she did not know about the university until her best friend from high school posted a picture of himself in the school's band uniform on social media. Seeing the picture, she learned about this university and was encouraged to enroll. Her friend persuaded her to contact the band director to ask about joining, which ultimately led to her enrollment. In Bart's situation, his high school band director had a close relationship with the university's band director. Bart explained that the band director of the university was like family to his band director in high school. The two bands had many back-and-forth interactions with each other. One day during lunch, he applied, was accepted, and received a band scholarship. Hana's prior connection was with a student whose sister went to middle school with her. However, Beth was recruited by a friend already on the team. Beth said that knowing people already at this school and those already on the softball team were the

deciding factors for enrolling. Most educators and scholars in education have agreed that a student's ability to assimilate to their new environment socially is crucial to student success.

In discussions around prior connections and friendships, strong peer-to-peer relationships surfaced as a critical element in student success and social integration inside and outside the classroom. Katerina noted that having a prior connection eased her anxiety about her choice to attend an HBCU. She added that since she had been on campus, people had shown her much love and had been very welcoming. Celia added that having a hometown connection made adjusting less stressful; she also stated that she had always felt included in everything by her classmates and friends. Bart stated that despite wearing cowboy boots, driving a lifted pickup truck, and speaking with a southern twang, people had treated him no different, like he was one of the guys. In addition, he and his roommate were both firefighters, although from different departments. Hana lamented that she had become a better person through positive experiences with her new friends. Colton added that everyone he met when he arrived on campus seemed welcoming. To him, it seemed like everyone knew everyone on campus and was laid back. Hyiab said that, in her experience, she did not have the right friend group when first arriving on campus, but she had since changed that and found a friendly group of people to hang out and have fun with. Amma expressed that everything had been perfect despite instances of discontent. She met people with whom she meshed and built close relationships.

Stress Management

It has been agreed among educators that today’s college students deal with everything from peer pressure, social adjustments, and financial struggles to racism, colorism, sexism, gender identification issues, issues surrounding sexual orientation, sexual assaults, or just being on their own for the first time. Following the data collected in individual interviews, the focus

group interview, and protocol writings, 10 of 14 participants shared tips on coping with problems and relieving stress. There were 25 instances that emerged from the data, revealing the issues that they faced and how they dealt with them as non-Black students integrating into the environment and culture on an HBCU campus. As a result, three subthemes were revealed: spending time alone, staying busy, and talking to someone they trust. During individual interviews, students spoke candidly about the issues that they were dealing with that affected their mental health. Katerina expressed concern that there were not enough support organizations for members of the LGBTQIA community, as she struggled with how she would transition while in college, especially at an HBCU. Initially, Katerina dropped out of school for a year to clarify her identity. She admitted that she would have felt better if there had been an on-campus community for students like her to support one another and share their experiences. Anabella shared that she cried every time anyone said anything hurtful to her about her being multiracial. Moreover, Anabella stated that she used to receive counseling to help her deal with depression. During her school enrollment, she was assured that counseling services would be available on campus; however, she learned that counseling services were unavailable once she arrived. Bart admitted that if it were not for the marching band, he would not have talked to anyone because he was an introvert and socially uncomfortable. If it were not for the friends that he made in the band, he would have kept to himself, only leaving his room to go to the café, class, and back to his room. Hana stated that she graduated high school at the height of COVID-19, which caused her to have second thoughts about going anywhere for college. Colton also admitted that he was anti-social and acknowledged that he was okay with going to the gym and football practice, but outside of football, after going through COVID-19, he just wanted to stay to himself. Beth proclaimed that she was an introvert and did not leave her room initially except for her one in-

person class and softball practice. As a result of these and other issues, participants developed strategies to help them get past their issues or, at the very least, mask their feelings and emotions. The following subthemes highlighted the dominant strategies that participants spoke about.

Alone Time

Participants revealed that spending time alone was their preferred coping method. Katerina said that she preferred to get away from people to deal with her problems and issues alone. Sometimes, she would log onto Discord or a server and play games to isolate herself. Lisa said that she did not like sharing or letting people know about her business and preferred to get away for a while. Kevin also preferred to get off campus or away from the source of the problem by going for a ride in his car or going to the park and listening to music. Colton mentioned that taking time away from the crowd to process his feelings and thoughts was therapeutic. He added that his mom was his best friend. However, he was cautious with what he shared with her, as he did not share anything that he felt was too drastic to keep her from worrying. He only shared those things that he felt his mother could handle, as she had two other kids at home that she was caring for in addition to her mother, who was ill. Antonio leaned more toward self-affirmation and meditation. His coping strategy was to utilize the breathing techniques that he had learned from a meditation specialist to relax and ease his stress levels. He often reminded himself, "Everybody has a high point in life, and life is never wrong; there are only bad days you are having. You are still the person you were when you were on top of the mountain.” He stated that repeating this affirmation when things got too bad strengthened him. Bart admitted that he also spent time alone listening to music. Music was his outlet that helped him to escape from problematic situations. Amma was a self-proclaimed introvert and shut-in. Her solution to solving problems was to immediately remove herself from the situation or source of the problem.

She would retreat to her home, where breathing and thinking about what happened was easier. As a graduating senior, she had since learned that there were people on campus whom she could talk to and who were willing to help.

Staying Busy

Often, when people are dealing with stressful situations or something traumatic, they tend to stay busy to occupy their minds so as not to think about it. Such was the case for three participants who referenced staying busy as one of their coping methods. Students have become proficient in masking their feelings, and staying busy allowed them to escape and forget that the problem existed for a while. Katerina said that in the past, staying busy with sports was a way of coping with the challenges that emerged from time to time. Colton agreed and said he liked going to the gym to work out. Lifting weights released tension and took his mind off of his problems. Antonio said that he also liked going to the gym and running, as working out released endorphins, which gave him a natural high that improved his mood and cleared his mind to think clearly. Gabriela conveyed that her work allowed her to escape the source of her problems by concentrating on different tasks. Hana said she liked immersing herself in as many activities or projects as possible. Staying busy helped students and gave participants something else to think about instead of dwelling on their issues, which could have potentially made matters worse.

