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### "IN THE UNIVERSITY BUT NOT OF THE UNIVERSITY": EXAMINING INSTITUTIONALIZED COUNTERSPACES THROUGH A STAFF PERSPECTIVE

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The University of San Francisco

“IN THE UNIVERSITY BUT NOT OF THE UNIVERSITY”:  
EXAMINING INSTITUTIONALIZED COUNTERSPACES THROUGH A STAFF  
PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the  
University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS  
in  
Organization and Leadership

By  
Omar Ramirez

Fall 2020

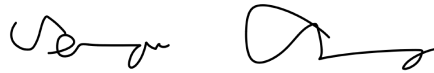
This thesis, written by  
Omar Ramirez  
University of San Francisco  
December 28, 2020

under the guidance of the project committee,  
and approved by all its members,  
has been accepted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

In

Organization and Leadership



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(Instructor)



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(Faculty Advisor)

29 December 2020

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(Date)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	1
Background and Need.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	3
Research Questions/Hypotheses .....	4
Theoretical Framework and Rationale .....	4
Limitations of the Study.....	5
Significance of the Study.....	6
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Campus Racial Climate and Students of Color.....	11
Students of Color’s Perception and Experience of Campus Climate .....	11
The Negative Impact of Racial Campus Climate on Students of Color.....	13
Counterspaces in Higher Education .....	15
Summary.....	17
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	19
Setting.....	19
Participants .....	20
Data Collection Tools and Instruments.....	21
Procedure.....	22
Data Analysis .....	23
Human Subjects Approval .....	23
Researcher’s Background.....	24
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	25
Findings.....	25

History of the CRC .....	25
Purpose of the CRC .....	28
Benefits of the CRC.....	31
Challenges of the CRC .....	36
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS .....	41
Discussion.....	42
Recommendations.....	46
Recommendations for Future Research.....	46
Recommendations for Practice .....	47
Conclusions .....	48
REFERENCES .....	50

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to first acknowledge the participants who were generous with their time, critical of the multiple levels of oppression present on campus, compassionate towards all who seek to grow, and kind through process of growth. Thank you for sharing your stories, experiences, thoughts, and perspectives. Through our interaction, I experienced growth as a scholar, but more importantly, as a person and practitioner. I hope this work does your stories and perspective justice.

Thank you to the communities I found at UC Berkeley and USF. The community of colleagues, faculty, and staff who both challenged and supported me as a scholar practitioner. Navigating through this academic endeavor was possible for me with the guidance of my femtors, mentors, advisors, and instructors. Thank you, Susan, Sunny, Fabrizio, Dr. Chong, and Dr. Smith. Thank you to the students I have the honor and privilege to work for; every day you teach me that I am always in a constant state of becoming, and every day I strive to do the same for you.

My deepest sense of gratitude to my family, cousins, uncles, and aunts for your continuous love and encouragement. To my kind and funny siblings, Diana and Miguel: you have beared witness to the processes that brought the world the many iterations of me. You have been there with your love and humor through the times that this process was joyful, or painful, or beautiful, or bleak or all the above. Today's iteration of me does not exist without you, and my deepest of gratitude for that.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my best friend, coach, and partner, Julienne. You kept me focused and accountable throughout my graduate school experience, and especially through the process of this thesis. Your patience and love nourished my spirit, your support, and advice grounded me, your encouragement and kindness motivated me. Thank you for grinding it out with me. I think it's time: put me in coach.

## ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative case study, this thesis examines a university counterspace that serves Students of Color through the perspective of the staff who work in that space. The case study aimed to explore four areas of investigation: the interviewees' knowledge and perceptions of 1) the history of their counterspace; 2) the purpose of their counterspace; 3) the benefits of their counterspace; and 4) challenges of their counterspace. The counterspace was a program within a large, 4-year, public, R-1 research university. Five staff from the counterspace were interviewed. A thematic analysis of the data suggests that students were an essential part of the history of the counterspace, and staff were central to the institutionalization of the counterspace and intentionally shared the history through staff orientation and student training. The counterspace's purpose disrupts the university's negative campus climate by centering students' voices and narratives and being a space in the community that acts as an accessible physical space and collaborative partner. Furthermore, findings suggest that the counterspace has a positive impact on the psychological, social, and academic experiences of Students of Color. However, the counterspace experiences institutional challenges, such as ideological differences with university administrators and a lack of institutional investment by the university through structural challenges that manifest as bureaucracy and limited resources. These findings are discussed with regard to implications for further research and practice in higher education.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the United States Census Bureau projections show significant changes in racial demographics of the country as a whole, and this trend is also seen in individuals pursuing postsecondary education across the country as the percentage of Students of Color increases at 4-year colleges and universities (de Brey et al., 2019). However, many Students of Color<sup>1</sup> who enroll in higher education institutions find an unwelcoming environment on their campuses (Miller, 2014). As a response many institutions have uplifted their goals and mission of creating an inclusive, diverse, and multicultural campus. One way institutions of higher education use to measure the degree to which their campus is successful in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment is campus racial climate.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Students of Color experience a hostile environment in both predominantly white institutions and at institutions with higher levels of racial/ethnic diversity in the student body (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). In a study that surveyed 4,037 underrepresented students (i.e., American Indian/Alaska Native, African American/Black, and Latinx students) at 31 private and public four-year colleges and universities, more than half (up to 55.4%) of Black students felt some level of exclusion from campus events and activities at predominantly white institutions. At institutions where the percentage of underrepresented students exceeds 20%, the feeling of exclusion is 30% among Latinx and 20% among Black students (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). These

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I have chosen to capitalize terms that include People of Color, such as Students of Color, to reaffirm and respect the experience of historically minoritized groups of people. At the same time, white appears in lower case because I have chosen to reject the grammatical norm of capitalizing white, as it would affirm the power the term holds.



findings highlight the negative experiences of underrepresented students as they try to engage with others, campus events, and activities on college and university campuses.

One problem for Students of Color in higher education institutions is that they encounter unwelcoming spaces, which can have a detrimental effect to their mental health, sense of belonging, and academic achievement (Solórzano et al., 2000). As a response to the racial climate, counterspaces are created. Solórzano et al. (2000) define counterspaces as sites on- and off-campus where People of Color oppose the deficit view of People of Color as well as establish and maintain a positive racial climate. Counterspaces help Students of Color to have a space on campus where they are able to find cultural affirmation and create a space for healing from the psychological traumas experienced as a result of the manifestations of racism within their campus (Bourke, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Nunez, 2011). In addition, counterspaces provide Students of Color with a sense of belonging and community, cultural integrity, and validation of their experiences at predominantly white institutions (Grier-Reed, 2010; Windchief & Joseph, 2015). This study will focus on institutionalized counterspaces, which are counterspaces that are officially associated with the college or university and are funded specifically or in part to support Students of Color (e.g., affinity groups, cultural centers, multicultural centers).

Much of the existing literature focuses on the benefits of counterspaces on the student experience. An important gap identified in the literature is the lack of studies on the perceptions of staff who work in counterspaces. Staff who are employed within counterspaces work directly with Students of Color, develop the programs through the counterspace, and interact with the administrators of the institution as it relates to their work with Students of Color. Their perceptions of counterspaces are important because they are positioned both in the service of

Students of Color and to their institution. Understanding the perceptions staff have of counterspaces may further understand impact counterspaces have on the institution. The perceptions of staff in counterspaces can inform the strategies and policies universities implement to address underlying systemic issues that impact the experience of Students of Color.

### **Background and Need**

While the racial demographics of higher education are changing, that does not mean that the racial climate is changing along with the demographics (Cabrera et al., 2017). Researchers have consistently found a discrepancy in perceptions of racial campus climate between Students of Color and their white counterparts; Students of Color reported their campus climate as more racist than white students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The perceptions extend to the experiences for Students of Color as they are negatively impacted by the racial climate of their institution (Lewis & McKissic, 2010; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Campus policies and practices that are rooted in whiteness contribute to a hostile racial climate (Cabrera et al., 2017; Gusa, 2010). Previous research suggests that counterspaces can have a positive impact on the experience for Students of Color in mitigating the negative impact of a hostile racial climate (Bourke, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Nunez, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct a case study in order to develop an understanding of how higher education staff perceive and understand institutionalized counterspaces, which serve Students of Color. There are a variety of types of counterspaces that are created for Students of Color, and students themselves often create the counterspaces. For this purpose of this thesis, a counterspace will be defined as a university-funded program, service, and/or office that specifically and intentionally serves the needs of Students of Color. The research will take

place at a historically white public research institution and will examine the knowledge and perceptions that staff have of their respective counterspaces.

