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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Second-Year African American Male Students on Predominantly White Campuses through Critical Race Theory

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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Second-Year African American

Male Students on Predominantly White Campuses through the Lens of Critical Race Theory

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

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Craig Steven Pickett, Jr.

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Abstract:

The critical nature of the first year has pushed thousands of colleges and universities across the United States to create intentional programs specifically for first-year students. Less understood are the experiences of students during their second year – a different and, at times, even more challenging period. Second-year students face a myriad of issues, including achieving competence, desiring autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose, with many experiencing a phenomenon called the sophomore slump. While recent studies analyze both the second year of college and the sophomore slump, few studies delineate the experiences of African American male students who statistically perform at rates that tend to fall below their White peers regarding retention, academic performance, and graduation rates. As such, this study aimed to acquire a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), as they navigated barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump. Phenomenology provided an opportunity to thoroughly analyze the essence of the phenomena through the stories, experiences, and perspectives of participants. In addition, critical race theory was selected as a conceptual lens because this theoretical framework allowed for the examination of racism, inequality, and the inequitable distribution of racialized power and privilege within the structure of a college campus. Open-ended interviews were conducted with nine African American male college seniors at PWIs via Zoom, a cloud-based video communications application. Four themes emerged through a phenomenological analysis: academic confusion, mental health, faculty relations, and maturation. Two additional themes emerged from a critical race analysis: campus hostility/peer engagement and greater representation. Findings from this study provide

implications for holistic student development, and highlight measures to promote a more

equitable and inclusive educational experience for students, particularly African American male

second-year college students at PWIs.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The critical nature of the first year has pushed thousands of colleges and universities across the United States of America to create intentional programs specifically for first-year students (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Reyes, 2011; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015). Less understood are the experiences of students during their second year – a different and, at times, even more challenging period (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gohn, Swartz & Donnelly, 2001; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Reyes, 2011; Sterling, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015). Second-year students face challenges that can potentially influence the remainder of their collegiate experience (Ellis, 2010; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Heier, 2012; Reyes, 2011; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015). These challenges can include achieving competence, desiring autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose (Reyes, 2011). The combination of internal challenges and external distractions amongst second-year students has the potential to create a phenomenon called the "sophomore slump" (Ellis, 2010; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Heier, 2012; Kniess, 2013; Noel-Levitz, 2013; Reyes, 2011; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015). Approximately 25% of students at four-year institutions feel less energized during their second year of college and uncomfortable at their own institution, a major sign of the sophomore slump (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

A particular demographic that faces the negative ramifications of the second-year experience and the sophomore slump are African American males (Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Many African American students (both male and female) progress through college at a significantly lower rate of completion than their Caucasian peers (Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Baker's (2013) study revealed that African American males saw their grade point averages drop

during their second year, even when they were provided with the same level of institutional support as other students. While researchers have completed studies highlighting challenges associated with the second year of college (Gohn et al., 2001; Heier, 2012; Keup, Gahagan, & Goodwin, 2010; Sterling, 2018; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011), the experiences of the African American male student typically have been omitted.

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have conducted numerous studies that highlight the challenges associated with the second year of college (Gohn et al., 2001; Graunke, Woosley, & Sherry, 2005; Heier, 2012; National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Willcoxson & Joy, 2011). These studies highlight potential factors that contribute to the sophomore slump. Moreover, recent studies highlight the experiences of African American students (Baker, 2013; Broom, 2016; 2018; College Board, 2011; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Dukakis et al., 2014; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper et al., 2011; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). However, the specific experiences of the African American male student have not been included in previous studies, as it relates to their lived experiences and how the sophomore slump influences their academic, personal, and professional journey during their second year of college. Many studies review the experiences of students, in general, during their second year of college and highlight general trends from both quantitative and qualitative studies (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gohn et al., 2001; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Reyes, 2011; Sterling, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015). While these studies reveal insightful information about second-year students and the sophomore slump, few studies delineate the experiences of African American male students during this critical time. This is problematic because African American male students statistically perform at rates that tend to fall below their peers, particularly White college

students (Broom, 2016; 2018). More specifically, the retention, graduation rates, and annual academic performances of African American males show a consistent pattern of low performance when compared to their White counterparts (Broom, 2016; 2018).