Talking to Someone They Trust

During data analysis, 10 out of 14 participants discussed the importance of having people that they trust in their inner circles. For Colton, that trusted person was his mother, whom he considered his best friend. He called home often to talk to her to help him stay focused and grounded. Similarly, Pierre stated that he turned to his sister for advice to take his mind off of whatever bothered him. Lisa enjoyed being with her friend group and confiding in them when

things were too much to deal with. Anabella revealed that she had a friend from her hometown on campus that she talked to when she felt stressed or depressed. Likewise, Gabriela replied that she always talked to her best friend when she had a problem because her friend was brilliant and trustworthy.

Outlier Data and Findings

During data analysis, three unexpected themes emerged from the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and protocol writing. The first outlier dealt with feeling out of place, which emerged as participants discussed their feelings and classroom experiences while studying civil rights and lynching in America. The second outlier revealed unexpected data regarding virtual classes. As students discussed academic integration in the group interview, it was revealed that virtual classes and the number of virtual classes that students took was a significant problem ignored by the administration. The data's third and most-unexpected outlier was the lack of chapel diversity.

Feeling Out of Place

Most of the participants felt comfortable with being at an HBCU. For the most part, participants felt accepted by their peers and professors. However, there were instances where some felt out of place. Four participants referenced instances of feeling out of place. Data analysis identified 10 codes detailing incidents where a participant felt out of place. For example, Katerina shared an experience in one of her humanities classes studying the civil rights movement, segregation, and lynching in America. During one class session, they watched a film documentary on Emmett Till. Katerina shared that she was extremely uncomfortable as a Caucasian in the class watching and hearing about the atrocities that took place. She remembered feeling like she should not have been there watching the video. She stated that although no one

said anything out of the way to her or acted meanly toward her, she still felt out of place. Beth, Hana, and Gabriela remembered having the same feeling in their humanities class. All stated that the professor and classmates were supportive and understanding. Some classmates even went out of their way to try and comfort them. Bart shared that he no longer sat in the front of the class as he did at the beginning of the semester. He stated that he used to sit in front of the class but then started feeling uncomfortable, as if he was the center of attention and all eyes were on him. As a result, he sat in the back of the class where no one could see him. Hana confessed that in her previous views of HBCUs, she experienced imposter syndrome because HBCUs were created so that African Americans could have the same opportunities that she was born with as a White person. She was concerned that she could have taken away an opportunity meant for an African American student. She stated that she was scared that her presence on campus would take away from someone else; however, she realized that whether she got admitted or not, they would not reject anyone just because she got admitted.

Issues with Virtual Classes

As participants discussed their academic integration experiences, they shared their thoughts on virtual learning. Virtual instruction had become a permanent fixture and problem on campus over the last few years. Participants across all three data collection forms agreed that virtual classes were a tremendous problem when creating spaces of inclusivity and impeding learning. Amma said that she never liked virtual classes. She felt that it may still have had something to do with the effects of COVID-19, which turned her off from virtual classes. She stated that she and others preferred in-person classes because students were not learning and needed additional help from a professor. Beth stated that she only had one in-person class the previous semester and only one at the time of this study. Colton added that most of his classes

were virtual and asynchronous, which limited his ability to interact with other students and professors. Gabriela also stated that most of her classes had been virtual and that she preferred in-person classes. Bart shared that the biggest downside to his college experience had been that most of his classes were virtual, which begged the question: “Why are parents paying for room and board when just about all of our classes are virtual?” Anabella added that with some of her online classes, it seemed that some adjunct professors did not want to be there or care about teaching or whether their students were learning anything. She adamantly stated that she did not come to college and live on campus, only to have one class in person, which was a chorus class. Katerina shared an experience where the professor uploaded nine quizzes and nine PowerPoints and said that they must complete them by the end of the semester. On one occasion, she opened one of the PowerPoints, took notes, and went to take the corresponding quiz, only to find out that the quiz had nothing to do with the PowerPoint. The group all agreed that it seemed like these adjuncts got most of their material from Quizlet. For those who did lecture via Microsoft Teams, it seemed that they did not care and had no passion for what they were teaching.

Diversify Chapel Service

The university held weekly chapel services as a Christian school and was Baptist by denominational affiliation. All students, alumni, and community members were welcomed and encouraged to attend chapel. Guest preachers were invited to preach, or the dean of the chapel would preach. During the individual and group interviews, participants spoke about their chapel experiences. Most were okay with going to chapel. However, Katerina, Anabella, Hana, and Amma felt that more diversity was needed to reflect the diversity of the student body. Katerina suggested having preachers from other denominations speak from time to time. Anabella, who was hesitant to say anything, said that she felt that the messages were directed towards a specific

group. In contrast, sermons should be crafted more universally for everyone, not just African Americans. Hana sided with Katerina and Anabella and replied that despite the university being a Baptist-based institution, the dean could arrange Catholic services and offer prayer services for Muslims. Amma, a Muslim, stated that she understood that the university was a Baptist school and that they were subject to chapel services; however, it would be great if they created time slots for prayer for Muslims on campus.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending a small, private, urban HBCU located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. To understand these experiences, individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing were used. Data from all three sources was used to answer this study's research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the integration experiences of non-Black students engaging in diversity and inclusion on campuses of HBCUs? Participants in this study described experiences of feeling accepted and valued by their peers and professors and how they successfully integrated socially through their participation in sports, clubs, and student organizations. Participants also shared how classroom interactions positively impacted their academic experiences. They expressed how these experiences made academic and social integration possible. They shared how having positive relationships with their peers and professors and inclusive classroom environments impacted academic integration the most. In her interview, Amma shared that she had a professor that she thought was mean until she realized it was just his sense of humor. She described how he never referred to students by just their first names. Instead, he would always address students

by doctor and their last name. This was done to get students used to hearing themselves being addressed as doctors as a positive affirmation, which the whole class liked. Participants also highlighted previous experiences and sports as the most vital experiences that brought about successful social integration into the culture of an HBCU. During his interview, Bart shared how his participation in the marching band made it easier to fit in socially. Bart shared that 1 month before reporting to band camp, they were all put into group chats and the Group Meets chat groups for the band. They were already communicating with one another, which allowed them to bond, before coming to campus.