### **Research Questions/Hypotheses**

Four research questions will guide this study:

- 1) What knowledge and perceptions do staff who work in a counterspaces have of the history of their institutionalized counterspace?
- 2) What are staff's knowledge and perceptions of the counterspace's purpose?
- 3) What are staff's knowledge and perceptions of the benefits of their counterspace?
- 4) What are staff's knowledge and perceptions of the challenges of their counterspace?

### **Theoretical Framework and Rationale**

This study will be guided by the concepts of 'whiteness' as racial discourse (Cabrera et al., 2017) and *White Institutional Presence* (WIP) (Gusa, 2010), as well as Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Bioecological Model within the context of higher education. Cabrera and colleagues (2017) describe how whiteness is situated in every aspect of higher education—from the people, the policies, and within the history of American higher education. Through the interrogation of whiteness, People of Color are able to engage in the discourse that can help inform programs, policies, and practice. According to Cabrera et al. (2017), it is the failure to interrogate the role of whiteness which can affect researchers' understanding of Students of Color in higher education and further marginalize Students of Color. WIP refers to the unnamed practices and ideologies of whiteness that drive campus climate (Gusa, 2010). WIP can provide an understanding of how a hostile racial climate that Students of Color experience is rooted in the operation of whiteness on campuses. The rationale for using Cabrera's et al. (2017) concept of whiteness as racial discourse and Gusa's (2010) WIP is that they provide a framework to

highlight the role whiteness plays in contributing to the hostile racial climate that pervades campuses and influences Students of Color. Also, taken together, interrogating the racial discourse of the multiple spheres that individuals are embedded in will allow researchers to understand the role of counterspaces differently than they have been currently studied.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Ecological Systems Model emphasizes that an individual is embedded in a series of environmental systems, or contexts, that continuously interact with one another and with the individual in order to influence a person's development or experience. These environmental systems range from immediate contexts, such as the family, peer groups, college or university staff, and faculty, to broader contexts, such as neighborhoods, subcultures, and even the greater society. The rationale for using the Ecological Systems Model is that it allows researchers to define and assess the college student experience within the current cultural context by recognizing how changes on college campuses, such as through policies and programs, can influence the daily lives of students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations of this study include that it will take place at a single university, focusing on institutionalized counterspaces that mostly focus on undergraduate students. The university is a 4-year, public, R1: Doctoral Universities (very high research activity) based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, so generalization of the study's findings to other types of institutions or counterspaces that serve other types of students, such as graduate and professional students, is limited. In addition, my participation as a staff member who serves undergraduate students is a limitation of this study. I must carefully consider and minimize the impact of bias regarding the subject of this study and during my interactions with the study participants.

## **Significance of the Study**

As the percentage of Students of Color continues to increase in higher education institutions, the institutional responsibility of providing a welcoming environment is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid (de Brey et al., 2019). When Students of Color enroll in higher education they are entering an unwelcoming environment on their campuses (Miller, 2014). Navigating through spaces embedded within whiteness has significant negative effects on Students of Color (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Counterspaces provide Students of Color with a welcoming community within their campuses, helps create a sense of belonging, and make sense of and cope with their experiences at historically white institutions (Bourke, 2010; Nunez, 2011; Windchief & Joseph, 2015). In other words, counterspaces provide Students of Color with a space to heal from the trauma experienced in other spaces on campus. The current literature for benefits of counterspaces focuses on mitigating the negative effects of a hostile racial climate on individual Students of Color, while little has been focused on addressing the role university staff play in addressing structural and systemic issues that contribute in maintaining a hostile racial environment. While it is important to continue to understand the impact of counterspaces, more research is needed to investigate the ongoing efforts of higher education staff that address the needs of counterspaces and the students that these spaces serve. This study is designed to facilitate the initial analysis of staff knowledge and perception of counterspaces and the students they serve as well as inform how programs, policymakers, and practitioners can best serve students.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Institutions of higher education operate from a historically white perspective, which becomes normalized throughout the campus culture and can contribute to the creation of a hostile campus racial climate (Gusa, 2010). Research suggests that Students of Color at both predominately white institutions and non-predominantly white institutions experience significant levels of feelings of exclusion on their campus and are targets of racial discrimination, which contributes to students' perceptions of the campus racial climate as hostile (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). A hostile campus racial climate has negative psychological, social, and academic impact for Students of Color (Franklin et al., 2014; Wasserman, Yildirim & Yonai, 2014; Yosso et al., 2009). One response to the negative impacts of a hostile campus racial climate are the creation of counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces can have a positive impact on the psychological, social, and academic experiences of Students of Color in higher education who experience a culture of devaluing of experiences by white peers, racism, and feelings of isolation on campus (Grier-Reed, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Nunez, 2011). It is important to further understand the role institutionalized counterspaces play in helping mitigate the negative effects of a hostile racial climate for Students of Color, through the perspectives of staff as well as the historical and social context of the counterspace. However, the existing literature is oriented around the individual experiences of the students within the counterspace.

The claim for this concept is that knowledge and perceptions of staff within the counterspaces they work in is important. Three sets of evidence justify this claim. These reasons include (a) Students of Color experience and perceive a hostile campus racial climate which impacts the psychological, social, and academic wellbeing of Students of Color; (b) counterspaces can have a positive impact on the psychological, social, and academic experiences

of Students of Color in higher education; and c) understanding the sociohistorical context of higher education can provide a lens to view the role of counterspaces in relation to the conditions that influence campus racial climate, which would help inform programs, policies, and practices that impact the experience of Students of Color. Side by Side reasoning is used to justify the claim that staff knowledge and perceptions of counterspaces and the students that counterspaces serve is important because the literature includes several sets of authors, theorists, and studies. Taken together, these different types of evidence support the claim that it is important to understand staff knowledge and perceptions of counterspaces to better understand institutionalized counterspaces.

### **Theoretical Framework**

One framework that considers the historical and social context of higher education is Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Ecological Systems Model. This model emphasizes that a person is embedded in a series of environmental systems that continuously interact with one another and with the individual in order to influence a person's development or daily experience. More specifically, a college student interacts with these different environmental systems, and these environmental systems range from proximal contexts, such as peer groups, faculty, student support staff, and counterspaces, to more distal contexts, such as university policies and the greater higher education landscape in the United States. In addition to these environmental systems or contexts, the ecological systems approach incorporates a temporal dimension and emphasizes that changes in an individual or the social environment that occur over time can influence the direction of an individual's development (i.e., whether development or a person's experience is positive or negative; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This means that the Ecological Systems Model allows researchers to recognize how changes on college campuses, such as changes in the student population as well as services and support offered to students, can

influence the daily lives of students. Furthermore, researchers can understand the college student experience as a process that does not simply occur in isolation but rather through social interactions and under the influences of social settings, such as those that occur in counterspaces (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The rationale for using the Ecological Systems Model is that it allows researchers to examine how environments on college campuses, such as counterspaces, and the staff who provide services to students through institutionalized counterspaces can influence the daily lives of students.

Additionally, the theoretical framework of Cabrera et al.'s (2017) concept of whiteness as racial discourse and Gusa's (2010) White Institutional Presence (WIP) will guide this study. Taken together, these two approaches allow researchers to consider the conditions that may have led to the experiences of students as they try to successfully navigate and persist through college, more specifically, how whiteness as racial discourse and White Institutional Presence is rooted in higher education. By taking into account Cabrera and colleagues' (2017) whiteness as racial discourse and Gusa's (2010) concept of White Institutional Presence (WIP) as well as using Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Bioecological Model, these frameworks provide a lens administrators and others might use to understand the experiences of Students of Color in hostile racial campus climates within the social, cultural, and temporal/historical context of whiteness.

### **The Importance of Sociohistorical Context of Higher Education**

While counterspaces help mitigate the negative impacts of hostile racial campus climate on Students of Color, it is important to understand how campus policies and programs contribute to the campus climate. One way to gain insights on the role that policies and programs play is to understand the historical and social context that Students of Color exist within colleges and universities (Cabrera, et al., 2017). Previous research suggests that higher education was created



to serve white students from wealthier families; through the creation of colleges, the division between the aristocrats and non-aristocrats was maintained (Rudolph, 1991). Not only was higher education created to serve wealthy white students, but institutions neglected to recruit non-white-wealthy-males and specifically created policies that excluded women, low-income students, and Students of Color (Karabel, 2005). The continuous proliferation of higher education institutions in the United States created a heightened competition for students (Rudolph, 1991). As the percentage of Students of Color continues to grow, changing the structural diversity of colleges and universities, that does not mean that the historical *modus operandi*, centered around serving the interests of white students and their families, has changed (Cabrera et al., 2017; de Brey et al., 2019). Cabrera and colleagues (2017) present whiteness as a social concept that includes an unwillingness to name nuances of systemic racism, avoids acknowledging the experience of minoritized groups, and minimizes the role of racism in U.S. history. They suggest that much of diversity initiatives at universities attempt to resolve racial campus issues by focusing on minoritized groups but ignoring the root of the problem, which is whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017). The challenge with focusing on whiteness on college campuses is that whiteness is often misunderstood as meaning white people; however, at the same time, whiteness is both ambiguous and effective in structuring society (Cabrera et al., 2017).