Recent studies highlight issues that African American male students face on predominantly White college campuses. African American male college students are prone to experience unusually high levels of stereotyping, racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, both inside and outside of the classroom (Broom, 2018; Harper, 2011; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). As a result, many African American male students view themselves as outsiders on the college campus because they lack a sense of belonging and a true connection to the campus. Hostile learning environments can lead to poor academic performance, mental health issues, a lack of institutional engagement, and disproportionally high drop-out rates (Brooms, 2018; 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Harper, 2011; Owens et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2010; Plater, 2020; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

While recent studies have analyzed the sophomore experience and the trends that face second-year students, a noticeable gap exists concerning the experiences of African American male students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Recent research highlights the need to specifically study the experiences of this vulnerable demographic. Broom (2016) recommended additional research to explore the lived experiences of Black male college students. More specifically, he recommended that researchers identify ways for institutions to better support Black male students as they navigate the challenges of higher education, with the hopes of pin-pointing ways to create a nurturing, supporting, and encouraging learning environment for this demographic. In more recent research, Brooms (2018) specified the need to conduct studies to

explore self-efficacy, sense of self, motivation, spiritual development, sexual identity development, and Black male consciousness amongst Black males as they matriculate through college.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. I highlighted the experiences of African American male college students, as they navigated barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump. I examined and investigated the experiences of this demographic from both a phenomenological perspective and critical race perspective, to understand how aspects of race, power, and privilege influence the experiences of second-year African American college students at PWIs. This study provides institutional leaders (student affairs professionals, faculty, and researchers) with insight, and can be utilized to develop vital initiatives and institutional strategies targeting African American male second-year college students. To enhance the understanding of student affairs professionals, academic advisors, collegiate faculty members, and researchers, I examined the lived experiences of African American male sophomores from a wide range of perspectives, including academic ambitions, faculty and staff engagement, institutional efforts regarding diversity, and professional success.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of African American males during their second year of college at predominantly White institutions?

RQ2: How do African American male second-year students at predominantly White institutions navigate barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in critical race theory, which examines racism, racial disadvantages, inequality, and the inequitable distribution of both power and privilege within institutions and society (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowen, Ingram, & Platt, 2011; Parker, 1998; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Zuberi, 2011). The purpose of critical race theory is to challenge the false narratives of racism, power, and privilege (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Parker, 1998; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011). The hope is that discoveries from critical race theory will be utilized to spearhead efforts that promote social justice, change, and advancement for People of Color (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Harper, 2009; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011). Considering that this study examined the experiences of African American male students on predominantly White college campuses, I utilized critical race theory to provide insight into how aspects of racism and inequitable distributions of power influence their lived experiences during the second year of college.

COVID-19 & Study Implications

When this study was originally proposed to the dissertation committee in fall 2019, I planned on collecting second-year data regarding student experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, from African American male students at PWIs. More specifically, I planned on assessing how focus areas such as academic engagement, co-curricular experiences, campus climates, professional development, and mental health were influenced by daily interactions with classmates, peers, professors, and various stakeholders through the lens of critical race theory.

Unfortunately, the spring semester 2020 was significantly disrupted by the spread of COVID-19 (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). As a result, more than 1,300 colleges and universities in all 50 states canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2020). By fall 2020, institutions across the nation developed strategic plans to merge in-person instruction (with social distancing) and online learning, with 44% of institutions developing fully or primarily online instruction, 21% using a hybrid model, and only 27% offering fully or primarily in-person instruction (Smalley, 2020). In addition, many institutions placed strict guidelines on student organizations, social gatherings, sporting events, and programmatic efforts altogether (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). Due to the global pandemic and newly implemented recommendations from both the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and local institutions, many students limited their daily engagement with others while on campus or took classes from home altogether to ensure the safety of themselves and their loved ones (Smalley, 2020).

As such, the dissertation committee believed that the temporary climate of higher education and the ramifications of COVID-19 from spring 2020 through spring 2021 would ultimately skew the data, with participants lacking the counter-stories, campus experiences, and personal encounters to properly complete the study. As such, the committee recommended altering the participants by interviewing college seniors, instead of second-year students. The recommended change provided me with a chance to understand the lived experiences of students during their second year of college, even though the assessed experiences are from 18-24 months in the past. With seniors participating, I had an opportunity to explore how they successfully navigated the barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump from a critical race perspective, without placing a major focus on the ramifications of COVID-19.