Sub-Question One

How do non-Black students integrate into the academic systems of their HBCU? Participants in this study identified positive relationships with professors as a prime factor in their academic integration. During her interview, Amma shared an experience that took place after the passing of her uncle, with whom she was living, where the dean of her department went the extra mile to assist her in a time of need. Amma said of her experience that after her uncle passed, she went into depression and stopped attending class. She realized that she was in jeopardy of being kicked out of school because she was failing and not attending class. She went to see the departmental dean and shared everything with him. She shared that out of empathy, he provided her with resources to get assistance with rent and more. He also spoke with her professors and asked them to give her incompletes and another week to complete her work. She stated that she did not know that that was possible. This taught her that there were nonchalant professors, and then there were professors who genuinely cared and who would take time out of their day to help students.

Sub-Question Two

How do non-Black students integrate into the social systems of their HBCU? Participants stated that socialization through student organizations and university-sponsored events helped them adjust to the social climate on campus. Katerina stated that she met most of her friends through the band and the band's sorority. Bart, also a marching band member, added that he already had a friend group from the band group that helped him. Anabella added that she made friends on campus through participation in the university's choir and in a young professional group for women, where she could network with other like-minded young women.

Sub-Question Three

How do non-Black students deal with challenges experienced at an HBCU? Two significant themes most-represented how participants coped with challenges that they faced on campus. One theme suggested that students preferred time alone, and another suggested discussing it with a friend. Lisa, who preferred alone time, said that she did not like sharing her business or letting people know about it. Instead, she preferred to get away for short periods of time. Bart said that he pushed through his experiences by putting in his Air Pods and listening to music. Amma added that she was a shut-in and that her coping solution was to get away from the problem's scene or source. She would go home, where breathing and thinking about what happened was easier.

Sub-Question Four

What impediments prevent non-Black students from integrating into the academic systems of their HBCU? Participants identified too many virtual classes as the most-significant issue preventing non-Black students from integrating into the campus environment. Amma said that she had never liked virtual classes and thought that it may have been due to COVID-19,

which had turned her away from the virtual experience. She, like most other participants, preferred in-person classes. Katerina shared that there had been situations where a professor would drop nine quizzes and nine PowerPoints and tell them to complete them by the end of the semester:

> Once, I opened a PowerPoint presentation, took notes, and then went to the quiz, only to find that the 10 questions on the quiz had nothing to do with the PowerPoint. They never went into the technical case studies the questions were asking. Some professors did not seem to care and were getting everything off Quizlet. It seemed like some professors read from a book or PowerPoint and were not enthusiastic about what they were saying, which made the class dull.

Summary

Through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol-writing responses, 14 participants varying in age, gender, race, and ethnicity described their experiences as non-Black students as they pertained to diversity and inclusion on the campus of a minor, private HBCU located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The themes that emerged from the data were academic integration experiences, social integration experiences, and stress management. Three outliers also emerged in this study: feeling out of place, having issues with virtual classes, and diversifying chapel service. Although they did not directly answer the central research question, they did impact student experiences.

The responses to the central research question and sub-questions emerged from the protocol writing and data collected through individual interviews and a focus group interview. The data showed that non-Black students could adapt and integrate socially and academically,

due to attending an HBCU. Participants were permitted to discuss the factors that facilitated their successful assimilation into the social and cultural context of an HBCU.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU) located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Undergraduate students who self-identified with any race or ethnicity other than solely African American described their experiences as non-Black students attending an HBCU. This chapter includes a discussion of the researcher's ideas and interpretation of the findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings developed from the themes presented in Chapter Four. The findings of this study revealed that successful academic integration, social integration, and stress management strategies significantly impacted how well non-Black students adjusted and adapted to matriculating at a small, private HBCU. Participants also identified mental health challenges that could hinder diversity and inclusion. This section starts with a summary of thematic findings, followed by the researcher's interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study identified the three primary themes of academic integration, social integration, and stress management. These themes provided an extensive understanding of the experiences that non-Black students encountered while matriculating at an HBCU. The participants of this

study reflected upon individual experiences that transpired both within and beyond the educational setting. Each student pointed out how their commitment to educational excellence facilitated integration and inclusion. They discussed how welcoming and inclusive the classroom and university were. They recognized the value of the diversity of their high school experiences and the formation of new peer connections in adjusting to the social and cultural environment of the campus. As non-Black students attending an HBCU, all 14 participants agreed that the university played a crucial role in promoting opportunities for diversity and inclusion via university-sponsored programs, student organizations, and sports. Like any new encounter, adjustments had to be made, as every participant in this study encountered challenges associated with acclimating to life on a college campus, specifically at an HBCU. Each student constructed their own set of coping strategies to confront these challenges. In response to the issue of how the university might improve diversity and inclusion, participants identified several opportunities and measures that the institution should consider implementing, in addition to barriers that they perceived could potentially prevent diversity and inclusion of non-Black students.

Interpretation of Findings

Data for this study was collected from non-Black students via protocol writing, individual interviews, and a focus group interview and then analyzed. Three themes emerged from the triangulation of data during analysis. This section provides my interpretation of the themes and their relationship to existing research on the phenomenon of non-Black students attending HBCUs.