In addition, historically white institutions are operating from a historically white perspective (Gusa 2010). The social context in which Students of Color are experiencing the racial climate is what Gusa (2010) has termed *White Institutional Presence* (WIP), which is the often-unnamed practices and ideologies of whiteness that drive campus climate. Through the WIP framework, Gusa argues that higher education is a space whites feel entitled to; creates the expectations for students, faculty, and staff to conform to the one ideology; obscures white

privilege; and creates a physical and social distance from People of Color (Gusa 2010). The hostile racial climate Students of Color experience is rooted in the operation of WIP on campuses (Gusa 2010). In neglecting to identify how policies and practices of universities and colleges sustain, an institutional culture of whiteness negatively contributes to the racial climate. However, WIP is not often linked to climate because it is seen as the norm (Gusa 2010). In addition, there is a significant discrepancy between how white students and Students of Color perceive campus racial climate; more specifically, white students perceive campus racial climate as welcoming to a higher degree than Students of Color, while Student of Color perceive the campus racial climate as hostile (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). As the racial demographics shift to an increasing percentage of Students of Color, the initial purpose of higher education, centered around serving white students has not changed higher education (Cabrera, et al., 2017; de Brey et al., 2019). Because of the changing campus demographics, understanding the historical and social context of how institutions of higher education were created and how WIP operates can help researchers to provide insights to why there is a difference in the perception of campus climate between white students and Students of Color and how campus climate affects students.

### **Campus Racial Climate and Students of Color**

#### **Students of Color's Perception and Experience of Campus Climate**

Previous research suggests that campus racial climate is an issue at both predominantly white institutions and institutions with higher percentages of underrepresented students (non-predominantly white institutions). Through the use of the Diverse Learning Environment (DLE) survey, Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) provide a snapshot of the campus racial climate underrepresented students (Black, Latinx, and Native American) experience in U.S. four-year institutions. By examining private and public four-year colleges and universities, the researchers noted that more than half of Black students felt excluded on campus at predominantly white

institutions. At institutions where the percentage of underrepresented students exceeds 20%, the feeling of exclusion decreases among Latinx and Black students (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). This trend among respondents remains similar regarding the percentage of students who have been the target of verbal forms of discrimination. At predominantly white institutions, 60.4% of underrepresented students indicated being targets of verbal forms of discrimination. That number decreases to 57.2% at institutions where underrepresented students are between 21% and 35% of the student population, then further decreases to 45.8% at institutions where the underrepresented students are 36% or above of the student body (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012).

While Hurtado and Ruiz presented the quantitative data of feelings of exclusion, in another study, Solórzano et al. capture glimpses of these experiences via stories shared by Black students. They captured students' experiences inside and outside the classroom as they face microaggressions multiple times a day. Solórzano et al. (2000) define microaggressions as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward People of Color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). In one instance a Black student received a high grade on a quiz and was confronted by the professor, accused of cheating, and forced to retake the quiz in isolation under the supervision of a graduate student (Solórzano et al., 2000). Another student shared the stories of study groups being formed and they are usually the last to be invited, which leads to the added pressure of needed to “prove yourself” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 67). These stories highlight the different ways Students of Color experience racially hostile environments inside and outside the classroom.

Additionally, previous research suggests that the hostile racial climate experienced by Students of Color is not experienced at the same level by their white peers (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). On campuses in the U.S., particularly at predominantly white

institutions, white students were the most satisfied with the social environment in their campus; furthermore, white students also incorrectly assumed Students of Color feel the same (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The level of satisfaction with the social environment on campuses is related to the perception students have of the campus climate, specifically the degree in which they perceive the campus as welcoming or hostile (Cabrera et al., 2017).

### **The Negative Impact of Racial Campus Climate on Students of Color**

Previous research suggests that campus climate is related to students' experiences on campus (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). For example, hostile racial campus climate can have a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of Students of Color (Franklin et al., 2014; Nadal et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2007). In a national multicampus study of Black male students at elite historically white campuses, Smith et al. (2007) present racial battle fatigue (RBF) as a theoretical framework to examine the psychological stress responses in coping with a racially hostile environment. Symptoms of RBF can develop from chronic exposure to stressful race related conditions (Smith et al., 2007). Findings from this study suggest that Black male students perceived the campus environment as less welcoming and more hostile toward Black Students. Also, Black students experienced various forms of racial microaggressions on campus academic, social, and public spaces (Smith et al., 2007). The hostile racial environment created psychological responses consistent with RBF, including constant anxiety, inability to sleep, sleep broken by conflict specific dreams, intrusive thoughts, loss of self-confidence, anger, confusion, and resentment. While previous research using the RBF framework were qualitative, Franklin et al. (2014) built upon the literature through a quantitative study, which finds that the largest impact of RBF-related psychological stress responses of Latinx students are racial microaggressions found in a hostile campus racial climate. In another quantitative study, Nadal et al. (2014) found that that the self-esteem for Students of Color is harmed as a result of racial

microaggressions, particularly if the racial microaggressions occur in an educational environment.

Negative racial campus climates also affect Students of Color's sense of connection to the college or university. In a study examining how various forms of stress and campus racial climate perceptions affect the persistence decisions of Students of Color, Johnson et al. (2014) surveyed 1,837 first year students at a predominantly white, selective, research university. For Students of Color, observing racism on campus is negatively related to campus environment perceptions, and this perception is positively related to institutional commitment. Not only does negative racial campus climates influence Students of Color institutional commitment, but there is a significant direct relationship between institutional commitment and academic progress into the second year for Students of Color (Johnson et al., 2014). That is, for Students of Color, higher institutional commitment was related to a greater likelihood that they would progress into the second year of college. In another study examining the impact of campus racial climate of Latinx students, researchers also found that expressing race-related stress can affect Latinx students academically (Yosso et al., 2009). More specifically, experiencing a hostile campus racial climate is related to less likelihood of seeking out academic assistance when needed and approaching faculty for help as well as poorer performance on tests (Yosso et al., 2009). Because hostile racial campus climates can have a negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing and social and academic experience, it is increasingly important for administrators in higher education to understand how their students perceive campus racial climate and ways colleges and universities can create a more welcoming environment for Students of Color. In addition, because much of the existing research literature focuses on students' perceptions of campus racial climate, researchers leave out the voices of those actively involved in creating racial

climates, such as university staff, which can uphold the dominant narrative or help advance counternarratives.

### **Counterspaces in Higher Education**

One way colleges and universities address hostile racial campus climate is through the creation of counterspaces. Counterspaces are sites on- and off-campus where People of Color oppose the deficit view of People of Color (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators, or other students emphasize the abilities and strengths of Students of Color instead of focusing on the areas where they may lack) as well as establish and maintain a positive racial climate (Solórzano et al., 2000). Some examples of counterspaces are student organizations, student services centers or offices, fraternities and sororities, and student-organized study halls aimed at supporting particular student populations that tend to be underserved by the college or university (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Counterspaces can have a positive impact on the psychological, social, and academic experiences of Students of Color in higher education. Evidence of this can be found in studies that focus on specific racial/ethnic groups, such as American Indian/Alaskan Native (Windchief & Joseph, 2015). Studies that focus on the experiences of students who identify as Black include Bourke (2010), Grier-Reed (2010) and Lewis and McKissic (2010). Nunez (2011) and Yosso et al. (2009) focus on the Latinx experience.

Experiencing daily interpersonal and institutional incidents of racism in higher education places a psychological burden on students (Franklin et al., 2014; McGee, & Stovall, 2015). Participating in and engaging with counterspaces can help mitigate the negative impacts of racism by providing a space where Students of Color can make sense of their experience in higher education (Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009). Counterspaces can help achieve this for students by building a sense of community that represents the cultural wealth of students' home communities. In addition, self-esteem for Students of Color is heightened, and

counterspaces provide a place to vent the feelings of frustration and anger (Yosso et al., 2009). Counterspaces that allow for students to express negative emotions may allow students to cultivate friendships with others on campus who may share many of their experiences.