Methodology

Phenomenology is a form of inquiry that seeks to understand human experiences, explore phenomena, and identify how individuals interpret phenomenological events (Moustakas, 1994; Sheehan, 2014; Sokolowski, 2000; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Sule, 2016). Phenomenology involves a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that portray the true essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers determine the underlying structures of the experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the occurrence or situation (Moustakas, 1994; Sheehan, 2014; Sule, 2016). Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness and works to examine issues from various perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of a phenomenon is achieved (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). By employing phenomenology, I explored the essence of the second-year college experience for African American males at PWIs. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis for this study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Although assumptions can be made, the true essence of the experience cannot be understood unless one takes the time to both collect and analyze stories, opinions, judgements, and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

To identify the participants for my study, I utilized purposeful criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants identified as African American male seniors currently enrolled at PWIs. Furthermore, I used snowball (purposeful) sampling to seek referrals from students, faculty, and staff at PWIs about potential participants (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). I continued to accept participants until saturation, the production of no new data from the phenomenon, was achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I conducted one-on-one interviews to collect data (Moustakas, 1994). The interview process encompassed informal engagement and open-ended questions focusing on a wide range of topics including academics, co-curricular involvement, mental health and wellness, racial encounters, and career aspirations. Depending on the participant's responses, additional questions were asked during the interview. I recorded each interview. Counter-stories, experiences, and perspectives from each participant were carefully documented, reviewed, and analyzed regarding the research questions (Moustakas, 1994).

Data analysis took place after each interview, until I achieved saturation. I employed continual thematic development to identify patterns within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes emerged through the process of coding – analyzing transcripts and establishing patterns from the data (Givens, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used phenomenological reduction and bracketing to suspend personal views, opinions, biases, and perspectives from the process of analysis (Givens, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). Furthermore, I used member checks (Givens, 2008) to ensure that experiences are properly captured. Finally, the positionality statement highlighted my personal biases about the second-year experience of African American males at PWIs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Significance

The study highlighted how African American male college students navigated barriers associated with the sophomore slump at PWIs, through both a phenomenological perspective and a critical race perspective. I used this study to recommend interventions for student development and success, while highlighting the potential influence of racism, structure, and power dynamics on college campuses. More importantly, I used this study to illuminate for student affairs practitioners, college advisors, faculty, and higher education researchers the experiences of

African American males as they navigated barriers commonly associated with the phenomenon of the sophomore slump. Findings from this study can be utilized to provide faculty, administrators, and researchers with a snapshot into the lived experiences of African American male second-year students. Furthermore, data from this study have the potential to influence institutional interventions, support systems, and personalized services for students as they navigate the barriers commonly associated with the second-year experience (Heier, 2012; Young, 2015).

Terminology

Definitions are provided to ensure clarity throughout the study:

- **African Americans** – Refers to an American or African of Black African descent (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, 2011).

- **Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)** – Any institution where Caucasian students account for 50% or greater of the total student enrollment (Jones, 2014).

- **Second-Year Student** – Any student who is returning to their institution, following the completion of their first year (Sterling, 2018). Depending on the institutional type and the number of credits, some second-year students still held the classification of "first-year students," some held the classification of "sophomore," and some may have held the classification of "junior." Rather than focusing on students who are classified as "sophomores," I focused on the participant's second year of college.

- **Male** – Rather than focusing solely on those who biologically identify as males, this study focused on any individual who self-identified as a male (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016).

- **Lived Experiences** – The encounters associated with one's life (Givens, 2008). These encounters included everyday situations, personal thoughts, inner reflections, physical well-being, and mental stability.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation focused on the lived experiences of African American male students during their second year of college at PWIs. Chapter 2 provides an extensive review of the literature. More specifically, the chapter focuses on key topics including critical race theory, the shift in institutional support from first year to second-year students, characteristics of the sophomore year, the sophomore slump, and African American male experiences at PWIs, both historically and within contemporary higher education.