College Selection

In his student integration theory, Tinto (1993) stated that students must separate themselves from their current groups and communities and connect with a new group, taking on

their customs, traditions, and practices. As a result of this study, I have found that such a notion begins with students choosing a college, which can be an exciting time, yet daunting for anyone considering enrolling, particularly young people who have just graduated from high school. There are many details to consider, including family, distance, cost of attendance for in-state versus out-of-state students, programs offered, safety, and, oftentimes, the surrounding community. In addition, participants in this study cited that non-Black students considering attending an HBCU should also consider how they would adapt academically and socially. Therefore, enrolling in an HBCU is not an easy decision to make. According to Davis and Borders-Patterson's (1973) study, Black students enrolled in PWIs are persuaded by low costs, financial aid availability, accessibility of programs, encouragement from guidance counselors, the notion that predominately White institutions (PWIs) offer higher quality education, and the idea that degrees from PWIs have a more excellent marketing value than degrees from HBCUs.

However, according to this study's participants, the dominant factors in their college choice were athletic opportunities, scholarship awards, campus environment, programs offered, and connections with friends already enrolled in the same university. Existing literature supported the idea that non-Black students also attend HBCUs due to their overwhelming familiarity with African American culture and traditions as a result of living in predominately Black communities and going to predominately Black high schools (Arroyo et al., 2017). As with participants in this study, familiarity with African American culture and high school experiences emerged as decision-swaying factors. Most participants benefitted from these prior experiences, which made it easier for them to adjust or assimilate to their new environments on an HBCU campus. This study showed that growing up in a diverse environment with a regular exchange of cultural practices and sharing many experiences, students felt more at ease with

attending an HBCU versus a PWI. This was supported by Allen and Stone (2016), who suggested that students growing up in these communities are more likely to feel at home and included in an HBCU versus a PWI.

Academic Experiences

Academic experiences have been pivotal in promoting student achievement and integration, especially for the students who participated in this study. This study identified two elements that helped participants succeed. The location for this study was a small, private HBCU with fewer than 2,000 students, which was significant because it allowed a student-to-teacher ratio that favored students who may require additional attention. The limited number of students created an environment that encouraged student integration and inclusion. Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration stated that when students have positive experiences, they are more likely to fully participate in institutional programming and create a sense of belonging to the university's culture and family. On the other hand, students with poor academic performance had a lower chance of retaining enrollment or completing their planned degree program and lacked a sense of commitment to the university (Tinto, 1993). Whether or not students are successful in integrating does affect student retention, which was one of the university's primary focuses.

The data analysis revealed three key factors significantly impacting academic integration: academic dedication, classroom environment, and positive interactions with faculty and staff. For example, intellectual interests facilitated connections and relationship formation based on academic commonalities for eight of the 14 participants, with each demonstrating an intense commitment to study and a willingness to assist struggling peers. Participants identified class size and participation as crucial elements in the classroom environment. Because of the small number of students in their classes, it was easier to remember names and faces. Participants

reported that professors fostered a welcoming environment in the classroom by requiring participation in class discussions and assigning group projects. In addition, participants described occasions in class where they were required to stand and share their names, hometowns, classifications, majors, and hobbies with the class. The professor would then call on a random student to recite what their peers had shared. This exercise was an excellent icebreaker because it allowed students to develop classroom comradery and student bonds. The relationships between students and teachers were also critical in promoting academic success and integration. Several students shared stories about how their relationships with professors, faculty, and deans impacted their experiences. Because the university did not currently employ a licensed counselor or mental health specialist, two participants in this study relied on professors and department deans to assist them in dealing with specific issues. Amma and Katerina faced unexpected challenges that could have derailed their college experiences. However, they were given the assistance required to stay in school and focus on their studies. As a result of their positive relationships with their professors and deans, Amma and Katerina felt comfortable seeking help and discussing their concerns.

Social Integration Experiences

Tinto's (1993) student integration theory identified social integration as the second central pillar. Students who participate and are fully immersed in the university academically and socially are more likely to succeed (Tinto). The belief was that the more positive the student experiences, the more likely they are to fully participate in institutional programming and feel a part of the university's beliefs (Booker-Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Palmer et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993; Williams & Palmer, 2021). The study's findings identified five factors that contributed to successful socialization: athletics, campus environment, peer relationships, university-sponsored

events, and participation in student organizations. Athletics provided a path for six participants to achieve social integration, as student-athletes were celebrated for their achievements and treated like celebrities. In addition, their first peer-to-peer relationships were naturally formed with their teammates. Before arriving on campus, band members were divided into friend groups. Football players bonded with their teammates during training camp prior to the start of classes. The same went for participants who were on the softball team. Socialization was easier because the campus was small and had fewer than 2,000 students. The physical layout and proximity of buildings and dorms provided a comfortable environment where students felt safe and could form communities around the campus square. Participants identified university-sponsored events, such as cookouts, cultural fairs, homecoming, and intramural sports, as important socialization components, as well as the university Greek-lettered step show, which all participants reported attending because step shows were the most popular activity on campus among all students. Other participants experienced social integration through participation in groups, such as the choir, International Student Association (ISA), chess club, yearbook club, chemistry club, and other student organizations. These clubs brought students together, allowing them to meet and bond with one another.

Stress Management

The data from this study also revealed that students faced challenges that tested their mental fortitude. Participants reported feeling out of place sometimes, difficulties with virtual classes, and overall mental well-being as factors that sometimes hampered academic performance and socialization. Four of the 14 participants described feeling out of place during their Black history class, where students discussed and viewed videos depicting the violent atrocities against African Americans committed during segregation in the 1950s and 1960s,

which made them feel uncomfortable. Some participants felt awkward in the classroom because they did not know how their classmates would react to them. Their responses were not necessarily out of the norm or atypical. However, they made one wonder what was taught and what had been intentionally or unintentionally left out in their secondary education. It was interesting that their peers could recognize their discomfort and had the compassion to comfort and console their classmates.