The benefits of counterspaces extend beyond the self for Students of Color. In studying the social networks of Black student participants in the African American Student Network (AFAM), Grier-Reed and Wilson (2015) found that Black students in AFAM had higher levels of social integration than Black students who did not participate in AFAM. In addition, AFAM students reported a higher number of non-family connections than non-AFAM students, and of those connections, 70% of the social connections for AFAM participants were at the university, compared to 54% of non-AFAM (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2015). The researchers suggested that this may be due to students connecting with others who can provide mentorship, validation, support, and resources for navigating a hostile racial campus climate. These findings are important because they highlight how counterspaces help Students of Color build a community after feeling isolated in higher education.

Additionally, counterspaces can help with the retention and graduation of Students of Color. In a study looking at the retention and graduation rates of Black students who participated and did not participate in AFAM, findings suggest that the Black students in AFAM had a significantly better 1-year retention rate when compared to Black students who did not participate, 87% to 80% respectively (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). There was also a significant difference in the graduation rate; AFAM students' 4-year graduation rate was 68% compared to 52% 4-year graduation rate of Black students who did not participate in AFAM (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). When looking at the retention and graduation rate, it is important to note that Black students participating in AFAM were not better academically prepared in high school as

compared to non-AFAM Black students (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). Taken together, these studies suggest the positive impact counterspaces at colleges and universities have on Students of Color, which further underscores the importance for administrators to understand counterspaces and the students they serve. Furthermore, previous research highlights the perspective of students who participate in counterspaces, but the literature does not include the perspective of university staff who work with students in counterspaces.

### **Summary**

At both predominantly white institutions and more diverse campuses, Students of Color experience interpersonal and institutional racism, which contributes to their perception of campuses in higher education as racially hostile environments. Experiencing and perceiving campus racial climate as hostile can have a negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing and social and academic experience. Researchers have demonstrated that in a hostile campus racial climate, Students of Color experience several symptoms of racial battle fatigue, feelings of isolation, and are less willing to seek academic help when needed. Various qualitative and quantitative studies show that counterspaces are able to mitigate the negative impacts of a hostile campus racial climate by helping build cultural integrity, create a sense of belonging, and make sense of and cope with racism that Students of Color encounter on campus.

Much of the literature focuses on the perspective of students who receive support or services from counterspaces and does not include the perspective of university staff who work with students in counterspaces or students who work as undergraduate staff in these spaces. In addition, existing research explores the impact of counterspaces on the individual or groups of people and does not consider the relationship between counterspaces and other stakeholders, such as the institution itself or the surrounding community. While counterspaces help mitigate the negative impacts of hostile racial campus climate on Students of Color, it is important for



university staff to understand how campus policies and programs improve campus climate, support the experience and success of Students of Color, and affect different stakeholders. When making decisions on policy and/or programs, it would be helpful for university staff to understand the experiences of Students of Color in hostile campus racial climates within the social, cultural, and temporal/historical context of how whiteness operates in higher education.

## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to further understand how higher education staff perceive and understand institutionalized counterspaces. This study will examine specifically a university-sponsored program that addresses issues Students of Color encounter in their undergraduate experience. The research methodology for this study will be a case study, relying primarily on interview methods. This form of research aims to provide a reflective interpretation of counterspaces through the perspective of university staff.

### **Setting**

The study interviewed using Zoom video conferencing. While the interviews took place over Zoom, the case study is a program within State University, a pseudonym for the university. State University is a large, 4-year, public, R-1 research university campus located in the Western region of the United States. In fall 2019, total student enrollment was less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2% African American, 36% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 16% Hispanic/Latino, and 24% white (US Department of Education, 2020).

The Cross-Cultural Resource Center (CRC), a pseudonym for the program, has one Director, two Assistant Directors, and an in-house therapist/wellness coordinator. In addition, a cohort of 25-30 undergraduate interns work with the CRC, and the majority are paid through work study funding. The undergraduate interns perform duties through five committees: 1) Art & Beautification, 2) Curriculum and Pedagogy, 3) Library and Archive, 4) Garden and Wellness, and 5) Outreach and Media. Undergraduate interns self-select into the committees, and often their work will overlap into different committees. The undergraduate interns have projects throughout the year based on their own interests. In addition, the work of the CRC is anchored in

their core values, which are: 1) student-led, 2) anti-oppression, 3) sustainability and wellness, 4) popular education, and 5) cross-cultural understanding and solidarity.

### **Participants**

The researcher used a convenience sampling procedure (Bui, 2020). The researcher sent an initial email to the Director of the CRC. The initial email contained a summary of the proposed study and a request for five participants. The Director of the CRC and the researcher met via Zoom video conferencing to discuss timeline and availability of staff members. The Director of the CRC agreed to be a participant in the study and send a request to additional staff. The participants were restricted to those who work for and participate in the CRC and were available and accessible for interview. After the introductory email from the Director of the CRC to the individual potential participants and the researcher, four additional participants were identified. The final sample included five participants who worked in the CRC. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants in the study (see Table 1 for the pseudonyms and role(s) of each participant). Two participants were student-staff who engaged with the CRC as undergraduate interns; and three participants were staff members who worked full-time within the CRC. The five interviews were scheduled and conducted within three weeks of the initial email.

**Table 1**

*Pseudonyms and roles of study participants*

Pseudonyms	Role(s)
Emory	CRC Director
Uri	CRC Assistant Director, former CRC undergraduate intern, State University Alum
Amari	CRC Assistant Director, former CRC undergraduate intern, State University Alum
Celyn	CRC undergraduate intern, current State University Student
Frankie	CRC undergraduate intern, current State University Student

It is important to note that the reason for the truncated timeline was due to challenges in securing an initial site. The first site was located in a different university. An alumnus who participated in the program as an undergraduate sent an introductory email on behalf of the researcher to three staff members of the initial site. The staff members, in turn, included the Director of the initial site. Although there were several emails indicating their willingness to participate after four weeks of follow-up emails with the three staff members, the researcher decided to send invitation emails to 15 additional staff members to participate in the study. Of the 15 staff members, two replied with a willingness to participate, but after two weeks, they became hesitant and suspicious of the proposed study. The hesitation might have been influenced by the fact that researcher was only able to communicate with the site via email. Due to the pandemic, the researcher could not visit the site in-person or reach potential participants via their campus phone numbers. The researcher did offer a phone conversation to discuss questions they might have regarding the study. Because of challenges related to participant recruitment at this first site, the researcher decided to change plans and recruit participants at the CRC.

### **Data Collection Tools and Instruments**

This study used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve relying on a certain set of questions and trying to guide the conversation on those questions; however, the researcher allowed participants some leeway and freedom to speak about what is important to them. By using this technique, the interview flowed more naturally and allowed the participants to offer information or knowledge that the researcher may not have thought of in advance (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

The interview included questions focusing on four areas of investigation: interviewees' knowledge and perceptions of 1) the history of the CRC; 2) the CRC's purpose; 3) the benefits of the CRC; and 4) challenges of the CRC. While student-staff and full-time staff were asked the

same questions, two questions were re-worded based on the participant's role. The interview questions were:

1. How did you decide to work at State University?
  - a. For Student-staff: How did you decide to attend State University?
2. What challenges do Students of Color encounter at State University?
3. Tell me about what you know about the history of the CRC.
4. What's the purpose of the CRC?
5. What is the mission/values/vision of the CRC?
6. What impact does the CRC have on student life?
  - a. For Student-staff: In what ways has the CRC helped you and other students?
7. In what ways would State University be different if the CRC did not exist?
8. What are the challenges (or barriers) that impact the services/programs/events offered or coordinated in the CRC?
9. What is one thing that you think will help address the challenges/barriers faced by the CRC?
10. What have you enjoyed most in working in the CRC?

### **Procedure**

All interviews were conducted by the researcher. Each interview was approximately 1 hour long and conducted through Zoom video conferencing. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, explained definitions so that each participant had a clear understanding of the study, and obtained consent. Along with the pre-written questions, the researcher probed and asked follow-up questions for further elaboration and clarification.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were video recorded for accuracy and transcribed. The researcher indexed and annotated each transcription in order to locate emergent themes and patterns from the participants' responses. Specific interview questions were matched to answer the four research questions. A coding method was used to organize interview data into themes and issues around these research questions. An analysis of the data yielded from the five interviews with current staff members of the CRC revealed findings within the areas of the four research questions. Staff participants' responses to the interview questions were grouped to correspond to the research questions and then categorized for major themes or patterns. In addition, quotations were selected from the interviews to highlight the themes and concepts (Bui, 2020).