In Chapter 3, I present the study's methodology. I begin with a thorough review of phenomenology and the rationale for its use in this study. I provide an extensive review of the research design, focusing on the methods, participants, positionality, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics. In Chapter 4, I provide an extensive review of the findings by presenting six emerging themes from both a phenomenological perspective and a critical race perspective. Lastly, Chapter 5 connects the six themes to national research, and provides academic deans, student affairs professionals, academic advisors, senior-level institutional leaders, and higher education researchers with recommendations for future implementation.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the literature search process, followed by an extensive literature review. The review begins by examining higher education's initial focus on first-year students, and the gradual shift towards the sophomore experience. Next, I explore characteristics of second-year students and commonly associated traits of the sophomore slump. From there, I focus on research-based trends from scholars regarding the experiences of many African American male college students at PWIs. Lastly, I review critical race theory. More specifically, I provide an overview of the tenants and principles of critical race theory and how it is utilized to critique post-secondary educational settings. I conclude with a summary of the literature and reasoning for the proposed study.

The Search Process

The literature presented in the following chapter was obtained through a myriad of sources, including case studies, book chapters, surveys, governmental reports, political briefs, and scholarly journals. An initial search in the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) using the terms "critical race theory," "college sophomores," "the sophomore slump," "academic assistance programs," and "African American male college students" produced a plethora of resources. Additional sources in the form of books, dissertations, reports, governmental briefs, and scholarly articles were uncovered. In the end, Google Scholar, Google Books, Amazon, and Education Resource Information Center were utilized to identify sources that provided a comprehensive examination of the research that exists to date concerning this dissertation study topic. Following multiple searches, 188 sources were collected and utilized for this dissertation. The sources are divided into four categories: phenomenology and qualitative research (33);

second-year initiatives, sophomore studies, and academic support services (41); critical race theory (33); and African American male college student experiences on predominantly White college campuses (81). Together, these sources were utilized to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature.

Focus on First-Year Programming

Colleges and universities across the U. S. have made great investments in the lives of first-year students (Coghlan, Fowler, & Messel, 2009; Ellis, 2010; Gohn et al., 2001; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018; Willcoxson et al., 2011). There is widespread recognition that, for many students, the acclimation from high school to college can be extremely complex. Several academic models and frameworks have been developed to explore factors related to first-year attrition and retention (Coghlan et al., 2009). These models, such as Tinto's (1985) model of student integration, Bean's (1985) student attrition model, and Nora's (2004) student engagement model are well known and have been widely applied to the study of first-year retention within higher education (Coghlan et al., 2009; Whittle, 2018; Willcoxson et al., 2011).

Numerous factors can influence one's initial transition from high school to college, including financial resources, personal confidence, social skills, and the rigorous nature of one's high school preparation (Gohn et al., 2001; Whittle, 2018). Many institutions place a dedicated emphasis on first-year persistence and retention. As a result, educational leaders, including student affairs practitioners, student success advisors, faculty, and researchers, have devoted numerous research studies, publications, and entire conferences to the lived experiences of this particular demographic of college students (Boettler, Goldfine, Leech, & Siegrist, 2020; Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018; van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, & Meijer, 2018; van Rooij, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2018; Millea, Wills, Elder, & Molina, 2018). Many institutions have strategically

developed programs and specialized offices to address the targeted issues of first-year students. The results have been effective, with the implementation of various high-impact seminars, first-year living/learning communities, first-year writing intensive courses, and additional educational initiatives (Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

Historical Focus

Reed College (1911) was the first institution in the U.S. to successfully launch a first-year seminar (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Administrators created the program to provide students with vital skills for academic success. Slowly gaining momentum, four other institutions created similar versions of the program, to assist first-year students with their academic studies (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Koch & Gardner, 2014). By 1926, 82 colleges and universities held first-year academic preparation and orientation initiatives, including Princeton University, Stanford University, Johns Hopkins University, and The Ohio State University (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Koch & Gardner, 2014). By 1938, nine out of ten college freshmen in the U.S. were required to take some form of a first-year seminar. Unfortunately, the trend of first-year academic initiatives began to wane (Koch & Gardner, 2014). College faculty believed that the courses were too remedial and nonacademic in the grand scope of higher education. As the complaints grew, many institutions halted their first-year initiatives and redirected their funds to other university efforts (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

As institutions defunded first-year courses, student engagement shifted with activism increasing on U. S. college campuses. (Koch & Gardner, 2014; Thelin, 2011). Students discovered their voice, and found ways to express their concerns, fears, and frustration by writing editorial think-pieces for college newspapers, facilitating listening sessions, holding special campus-wide demonstrations, overtaking administrative buildings, and protesting a

myriad of domestic and international issues including the Vietnam War (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

On many campuses, such as Kent State University and South Carolina State University, activism

and protests resulted in unprecedented levels of violence, bloodshed, and campus chaos

(Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Thelin, 2011). To intentionally address

student unrest, administrators focused on the creation of student-centered initiatives that

promoted peace and civility, while simultaneously emphasizing core skills for student success

(Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Thelin, 2011; Winston, 1974).