During data analysis, I also noted that participants were showing signs that they were still dealing with the effects of COVID-19. As a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the university switched to online instruction. However, in a post-COVID-19 world, students were still registered for virtual classes. Participants recorded numerous complaints about their virtual classes using all three data collection methods. Most participants were dissatisfied when classes labeled as in-person were converted to virtual courses after the registration period ended. This raised the question of: “Why I am paying to live on campus if all of my classes will be virtual?” If participants knew beforehand that most, if not all, of their classes, were virtual, they would not have paid for room and board, a meal plan, or any other fee required of students living on campus. Most participants also expressed dissatisfaction with many adjunct instructors teaching virtual classes. Many adjunct professors were described as unconcerned, unenthusiastic, uninvested, and unprofessional. Also, having a schedule of all virtual classes limited students' ability to interact and form bonds with classmates. In addition to feeling out of place and dissatisfied with their virtual classes, some participants reported feelings of depression and a lack of sociability caused by COVID-19. Instead of seeing a professional licensed mental health specialist, these students were able to get assistance and support from professors and deans.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study highlighted non-Black students' lived experiences with diversity and inclusion at an HBCU. This study's findings had implications for university policies and practices regarding offering virtual classes, hiring adjuncts, supporting mental well-being, and providing opportunities for diversity growth.

Implications for Policy

These findings suggested that virtual classes are counterproductive to diversity and inclusion efforts, the procedures for hiring adjunct professors should include a detailed and rigorous vetting process, the university should consider broadening recruitment efforts to include markets usually not considered, and the university's communications should be more inclusive.

While virtual classrooms were required during the COVID-19 global pandemic, they had now become an essential component of the university's academic system. This study's data suggested that there was a decline in student performance, which had been attributed to insufficient faculty-student interactions, as well as instructional strategies. Thus, it was recommended that the university establish a virtual college separate from regular student residency. To address the issue of not having quality instructors, each potential new hire should be thoroughly vetted before being appointed and must attend an on-campus conference with the president every summer. Furthermore, asynchronous courses should only be offered to students who have demonstrated the ability to perform well with little oversight. During participant interviews, it was revealed that students with GPAs of less than 2.5 were enrolled in asynchronous courses.

The findings of this study also had ramifications for mental health. Participants who disclosed experiencing anxiety, depression, and feeling isolated did not have access to

professional support in coping with these challenges. Conversely, students sought guidance from a trusted professor or devised independent mechanisms for managing issues. While it was praiseworthy to have committed and willing to assist faculty and staff, it was essential to note that they lacked the professional certification and training to address the specific challenges that students may encounter. Thus, employing an in-house licensed professional therapist or behavioral specialist or forming a partnership with an organization that provides counseling services was advised for the university.

This study suggested four approaches to increase diversity: providing more academic programs, broadening the marketing base, developing additional social organizations, and diversifying chapel services. Currently, the university offers 15 graduate and 31 undergraduate degrees. Increasing graduate programs may boost retention rates since graduate students have a better completion rate and provide more chances for non-Black students on campus. More Ph.D. programs could attract professionals of all races seeking advancement or a career shift. Expanding the marketing presence could have an immediate impact on diversity. According to the findings of this study, the university should consider broadening its base by entering previously untapped markets. This university primarily served areas with a large African American population.

Furthermore, this study's findings also recommend additional religious services for students from different Christian denominations and Muslim students who would like an opportunity to come together for prayer as required by their religious customs. The university offered weekly chapel services, which students were encouraged to attend. However, these services followed a Protestant Christian format. In addition to these services, the conclusions developed in this study suggested that the university should offer Catholic and other

denominational services or provide students with information on local centers of faith within their denomination. If possible, shuttle services should be offered to provide students with transportation to and from these services.

Implications for Practice

This study's data, analysis, and findings offered practical implications for improving student integration at this university and possibly others. The following practical implications could have an impact: implementing virtual classes, assisting students with mental wellness, hiring qualified instructors, and diversifying spiritual formations.

Virtual instruction has now become an inescapable and necessary component of the higher education experience. Some institutions have refined their virtual instruction to meet the university's and their student's needs, while others have remained a work in progress. The COVID-19 pandemic caught many institutions of higher education off guard or completely unprepared. After COVID-19, colleges and universities have continually sought to improve their virtual programs. During data analysis, it was discovered that students were dissatisfied with having all virtual classes, were concerned with the unprofessionalism and ineffectiveness of their virtual professors, and thought that virtual classrooms hampered student integration. This study suggested that the university create an online college as a practical implication. This would require the university to create separate academic advisors, undergraduate and graduate financial aid, undergraduate and graduate admissions, and student accounts personnel. It would also require a separate pool of thoroughly vetted and qualified instructors. Residential students who want to take virtual classes must meet the exact prerequisites as undergraduates who want to take an independent study course for credit toward degree completion. Interested instructors applying to the university should be meticulously examined. Successful candidates would be required to

attend at least one on-campus leadership conference with the university's president and executive leadership council before the start of the academic year. These actions would benefit not only this university and its students but could also help other colleges and universities seeking to establish a more substantial online presence.

Implications for helping students with mental wellness involved creating a center for mental wellness staffed by qualified and licensed mental health experts. First-year students identified by Student Success Services as high-risk students, referring to students who may be at risk of not completing their programs, would be paired with a mental wellness coach. Doing so would help students get the support they need as they adapt to their new surroundings and people. Students would be required to meet with the mental wellness coach at least twice a month, then as often as their coach deems appropriate, considering how the student progresses.

This study also provided implications for diversifying spiritual formation on campus. Each week, the university sponsored a chapel service; however, some students expressed that the services were too focused on one demographic: African American students. Students who were Catholics or Muslims expressed feeling negated. Therefore, based on the data collection, analysis, and findings, it was suggested that the university should consider offering a unitarian-type service with clergy from various denominations participating in a Protestant Christian service and adding additional services for Catholic and Muslim students. These suggestions were based on this study's findings for this university and may or may not apply to other colleges and universities.