### **Human Subjects Approval**

The University of San Francisco (USF) Institutional Review Board has approved this study for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS). The purpose of this approval is to protect the participants during the research. Participants received and signed a consent form prior to the scheduled interview. The consent form included the purpose of the study, the actions requested, location of the study, potential risks and discomforts of involvement, the benefits of the study, and efforts to minimize risks to confidentiality. Efforts to minimize risks to confidentiality included replacing real names with pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts and observation notes. In addition, documents that contained personal identifiers were stored in a password-protected computer. At the scheduled time of the interview and before recording, the researcher reviewed the consent form once more with each participant. Before data collection began, the participants were reminded that they may stop the interview at any time for any reason. The participants were verbally asked for their consent one additional time before recording began.

## **Researcher's Background**

It is important for the researcher to recognize and acknowledge their positionality and potential biases. The researcher's experience in higher education is heavily influenced by growing up in a low-income, Latinx, mix immigration status family. The researcher entered the public education system not able to relate to his peers and teachers along the lines of race and income, often feeling othered. After graduating high school, the researcher enrolled in community college then transferred to a four-year university to complete an undergraduate degree. While the graduation rate at the institution the researcher attended as an undergraduate was above the national average and the overall number of students felt welcomed on campus, having to navigate a system of higher education without the guidance of my family presented a significant challenge to the researcher. Navigating through college and academically thriving was only possible for the researcher with the guidance of staff in higher education. The staff provided the information, explanation, and translation of the labyrinth of bureaucratic processes that many first-generation students encounter in higher education.

The researcher also acknowledges that a) as a staff member at a university, he is also a part of a larger higher education structure that is historically rooted in racism and systemic oppression, and b) they also have and continue to benefit from privileges of a heterosexual, cis-male with documentation status as an American citizen. As such, the researcher does not make the assumption their experience through his minoritized identities provide a substitute for the knowledge and experience offered by the participants in the intersectionality of their identities.

## CHAPTER IV RESULTS

The findings of this study reflect the perceptions and knowledge of five staff members of the CRC. The findings provide an understanding of four aspects of the CRC: the history of the CRC and how it was created; the purpose of the CRC and its work; the benefits of the CRC; and challenges the CRC experiences.

### **Findings**

#### **History of the CRC**

*“So much of the story, the [CRC] is actually at the heart of its student visioning and collaboration”*

*—Amari*

The first research question asked what were the staff's perception and knowledge of the history of the CRC. The data revealed that students are an essential part of the history of the CRC. University staff were central to the institutionalization of the CRC, and the history of the CRC is kept alive by its staff and intentionally shared and passed down through staff orientation and student training. All five participants connected the history of the CRC back to university student activism and uprisings in the 1960s. Emory further elaborated that student activism at the university and at other nearby universities in the area set the foundation among the Black, Mexican, Chicano, Native, and Filipino students to advocate for more representation and accessibility in higher education by calling for the creation of an Ethnic Studies department and the creation of a college or university “for the people and by the people.” Although a college or university “for the people and by the people” was not created in the end, an Ethnic Studies department was created at the university. While the CRC did not exist in the 1960s, participants stressed that student activism of the 1960s set the foundation for minoritized students (e.g.,



Black, Mexican, Chicano, Native, and Filipino students) to advocate for representation at the university, which was integral for the creation of the CRC decades later. Uri framed the connection, “it’s all this legacy of students’ struggle, student activism that has led to this what we now know as the [CRC].” Amari added, “the [CRC’s] history is about student vision. It's about student vision and those who are custodians of that vision, who hold that vision and keep trying to manifest it throughout the years.”

In addition to university student activism and uprisings in the 1960s, participants revealed that university student activism and pressure on the university in the 1990s helped in the creation of the CRC. In 1999, minoritized students, especially for Black and Native students, at the university felt the budgetary cutbacks of campus resources and in the Ethnic Studies department. Like in the 1960s, student activists organized together and called for representation and resources for minoritized students at the university. As a result, students were able to come to agreements with university administrators, such as the creation of a research center for the study of race and a multicultural center with a few staff positions. Most of the participants felt that because of continued student activism of the 1990s, the seed for the CRC was created at the university. Amari said, “The [CRC] was won through student struggles...So the original seeds of which are planted in the ‘60s, 1969, and again when students were organized under the banner in 1999.”

Another theme that arose in the data is that participants shared that there was a transition period between 1999 and 2009 where new staff helped steward the process for the creation of a memorandum of understanding between students and the university. During this period staff worked closely with students to figure out and create the infrastructure of the CRC, such as funding for staff and establishing the physical space for the CRC. The three full time staff participants stressed that in the establishment of the CRC, the creation of the CRC was student-

led, student-imagined, and student-created. Emory highlighted that “co-creation was so important to the history of [the CRC].” In addition, Emory shared, “That’s been really key to the [CRC] at all parts. Since the beginning is that it’s not a space for Students of Color. It’s *with* Students of Color.”

The full-time staff (Emory, Uri, and Amari) also shared that 2009-2016 was an important time, with 2015-2016 being particularly important because that was when the CRC moved into the physical space in which they are currently located. Since the CRC moved into a permanent space, the CRC has been a staffed and funded program on campus. When it comes to CRC’s history, participants acknowledged the importance of knowing the roots of the CRC. Emory noted that “it is not an antiquated history. It’s a very living history.” It is also worth noting that all participants were able to talk about the history of the CRC---the two undergraduate interns (Celyn and Frankie) learned the history of the CRC as part of their training; two staff members (Uri and Amari) are alumni of the CRC, learned the history of the CRC when they were undergraduate interns, and now teach the history of the CRC to current undergraduate interns as full-time staff; and Emory is the director of the CRC, has worked for the CRC since its inception, and continues to share the history of the CRC to community members. When describing the CRC’s history and reflecting on their experience learning about and teaching CRC’s history to students, Uri explained:

It excites me to think about the history. I’m like, yeah, all these steps and all this history that came before that really created the conditions for us to have the [CRC] that we have now, and I try to remind the students of the history often or to give them the space to hear from myself or [Amari] or other alumni of, like, what was the [CRC] like when you were a student, you know, I think the spirit of the [CRC] shows up in those years.

Frankie, who is an undergraduate student intern shared:

Actually, we can make the university, do this for us. And again, it's always a struggle.

But I think it's knowing about the history, it's very much for me always, like, realizing

that students are powerful and when we demand things we can get things done. Yeah, I

think that's definitely something that I always think about when I think about the history.

This highlights the importance the history of the CRC plays in its creation and existence with students.

### **Purpose of the CRC**

*“What if we can have a world where many worlds fit, which comes from indigenous thought.*

*How can we have a space or a community center that invites all these different lived experiences*

*and how can we learn from one another and be in solidarity, build coalitions.”*

– Uri

When asked what is the purpose of the CRC, all five participants mentioned the CRC's core values. Like the creation of the CRC, students were included in the creation of the core values of the CRC, and the core values centers students' vision for what they want from a space like the CRC. CRC's core values are: 1) student-led, 2) anti-oppression, 3) sustainability and wellness, 4) popular education, and 5) cross-cultural understanding and solidarity. Amari shared:

[The CRC] facilitates students' greater involvement in multicultural-related education, collaborations, and cross/inter-cultural community building by providing: an educational space for the critical study and practice of multiculturalism, a welcoming and inclusive space for students, an alternative space for cultural expression and identity exploration and by building community among [the university]'s diverse students.

The CRC is a values-oriented space, and their purpose and work aligns with these core values.

In addition, participants' responses highlighted the CRC's purpose in disrupting negative campus climate by centering students' voices and narratives and being a space in the community that acts as an accessible physical space and collaborative partner. Responses fell into three themes: 1) purpose to the student, 2) purpose to the institution, and 3) purpose to the community. Most of participants described CRC's *purpose to the student* by highlighting that it is a space where Students of Color, particularly queer and trans Students of Color, can bring their whole selves and see themselves in the programming that the CRC does. CRC typically centers Students of Color, their voices, and their narratives. Emory and Amari described the CRC as a breathing space where students can relax and be themselves; in addition, the CRC is an engaged space where students can engage with each other. Uri further explains:

In its day-to-day, it is a practice space. It is a space where you can make mistakes, where you can learn about pronouns, where you can learn about inclusive language, and it's an invitation to shift, you know, to shift our language, to shift our assumptions and understanding of others...Really think critically, of like what does it mean to build coalitions. To be in solidarity.

The full-time staff participants also described that by centering and working with students as "whole people," the CRC disrupts the negative campus climate and experiences Students of Color may encounter in other places on campus and helps with the retention of Students of Color. Amari explains that when students come to the CRC, "students get to see 'a peer of mine' looking at me saying like, 'I care that you're here, and I want you to do well.'" In addition to centering and working with students as whole people, the CRC provides material resources and emotional and instrumental support to students, such counseling, meeting space, menstruation

products, safer sex products, test materials (e.g., scantrons, exam booklets), photocopying and printing services as well as items from the CRC food pantry and garden.

The second theme revealed in the data was the CRC's *purpose to the institution*. The full-time participants saw themselves not only as stewards of students' vision and of CRC's core values when it came to their purpose with students at the university, but they also acknowledged their role to the institution. Uri explained:

We do sit within the [Department of Equity and Inclusion at the university], and I think part of the purpose of the [CRC] is to name the challenges that we see our students coming up against day in and day out and bring that up to, you know, higher administration and things like that so that there's an understanding that, yes, we have [the CRC], and we have a space, but there's still students [who] struggle.

CRC's purpose to the institution involves raising university administration's awareness about the challenges students face and redirecting university resources in service of Students of Color. In addition, the three full-time staff participants highlighted that the CRC plays a role in facilitating campus involvement with and providing space for multicultural education and critical study and practice. One example that the CRC does this is by continuing to share and educate the institution and community the history of activism by Students of Color at the university, such as the history of student activism and uprisings in the 1960s and 1990s that are connected to the creation of the CRC.

The third theme revealed in the data was the CRC's *purpose to the community*. With activism and community building in CRC's historical roots and foundational values, all participants emphasized that the CRC not only works with the university campus community but also with the community outside of the university. In order to collaborate with the CRC, people

or groups in the community do not have to be a student at the university; however, the CRC asks that the programming requested is in alignment with CRC's core values. Emory said:

We say that we're *in* the university but not *of* the university. Right. We're the [CRC] within [the university], but...we're a community center, and we work to try to redistribute resources. I think about our collaboration process. For example, anyone can. You don't have to be a student to try to collaborate with us. And there's so few campus spaces on campus that are free in terms of having an event. So, you know, we don't charge anything. It's open to students. It's open to departments, but it's also open to the community. If they want to do an event with us, our ask is really that the programming requested again is in alignment with our core values, like that's really what we're trying to animate in the space and in these virtual times, too.

This highlights how the CRC serves as an accessible physical space and collaborative partner in a community setting.

### **Benefits of the CRC**

*"In the [CRC] I've learned different skills, whether it be [a] loving work ethic or just how to consider people's feelings... incorporating it into my life helps me be more of a, I want to say, better person"*

*–Celyn*

The third research question asked what were the staff's perception and knowledge of the benefits of the CRC. While the university can be a place where students experience institutional challenges, all participants described that the CRC benefits students by providing a space on campus where students can receive material and social support, be affirmed and seen, develop and grow, as well as persist in college, particularly for Students of Color. CRC provides material benefits to students through their food pantry, garden, library, and programming. Uri explained:

Benefits that I can think of...I guess, tangible or like material benefits. I think about how I mentioned earlier that I am constantly thinking about in these quarantine times. Like, what about the students who frequent the [CRC] that are not interns? You know, would have come for, like, they need a green book. Or they want to have something printed, or they are coming to our food pantry, are coming to get a tea blend. You know, I think about one of the benefits of knowing the [CRC], that it exists, or that it's a space, is having access to those resources. Right and knowing that you can come to the [CRC] and print for free. Knowing that you can come here, and you can get a green book and you're not going to need to buy one. That if you're experiencing food insecurity that you can come by, no questions asked...There's no questions, like, please take what you need. I think of that as a benefit.

Another benefit the students receive or experience from the CRC is a place or space to breathe. All the participants described that on campus, students experience institutional challenges, such as white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and financial and socioeconomic challenges. Emory further elaborated that:

It's hard to think of an arena where race and ethnicity along with other structures that are rooted in white supremacy and anti-Blackness don't have a negative effect on Students of Color, right? So, it'd be hard to be like, 'where's they're not challenges?'

The CRC benefits students, particularly queer and trans Students of Color, by providing a reprieve from racism and white supremacy; all the participants explained that students are self-affirmed and validated, and students feel that they are seen and heard by staff and peers in ways that they may not be seen and heard in their classrooms or other spaces on campus. Frankie described their experience in an environmental justice class:

For me, it was always just very uncomfortable to realize that at the end of the day for my white colleagues, and my white classmates, and my white instructors that this was all just kind of like a thought exercise. And it's like, well, this isn't a thought exercise for me. This is real. And it's real for me and my communities and that was just so clear. And so obvious in terms of, 'oh, y'all really think that like people are disposable', and that was just kind of like a slap in the face.

Frankie then described the first time they entered the CRC the day after the 2016 presidential elections:

It was just a whole bunch of people, I think everyone was like communally grieving and holding space for each other. And also, just processing in shock 'like what the hell is going on?' And I just, I remember being like, 'oh wow, like this is, this is different' from what I usually see on campus.

In addition, CRC benefits students because most of the participants reported that students experience some form of growth, such as in the areas of personal and professional growth or in their critical thinking. All the participants explained that the CRC provides a space for students to practice and live out their core values. Because the CRC is student-led, the CRC provides students with opportunities to lead and opportunities to live the values students want to animate for themselves or for the community. For example, Celyn, who is an undergraduate student intern, said:

As an intern in the [CRC], I've, like, learn different skills. Like whether it be like loving work ethic or just like how to consider, like, people's feelings. And then we also, we always start our semester off with...bell hooks' definition of love. And so, I feel like learning that and reading that and like incorporating it into my life, like, helps me be



more of a, I want to say, better person, but also just like more considerate and reflective. And I feel like I've done a lot more of reflection than I did before because different values that I've learned through the [CRC]. And... also the workspace is different, very different from anything I've ever experienced before. Like, where people are just generally understanding of your capacity, as well as what you bring to the table, and it's a very supportive environment, working there. And being able to pitch your ideas for things, if you want to see something happen people are generally really supportive. And, they'll make it happen, if you want to make it happen. And so, yeah, I just gained a lot of, I guess, confidence in myself, as well as, like, holistically in my growth as a student, as a person.

Furthermore, not only do students benefit from growth and development, the effects can be longer term even after students graduate. Amari, who first participated in the CRC as an undergraduate intern and who now still works at the CRC after they graduated as a staff person, shared:

[The CRC], more importantly has given me so much joy and pleasure and ... so much just sense of purpose. Also, I think it's been huge in ...my professional and personal development, like my development as a human being... I think, you know, students at a university are at a very special age. And I think that it's a very special age to have a place to hold you in your complexity of identity and your complexity of experience and to honor the specialness of that, but also the like, muckiness of it...The muckiness and the specialness are simultaneous. You can't actually pull them apart and it's your work to do, but that's definitely been my huge takeaway. Just on like even if all this went away tomorrow, if, like, the university stop existing, I would still have that to take away.

While all the participants described the many ways that work done through the CRC benefits individual students, Amari and Frankie connected that work as the work for the retention of students. Amari and Frankie felt that the support, resources, and programming that the CRC provides to the campus community contributes to the retention of students at the university, especially for Students of Color who may feel like there are not many places on campuses that support them. Amari revealed:

I think that we can't underestimate the work of, not just the [CRC], the [CRC] and other spaces...all of these spaces that make Students of Color feel like the university is for them when there's so many messages that say that the university is not for us. If we all went away tomorrow, [State University's] retention would go out the window. I'm so sure of it.

I am so sure that so much of the work that [the CRC] is doing is retention work.

The compassion that CRC's staff has and demonstrates when working with students helps students feel supported during times of need or when students want to pursue opportunities. An example of how the CRC helps students with retention can be seen through Frankie's experience as a current undergraduate student intern at the CRC:

For me personally, I know that I would physically, literally not be here if it was not for the [CRC]. I think it has helped so much, for me personally, in terms of, like, my retention in this university and in terms of being able to just literally work a job that I don't hate. And I'm surrounded by, like, colleagues and co-workers and peers, who support me and affirm me. And I feel like I'm able to be supported in terms of, like, oh, I can dream up an idea for, like, I want to, like, start this book club or like have this event or have this program for this panel or this workshop. And the questions that people ask me, it's like, 'Okay, cool. How many people do you need to support you? How much

money do you need? What day and time would you like that to be?’ And it's more about the questions, become about logistics. ‘What can we do to make it happen?’ versus ‘Oh, actually, I don't think you can do that because I feel like that's not really part of the [CRC] mindset.’ And I feel that having had that throughout the past four plus years has been invaluable. And I know just, particularly as like a student intern, I think [Name of three staff] do so much to support us personally, professionally, and academically just in terms of literally being able to, like, keep us here at the school. I would definitely not be here without them, and I'm really grateful.