Opportunities for Growth. Across all three data collection methods, 11 participants discussed areas they saw as opportunities for institutional growth in diversity and inclusion. There were 39 codes generated during the analysis that were clustered to generate four

subthemes. Participants shared what they believed would increase campus diversity based on their experiences as non-Black students at an HBCU. Out of these clustered codes, the following subthemes were generated: adding more clubs, diversifying chapel services, and improving marketing strategies.

Adding More Clubs. Katerina stressed that there needed to be an organization to support the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) community on campus. She argued that the university had almost everything for every community on campus except for the LGBTQIA community. Celia suggested adding more clubs as a way for more students to get involved at the university. She added that there needed to be an improvement in communicating activities and events. She stated that she and her friends mostly heard about things from a friend on the planning committee; occasionally, she received an event flyer that could be posted on social media. Antonio suggested adding a chess club, a lace and paint club, or a music club. Pierre stressed that the university needed more sports teams, clubs, and intramural sports. Antonio agreed, stating that sports generally create bonds between students.

Improve Marketing Practices. Marketing strategies also emerged during data analysis. Most participants agreed that the university should market better to other demographics and expand its social media presence and market base. In the group interview, Kevin added that the university needed to put out more information, especially about the community work it did and the charities it supported. Katerina added that the university should expand its market and investigate areas that have people of different backgrounds or continue past practices and get the same result, like an algorithm. Anabella emphasized that it was not enough to put pictures of White students and one White cheerleader on the website or posters; instead, the university must go into the predominately White school districts and recruit there. Celia added that the university

should reach out to high schools in rural areas because she had never heard of the university until her involvement with a girls' empowerment camp that sponsored a tour of HBCUs along the East Coast. Hana suggested informing non-Black students that they were welcome to come here. She added that people she knew felt that because they were not Black, they were not welcomed. She suggested attending more college and career fairs to reach out to more non-Black students.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of this hermeneutical phenomenological study on the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU. The themes in the data collection, analysis, and findings validated and corroborated Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration.

Empirical Implications

A comprehensive examination of past studies on diversity and inclusion in higher education revealed that the experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU were underrepresented or ignored altogether (Arroyo et al., 2017; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2015). However, in this study, participants shared experiences that impacted their ability to integrate academically and socially as non-Black students on an HBCU campus. These shared experiences supported the notion that exposure to other cultures, traditions, and students dispelled stereotypes frequently prescribed by media, social media, and attitudes towards race, as suggested in the literature (Dwyer, 2006; Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer & Williams, 2023). Harrington and Thomas (2018) cited a study where Asian American and Latin American students attributed their success to positive interactions and relationships with administrators, faculty, and staff. Participants in this study also cited positive

interactions and relationships as factors in the ability to academically and socially integrate into the culture and environment of their HBCU.

Student Involvement as a Diversity Outcome. Literature that was currently available suggested that student engagement is a factor that contributes to college persistence (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Chrysikos et al., 2017; Considine et al., 2017; Crewe, 2017; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Palmer et al., 2018; Pichon, 2018; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, Commodore and Njoku (2020) proposed that educational policies and practices have the potential to affect student involvement, which, in turn, leads to student learning and personal development. Furthermore, according to Carter and Fountaine, there has been a direct connection between participation and academic and personal growth. They suggested that the degree and quality of student engagement directly affect academic development and growth. The findings of the current study were consistent with their findings (Carter & Fontaine, 2012). Moreover, the findings of the current study also agreed with Mobley et al. (2022), who suggested that the participation of students is influenced by their prior experiences, the backgrounds of their families, and the communities in which they lived. Many students in this study expressed that their high school experiences significantly shaped their choice to enroll in an HBCU. Participants who had attended primarily Black high schools or lived in a predominantly Black community considered their experiences a prerequisite for enrolling in an HBCU. Having experiences like those shared in this study made adjusting to the culture of HBCUs easier to manage.

Sense of Belonging. Another theme in the literature review was the fundamental human need for a sense of belonging (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). Belonging has been critical to student success and integration, particularly for students from underrepresented groups on campus,

according to the consensus in higher education (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). According to this study's data collection, analysis, and findings, engaging in athletics, student organizations, and social activities and cultivating positive relationships with faculty and staff, every participant achieved a sense of belonging. Students with a strong sense of belonging tended to exhibit greater self-confidence, academic commitment, social adaptability, and an ability to achieve more ambitious goals. This was further corroborated by Campbell-Whatley et al. (2021), who found that non-Black students attending HBCUs who obtained a sense of belonging had higher completion and retention rates. Finally, students have been more inclined to internalize and exhibit behaviors that align with the values and ethics of the institution when the campus environment fosters a sense of belonging.

Campus Environment. The literature review also identified the campus environment as a significant theme, further corroborated by this study's data collection, analysis, and findings. As stated by the participants, the campus environment played a significant role in their decision to attend this HBCU. They liked that the campus was small and secure, the atmosphere seemed peaceful and tranquil, and there was a short distance between residential halls and the academic and administrative buildings. The campus offered an intimate setting that facilitated social integration. According to Rankin and Reason (2005), many students first interact with people of other races and ethnicities on college campuses. Hence, the campus environment, especially of this HBCU, impacted learning and social outcomes, which validates the importance of including the campus environment in any study of diversity and inclusion (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation all affect learning and the cultural environment on HBCU campuses, according to Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2019).

Theoretical Implications

The theory of integration pertains to the degree to which students adopt the perspectives and convictions of their instructors, staff, and fellow students, as well as their compliance with the university's policies and practices (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Academic integration, crucial to student satisfaction, has been evaluated according to students' grade point averages (GPAs) and intellectual achievement (French, 2017; Tinto). Likewise, social integration into the campus community influences students' dedication to the university and their education, which was equally significant. Tinto's theory was founded upon van Gennep's (1960) theory of rites of passage, which asserted that joining a new group consists of three distinct phases: (a) separation from the past, (b) transition, during which students interact with a new environment and people; and (c) incorporation, during which the individual assimilates into the new group's norms and expectations. Students must integrate into the social system to attain community membership, according to Tinto (1993). Higher education integration has encompassed intellectual (i.e., shared values) and social (i.e., personal affiliation) connections.