By being a reliable space at the university for Students of Color and helping students pursue their own visions for opportunity, the CRC helps with student retention.

### **Challenges of the CRC**

*“We have to really fight for these things that will make us sustainable in the long term.”*

*–Frankie*

The fourth research question asked what were the staff's perception and knowledge of the challenges of the CRC. Participants' responses fell into two themes: 1) difference in understanding of “multiculturalism” between the university administration and the CRC and 2) structural challenges. Participants described *a difference in understanding of multiculturalism between the university administration and the CRC* as a challenge because staff at the CRC felt the CRC holds and functions under a different definition of multiculturalism than university administrators on campus. The CRC's approach to multiculturalism does not ask students to assimilate or acculturate, but rather the CRC centers and works with students as “whole people” and values students' lived experiences. This understanding of multiculturalism differs from that of the university because as Emory explained, there is a set of standards and practices that exist in higher education that drive multicultural spaces on university campuses to be more like spaces

of assimilation and acculturation. Under this type of understanding of multiculturalism, campus spaces make students assume the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the overall university culture, or the university or campus space takes or adapts aspects of the students' culture. According to Emory, this orientation of multiculturalism creates spaces that:

celebrate diversity in a way that I feel is often like consuming. We're gonna have a cornucopia of diversity. We're a melting pot, we're a jambalaya, we're, you know, everything is like about us and it's literally consuming us, People of Color.

These two approaches to multiculturalism exist in tension as evidenced by two examples of the CRC having to make their work legible and work they performed on a working group to improve campus climate. Amari indicated that the assumptions and perceptions that people outside the CRC have of multicultural spaces present as a challenge because these assumptions can prevent the very work that the CRC does, such as by having to spend time and resources explaining the *why* of their work instead of using that time and resources for the actual work that fits under their core values. Amari described this challenge as making the work of the CRC "legible to the university." Another example of when this shows up is in a question that staff receive regarding their work; often the CRC is asked, "What do you do for white students?" This question is predominantly asked by white, cisgender men who are administrators at the university.

According to Emory, this example demonstrates the false assumptions that white students do not participate in the CRC, renders visible the otherness of the CRC, and attempts to re-center the work around a colorblind idea of multiculturalism.

Amari further explained that the difference in understanding of multiculturalism presents as a challenge because with their framework, the CRC approaches critical dialogue around university business different from university administrators. Amari explained:

We engage with multiculturalism in a very critical way, like you know, we understand that there's a lot of hang ups on that word. And we are using it intentionally, so let's talk about it. I think the business of the university isn't always 'let's talk about it,' even though that is the business of [CRC]. The business of the [CRC] is let's trouble it, let's look at it. Let's talk about the nuance. Let's get into what we mean when we say what we say, and let's say we mean. I don't think that's necessarily the business of the university all the time. I think that's a challenge.

Amari felt that the CRC intentionally complicates what it means to have a multicultural space and invites critical dialogue around what it means to be a multicultural space on campus for students. This ideological difference also has led to different approaches to strategic planning and addressing issues of race and campus climate between the CRC and university administrators. After the results of a campus climate survey were released, the university invested money in addressing campus climate and created working groups, which CRC staff and students participated in. In the working group, CRC staff and students advocated for investing resources on work that centered students who were most impacted by the campus climate. However, in the end, the overall working group decided that resources would not be invested in work that centered the experience of Students of Color.

Another theme that developed in participants' responses included *structural challenges* faced by the CRC. A lack of institutional investment is reflected in structural challenges that manifest as bureaucracy and limited resources. Four of the five participants described the challenges the CRC faces with their organizational structure, bureaucracy, and resources. Amari, Frankie, and Uri described the structural challenge through the bureaucratic barriers. The CRC is organized under an equity and inclusion unit, and this unit has experienced several administrative

leadership and staff transitions that have added challenges for CRC staff. When there were vacancies in positions or new people transitioned into roles in the equity and inclusion unit, participants mentioned that there was a lack of clarity regarding the changes in the organizational structure, which in turn, also contributed to the unclear staff reporting lines. Amari explained:

Right now, we don't have the reporting line. There's those of us who are assistant directors and program managers. We report to our directors who then report to no one. There's, like, the blank void. There's a question mark, and they're currently hiring for a senior director to be in that position...there's this gap, like very structurally and immediately, and I feel like that is a huge barrier.

Frankie stated, “It's a lot of like trying to jump through like bureaucratic hoops.” For the CRC staff, the constant changes in the organizational structure further complicated the bureaucratic processes of the university. Uri mentioned that it was challenging to acquire required signatures or to identify administrators to provide approval for certain aspects of the CRC operations. Frankie acknowledged that there is a tension working at the university because much of CRC's work is possible due to the majority of their funding coming directly from the university; however, at the same time, the work they would like to do is also limited by existing within the university.

Another significant structural challenge that the participants identified for the CRC are limited resources provided from the university. Three of the five participants identified that the CRC could use additional resources in the programs they provide because they redirect resources to help students. However, Amari and Frankie report that when they observe the CRC in relation to other programs on campus, especially those in athletics, resources are not evenly distributed

by university administrators. When addressing the issue of resources, two of the participants specifically pointed to the athletic programs as points of reference. Frankie stated:

I don't know how many full-time staff people [the athletic program has] and how much money that [the athletic program] got and all the institutional support that they have... [the CRC has] to kind of just really fight for these things that will make us sustainable in the long term.

Although Amari and Frankie see athletic programs receiving funding and resources, the participants do not feel like the CRC receives the same amount. Emory shared that it feels like the automatic response from the institution for requests is “no.” They shared, “I realized in our day-to-day work, there's so many no(s). Everything is a no first...How's money not the major deciding factor of what we do and what we imagine?” From the perspective of Emory, challenges with lack of resources have sometimes limited their ability to imagine what could be possible regarding solutions to problems.

## CHAPTER V DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The racial demographics of higher education has significantly shifted over the last two decades, as more Students of Color pursue postsecondary education across the country (de Brey et al., 2019). Despite the changing racial demographics, Students of Color experience a hostile environment in institutions of higher education (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). Contributing to a hostile racial climate are campus policies and practices that are rooted in whiteness (Cabrera, Franklin, and Watson, 2017; Gusa, 2010). A hostile campus climate can have a detrimental effect on the mental health, sense of belonging, and academic achievement for Students of Color (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). To ameliorate the negative effects students experience as a result of racism, institutions can look to counterspaces to help Students of Color heal from the psychological traumas as well as to create spaced that provide cultural affirmation (Bourke, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Nunez, 2011). Counterspaces can also provide Students of Color with a sense of belonging and community, cultural integrity, and validation of their experiences (Grier-Reed, 2010; Windchief & Joseph, 2015).

The existing literature largely focuses on the impact counterspaces have on the experience of individual students. In addition to understanding the interventions that would help improve the experience for Students of Color, it is important to understand the broader context that Students of Color operate within. Previous research suggests that whiteness is situated in every aspect of higher education, such as within the history of American higher education, the policies, and even people (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). The purpose of this study was to further understand the impact of counterspaces from the perspective of staff. Staff members within a counterspace are uniquely positioned at an intersection of service to Students of Color and service to their university. The staff of the CRC operate at this intersection and the case



study allows for an examination of the role counterspaces play beyond the benefits to individual students. Through the perspective of staff, this study was able to confirm much of the research on the positive impact counterspaces have on the experience of Students of Color and provided insights on addressing the role university staff play in addressing structural and systemic issues that contribute in maintaining a hostile racial environment.

### **Discussion**

When describing the history of the CRC, the key events that participants mentioned were university student activism and uprisings in the 1960s and 1990s, a transition period between 1999 and 2009 where new staff helped steward the process for the creation of a memorandum of understanding between students and the university, and the time period between 2009-2016, which was characterized by the CRC establishing their current physical space on campus and funded, full-time staff to work with students. This history of the CRC highlights how the CRC was created from years of student activism and protest over decades, and this student struggle resulted in and established the foundation of the CRC as being student-imagined, student-created, student-led, and student-centered. Previous research suggests that the history of higher education, in general, was created to serve white, wealthy, men only and that historically white institutions of higher education are rooted in the operation of White Institutional Presence (Gusa, 2010; Karabel, 2005; Rudolph, 1991). The history of the CRC could possibly be due to students protesting an institutional culture of whiteness that contributed to their negative student experience by fighting for more representation on campus. In addition, previous research suggests that counterspaces include on-campus sites aimed at supporting particular student populations that tend to be underserved by the college or university (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). For the CRC, this institutionalized counterspace was created by Students of Color in response to the needs of students who wanted representation at the university.

The findings suggest that key staff personnel in student-created institutional counterspaces act as stewards for the vision of students. By upholding students' vision and values, staff may help create a space that these students envision and help them thrive. Through this method, staff help ensure that the counterspace remains a counterspace.

All five of the participants underscored the importance of the CRC's core values. The CRC as a space and as a team anchor their programs and services in their core values. It is important to note that the process of creating CRC's core values was through the leadership of students, and staff supported these students' efforts. Through their work the CRC confirms the literature regarding the role a counterspace plays for Students of Color. Previous research suggests that engaging with counterspaces is associated with higher levels of social integration and sense of community, and engaging with counterspaces can provide mentorship, validation, support, and resources for navigating a hostile racial campus climate (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2015). The findings support that students who engage with the CRC also gain a sense of community, support, and resources for navigating a hostile racial campus climate, as several of the participants described the CRC as a reprieve from the rest of campus. Upon entering the CRC, students have a space where they can finally breathe. By providing that space, the staff at the CRC disrupts, for a time, the negative campus climate students encounter in other places on campus. These findings are important because they highlight how staff in counterspaces, like the CRC, stay true to the vision and core values established by students. This work and support by staff help meet the needs of Students of Color and helps build a community after feeling isolated in higher education.

Two additional themes that arose through the participants is the CRC's purpose to the institution and to the community. These two themes extend the current understanding of the role

counterspaces assume. An extensive amount of literature on the positive impact that counterspaces have on the psychological, social, and academic experiences of Students of Color in higher education is focused on the individual experience. Evidence of this can be found in studies that focus on specific racial/ethnic groups, such as American Indian/Alaskan Native (Windchief & Joseph, 2015), Black (Bourke, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and Latinx students (Nunez, 2011). The interviews with staff indicated that in addition to serving individual students through their programs, resources, and services, the purpose of the CRC also involves raising awareness of the university's administration about the challenges students face and redirecting university resources in service of Students of Color.

Another theme that developed in discussing the purpose of the CRC is the work within the surrounding community that is not associated directly with the university. This element extends the understanding of the role institutional counterspaces play, particularly as it relates to the community beyond the university. This could be related to CRC's core values, which includes social justice, and that the counterspace was born from a history of advocating for justice for all people. Another possible reason for the CRC to incorporate their work with the local community could reflect cultural differences between a current student demographic that is more community-centered than previous generations of students in State University.

By examining staff's perspectives regarding the benefits of counterspaces, this study finds that staff are positioned both in the service of Students of Color and to their institution and are in the position to better understand and observe the different ways counterspaces benefit multiple stakeholders. When describing the benefits of the CRC, participants highlighted benefits for both students and for the university. Counterspaces, like the CRC, benefit students by

providing a physical space on campus where students can receive material and social support, be affirmed and seen by university staff as well as by their peers, and develop and grow personally. In addition, findings from this study suggest that staff who work for counterspaces feel that counterspaces may help with student retention, which is a benefit for the university institution. Previous research that suggests that higher institutional commitment in students is related to a greater likelihood that they would progress into the second year of college (Johnson, et al., 2014). By providing services and programming that facilitate students' academic success (e.g., providing materials, such as test books and printing), well-being (e.g., providing access to counterspaces' food pantries), and sense of belonging, counterspaces not only serve at the student level but may also contribute to student retention. By exploring this relation from the perspective of university staff that work for counterspaces, the current study extends upon the literature that examined the relations between counterspaces and students from the solely student perspective.

From the perspective of the CRC staff, a challenge that staff in counterspaces may experience is a difference in understanding of multiculturalism between the university administration and the CRC. This difference presented a challenge because there are implications on their work. According to the CRC staff, the operating definition of the university seems to attempt to simplify the identities of people in order to fit them into boxes. In contrast, the CRC centers and works with students as "whole people" and values students' lived experiences, and in order to do this, the CRC avoids the oversimplification of the peoples' identities. Instead they engage with the complexity of the multiple identities with which people assume and live. This approach allows for the CRC to understand the needs of their students in many nuanced differences that come with multiple identities. The ideology of multiculturalism within the CRC

allows the staff to engage in the complexities of race and would allow for a multicultural space to center their work around the experiences of Students of Color, while at the same time be a space white students can participate in and engage in. Existing literature on counterspaces do not explore if counterspaces and their respective institutions have a shared definition of multiculturalism. This finding suggests ideologies within counterspaces impact the way they approach their work with Students of Color and suggests the possible tension staff in counterspaces may feel as being part of and separate from the university. It is critical for the work of counterspaces to engage their work with a critical and nuanced understanding of multiculturalism.

Furthermore, while an extensive amount of the research literature focuses on the individual student, findings from this study suggest that there is a need for counterspaces to address challenges at an institutional level. Focusing on individual students is important, however, by not examining the challenges and barriers that students face at an institutional level, higher education researchers and practitioners ignore the structures, culture, climate, and history that contributed to the need for Students of Color to demand and establish a counterspace.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. One limitation pertains to the sample, which included full-time staff and undergraduate interns. Future studies should include university administrators affiliated with or overseeing counterspaces to further understand key people who engage with counterspaces. These future studies can explore administrators who decide policies and allocate resources for counterspaces and how these decisions affect stakeholders of counterspaces, such as students, communities outside of the university, and the university itself. In addition, future studies can examine similarities and differences in knowledge and perceptions of counterspaces

between administrators, university staff who work in counterspaces, and students. Another limitation of this study is that this study focused on one institutionalized counterspace from one 4-year, public, R1: Doctoral Universities (very high research activity) based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education university. Generalization of the findings to other higher education institutions may be limited. Future studies could explore the role counterspaces play in other types of colleges and universities, such as 2-year, private colleges or universities, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, or tribal colleges. A final limitation is that this study focused on institutionalized counterspaces, or counterspaces that are officially associated with the college or university and funded to serve Students of Color, and its impact on undergraduate students. Future research should explore other types of counterspaces, such as informal counterspaces, as well as counterspaces' relations with other types of students, such as graduate and professional students.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study could potentially inform best practices for counterspaces in similar colleges and universities. Findings from this study suggest the importance of staff to understand and incorporate students' vision for representation because staff are in a unique position. Staff are part of the institution and can be stewards of students' vision. Veering off the student vision could potentially result in reinforcing the same institutional culture of whiteness student activists have historically fought against.

In addition, staff in counterspaces could help play an important role in colleges and universities by raising university administration's awareness about the challenges students face and redirecting university resources in service of Students of Color. Staff are in the position to work in collaboration with students to understand students' needs and could propose student-centered solutions to the university. Staff in counterspaces can inform the strategies and policies

universities could implement to address underlying systemic issues that impact the experience of Students of Color.

### **Conclusions**

The CRC case study provides researchers and practitioners several salient findings that may inform possible ways to improve the racial climate on their campus and by extension the experience of Students of Color. The first is that understanding the ways in which counterspaces help individual students is crucial but incomplete without understanding the broader context that is influencing the need for counterspaces to exist within universities, and this understanding includes beginning with the historical roots of the problem counterspaces attempt to solve. The system of higher education in the United States was not intended to serve Students of Color and for a significant amount of its history, higher education institutions actively excluded Students of Color (Karabel, 2005). In order to address the ways these vestiges of higher education's history appear and negatively impact the experience for Students of Color, all stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty, staff, and administrators) of these institutions must begin by understanding that they exist and how they currently operate.

Furthermore, the CRC case study demonstrated the importance of students' vision when creating and developing a counterspace. When campuses attempt to improve campus climate or address the needs of students through institutionalized counterspaces, students should be at the center and help lead throughout the process of ideation, development, establishment, and implementation. This study demonstrates how staff are important stewards in this process. Findings from this study suggest that counterspaces, like the CRC, provide a welcoming space that affirms students' multiple identities and lived experiences and helps students find community in an institution that is a racially hostile environment. An essential aspect that allows the CRC to provide this space is the history of the CRC as well as its core values. The history of

the CRC is kept alive by its staff as it is intentionally shared as part of staff orientation. Furthermore, staff guided a student-led effort of creating the CRC's core-values. In the staff's role of helping to create a welcoming space, passing along the history, and guiding students through processes as it relates to their space, staff act as stewards that can facilitate the process.

Lastly, staff in counterspaces are uniquely positioned to help lead institutions in the efforts to improve campus racial climate. Staff in counterspaces can provide insights to understand and implement interventions that can help provide immediate mitigation for issues associated with a hostile racial climate and serve as examples of best practices for the rest of campus to emulate, particularly by serving the whole student and engaging in the complexities of students' lived experiences. The CRC provides an excellent example of where institutions can begin: begin with creating a shared definition on what is meant by multiculturalism and, by extension, diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice.



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