The theoretical implications of this study have been based on and incorporated Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. As evidenced by data collection, analysis, and study findings, academic and social integration emerged as significant elements in the participants' capacity to integrate into the university's culture and environment. Student integration was used to examine participant persistence. The findings suggested that participants who socially integrated into the campus environment were more committed to the institution and more likely to graduate (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; French, 2017; Karp et al., 2017; Tinto, 1993). This was backed by the study's findings, which showed that participants stayed on

schedule according to their degree completion plan, effectively transitioned into the university environment, and built strong relationships with their peers, professors, and staff.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study's limitations were a small participant sample pool and student-athlete access. Its delimitations were restrictions on participants' age, racial identity, and enrollment status. The following sections discuss these limitations and delimitations in greater detail.

Limitations

The first limitation encountered during this study was the small sample size. Twenty potential participants were identified; however, only 14 participated. The sample set consisted of eight females and six males. Using a small sample size of 14 participants to represent the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students at an HBCU presented a problem when attempting to generalize the findings, as HBCUs are not a monolithic group of institutions. Instead, HBCUs differ in size, student population, location, and whether they are private or public.

Second, access to student-athletes was limited due to coach-imposed time constraints and National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) compliance rules. Their training camps or practices, mandated study hall sessions, and class schedules all limited participants' availability during the winter and spring sports programs. Additionally, participants could not participate in the focus group interview in person; however, those who could be there in person could participate via Microsoft Teams or by phone. As a result, nonverbal cues were not captured for all individuals, limiting sentimental coding efforts.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study included the use of criterion sampling, which set the parameters around participant participation. The age requirement for participation was set between 18–25 years. Eligible participants had to self-identify as any race other than solely African American, and students had to be enrolled full-time and live on campus. This ensured that participants could respond to the interview questions based on the study's focus. The second delimitation was the selection of the study site. This study took place at a small, private HBCU in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, with a student population of fewer than 2,000 students.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this hermeneutic phenomenological study provided insight into the experiences of non-Black students attending an HBCU, more research was needed to comprehend diversity and inclusion on these campuses better. In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ended affirmative action in college enrollment. Research on the impacts of this measure has suggested investigating how it affects enrollment at HBCUs across the country, particularly as more minorities seek alternative educational options. Furthermore, this study also proposed to research religious diversity among HBCU students. The conclusions of this study revealed that more emphasis was needed on spiritual formation options for students attending HBCUs—Baptist polity and preaching served as the foundation for spiritual formation for this study site. However, there were Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Muslim students whose only religious option for spiritual formation was to attend a weekly Protestant Christian service. A study looking at religious formation on HBCU campuses would shed light on how to bring everyone together respectfully in all practices. Finally, another recommendation was to study intra-racial diversity on HBCU

campuses. Not every student who appeared to be African American identified as such. In the case of this university, there were students from several African and Caribbean countries who, by American social standards, were considered African Americans; however, this study showed that these students did not consider themselves to be African American because they were deeply attached to their culture and heritage.

For many, entering a new environment where you are a minority when you have been used to being in the majority was a big adjustment. Leaving a small town with no diversity presented a problem for some students considering college. The fear of the unknown caused anxiety for even the most confident students. Despite having diverse experiences in high school and their communities, most participants found this to be their first experience of being in the minority. Eight out of the 14 participants in this study provided 16 codes to their limited experiences of being in the minority. During the focus group interview, Katerina said that although she came from a diverse environment in high school, she still felt intimidated when she first stepped foot on campus. However, with the comradery among band members, she quickly got past it and relaxed, knowing that she was among people who accepted her as a good drummer and person. During the group interview, Bart mentioned that coming from a small population made his first time on campus somewhat frightening. Celia added that she, too, grew up in a small town where almost everyone had the same background and shared the same views. When she decided to attend college, especially an HBCU, she was immediately challenged by the thought of just being around people of different backgrounds and cultures from hers. Bart stated that it could be a big challenge for anyone from a small town to attend college, especially for him, growing up in a county of about 6,500 residents and a town of about 300 residents. His high school had about 220 students, and his graduating class only had 40 people.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological sought to describe the diversity and inclusion experiences of non-Black students at a small, private HBCU located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. A hermeneutical phenomenological research design was used to highlight non-Black students' lived experiences on their input. The theoretical framework for this study was based on Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. Individual interviews, a focus group interview, and protocol writing were used to collect data from 14 undergraduate students. The data was analyzed using Saldaña's (2021) two-cycle coding. This study revealed various implications for policymaking, practices, and empirical research, which emerged from the findings. Furthermore, the data and findings of this study supported and verified the theoretical framework, revealing that academic and social integration are crucial to student success. Additionally, previous experiences were a prerequisite to assimilation at an HBCU campus. Moreover, this study highlighted recommendations for future research on diversity and inclusion on HBCU campuses, which may have consequences for policy creation and implementation on HBCU campuses nationwide.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Non-Black Students' Perceptions of Diversity and Inclusion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

- Are you 18-25 years of age?
- Are you a full-time graduate or undergraduate student?
- Do you live on campus?
- Do you identify with any racial group other than African American?

If you answered **yes** to each of the questions listed above, you might be eligible to participate in a research study.

This research study explores student perceptions and lived experiences of diversity and inclusion at historically black colleges and universities.

Participants will participate in a one-to-one audio- and video-recorded interview, an audio- and video-recorded focus group interview, and protocol writing. The interviews and writing protocol will take 30-45 minutes each, and the focus group will take 45-60 minutes.

If you would like to participate, contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below.

A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview.

[redacted] a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact [redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix B

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Non-Black Students' Perceptions of Diversity and Inclusion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: [redacted] Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. participate, you must be at least 18-25 years of age, a full-time graduate or undergraduate student, live on campus, and self-identify as another race other than African-American. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

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

The study explores the response of historically black colleges and universities to multiculturalism as a growing phenomenon and the existential experiences of non-black students attending HBCUs. At this stage in the research, multiculturalism will be generally defined as cultural and ethnic diversity or diversity.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

As a participant in this study you will:

1. Second, to participate in a one-to-one interview, a focus group interview, and a protocol writing. The interview session will be video and audio recorded for data collection and will take between 30-45 minutes. The focus group will also video and audio recorded and is expected to last 45 to 60 minutes. The writing protocol is expected to last 30 to 45 minutes. All recorded material will be kept confidential and stored in a locked safe.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include providing first-hand insight into attending an HBCU as a non-African-American student. In addition, the shared experiences may help other non-African-American students decide to attend an HBCU. Other institutions may use the study's findings to improve policies and practices to improve diversity and inclusion on campus.

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. Additional steps to protect participant identities will be taken as follows:

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted where others cannot listen or create distractions.
- All 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.
- Individual Interviews and focus group discussions 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.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. However, while discouraged, other focus group members may share what was discussed with people outside the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with [redacted] If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any questions 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/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and not included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is [redacted]. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him [redacted] you may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [redacted]

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 [redacted]

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are [redacted] researchers [redacted]

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. Furthermore, I have asked questions and have received answers. Therefore, 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

Appendix C

Liberty University IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 16, 2023

Gary Tyler
[redacted]

Re: IRB Conditional Approval - IRB-FY23-24-527 NON-BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear [redacted]

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been conditionally approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Conditional approval means that your complete approval is pending our receipt of certain items, which are listed below:

Documented approval from each research site you are enrolling in your study. Acceptable forms of documentation include a letter on official letterhead or a time-and-date stamped email from a person with the authority to grant permission.

Please keep in mind that you are not permitted to begin recruiting participants or collecting data until you have submitted the above item(s) and have been granted complete approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well as you continue working toward complete approval.

Sincerely,

[redacted]
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix D

Site IRB Approval Letter

November 27, 2023

[redacted]
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
[redacted]

Dear Mr. [redacted]

After carefully reviewing your research proposal entitled NON-BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY, we have decided to permit you to conduct your study at [redacted]

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ We will provide our membership list to [redacted] and [redacted] may use it to contact our members to invite them to participate in his research study.

X☒ We grant permission for [redacted] contact [redacted] undergraduate students to invite them to participate in his research study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Appendix E

Email Recruitment

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of a doctoral degree requirement. My research examines the diversity and inclusion of non-black students attending a historically black college or university from a student's perspective. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 -25 years of age, identify with another race other than African American, live on campus, and be full-time graduate or undergraduate students. Participants will take part in a one-to-one audio- and video-recorded interview, an audio- and video-recorded focus group interview, and protocol writing. The interviews and writing protocol will take 30-45 minutes, and the focus group will take 45-60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested for this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [redacted] for more information and to schedule an interview.

A consent document containing additional information about my research will be emailed to you one week before the interview. If you choose to participate, you must sign and return the consent document to me during the interview/focus group.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Appendix F

Recruitment Sample for Social Media

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Liberty University. My research aims to explore student perceptions and lived experiences of diversity and inclusion at historically black colleges and universities. To participate, you must be 18-25 years of age, a full-time graduate or undergraduate student, live on campus, and identify as other than African American. Participants will take part in a one-to-one audio- and video-recorded interview, an audio- and video-recorded focus group interview, and protocol writing. The interviews and writing protocol will take 30-45 minutes, and the focus group will take 45-60 minutes. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please send me a direct message for more information. A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview, and you will need to sign and return it at the time of the interview.

Appendix G

Qualitative Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Phenomenological Research Questions:

1. How would you define diversity as it relates to higher education?
2. How would you define inclusivity?
3. What key factors guided you as you decided to attend college?
4. When did you decide to attend this college, and why?
5. Please explain or give an example of how this college has provided culturally diverse programs and activities that promote collaboration and understanding of other races, ethnic groups, and nationalities.
6. What classroom experiences have you had with other students who are not of the same race, ethnicity, or nationality?
7. Describe the ways your professors involve you and other students in collaborating on the the subject of cultural diversity?
8. What type of assignments have your professors organized on cultural diversity, which promote collaboration in the classroom?
9. Describe a problematic class discussion on race, ethnicity, and nationality.
10. Share your most positive experience with students of another race/ethnicity/nationality on campus, during activities, or in the classroom?

Appendix H

Sample Focus Group Interview

Focus Group Questions

1. What made you decide to choose a college? SQ1
2. What role did your family play in choosing a college to attend? SQ1
3. What ultimately led you to choose an HBCU? SQ1
4. What have you experienced in the classroom? SQ1
5. How does your professor make the classroom experience inclusive? SQ1
6. What has your institution done to promote cultural diversity and inclusion? SQ4
7. What activities or programs would you recommend creating an environment for non-black students to thrive socially? SQ2
8. How do you cope with the challenges you experienced as a non-black student attending an HBCU? SQ3
9. What kind of academic environment would you recommend to leadership to attract and benefit non-black students? SQ4
10. Describe any support you have received from your institution to integrate socially into an HBCU environment fully. SQ4
11. What can the university do better to improve diversity and inclusion on campus?

Appendix I

Sample Prompt for Protocol Writing

Protocol Writing Prompt

In 500 words or less, describe your experiences as a non-Black student attending an HBCU. Please include classroom experiences and interactions with other students, professors, administration, faculty, and staff. Describe your level of comfort socially and academically. Also, based on your experiences, describe what the university can do better to improve diversity and inclusion on campus.

Appendix J

Thematic Table

Themes	Subthemes
Academic Integration	Academic Commitment
	Classroom Environment
Social Integration	Extracurricular Activities
	Previous Diversity Experiences
	Prior Connections and Friendships
Stress Management	Alone Time
	Staying Busy
	Talking to Someone They Trust