The University of South Carolina responded to the civil unrest in 1972 by implementing a

new first-year seminar (University 101) that focused on character development and academic

assistance (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mayo, 2013). John Gardner, the Executive

Director for the program, found ways to enhance the curriculum, placing a greater emphasis on

student success. As a result, University 101 became a campus-wide catalyst for retention, while

providing vital data on academic performance, student motivation, and the collegiate transition

process. The program gained both regional and national recognition, and institutions used the

South Carolina model to create similar programming for their first-year students (Freer, 2016;

Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mayo, 2013). As the program's acclaim grew, Gardner and his team

decided to host a national conference on first-year initiatives. The conference exceeded

expectations, with almost 200 higher education representatives convening to discuss best

practices for first-year students (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mayo, 2013). The

gathering was so successful that Gardner and his team decided to make it an annual event, under

the title, "The Freshman Year Experience." He ultimately created a national movement that

focused on the academic development of students as they transitioned from high school to

college (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014 Mayo, 2013).

The focus on first-year experiences and academic support programs gained such notoriety by the 1980s that President Ronald Regan launched new federal initiatives focusing on national student retention (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014). Changes in federal financial aid funding, along with an increase in public attention to the quality of education, brought about national reports such as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Gardner's efforts expanded as he collaborated with The University of South Carolina to create a research and resource center specifically for first-year experiences. The National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience opened in July 1987 (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mayo, 2013). Soon thereafter, the Center launched the Freshman Year Experience Newsletter and the Journal of The Freshman Year Experience (Freer, 2016; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mayo, 2013).

Changing the National Focus to Second-Year Students

Grounded in the recent success regarding first-year programs, student affairs practitioners shifted their focus to other academic classifications (Heier, 2012). As a result, educators have spent the past 20 years analyzing the experiences of second year students and identifying ways to enhance their academic skills and performances (Coghlan et al., 2009; Greg et al., 2016; Gohn, Swartz et al., 2001; Noel-Levitz Research Report, 2013; Orefice & Whitely, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018). The second year of college is often plagued with a combination of academic demands, developmental issues, institutional requirements, and unmet expectations (Coghlan et al., 2009; Greg et al., 2016; Gohn et al., 2001; Noel-Levitz Research Report, 2013; Orefice & Whitely, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018). As a result, students can become disillusioned by their new reality and find themselves entering a phase of confusion called the "sophomore slump" (Freedman, 1956, p. 15). The sophomore slump serves as a period of

academic deficiencies, social disengagement, dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience, major and career indecision, and developmental confusion (Coghlan et al., 2009; Greg et al., 2016; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018).

To combat these issues, institutions created initiatives specifically geared towards sophomores, with the hopes of increasing academic performance, campus engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence (Coghlan et al., 2009; Greg et al., 2016; Gohn et al., 2001; Heier, 2012; Noel-Levitz Research Report, 2013; Orefice & Whitely, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018). While the number of collegiate sophomore programs across the country is steadily growing, the statistics still pales in comparison to first-year programs. Higher education continues to devote less time, money, energy, and resources to second-year college students, as compared to their first-year counterparts (Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018). The second year of college is just as crucial as the first year, and it plays a key role in the decision to persist through the remainder of one's college tenure (Coghlan et al., 2009; Ellis, 2010; Gohn et al., 2001; Sterling, 2018, Whittle, 2018; Willcoxson et al., 2011). According to Perez (2020), 66.7% of institutions with sophomore initiatives had second-to-third-year retention rates between 75% and 100%, while 33.8% of institutions without sophomore initiatives had second-to-third-year retention rates between 75% and 100%. Thus, colleges and universities that developed intentional sophomore-based programming generally yielded higher third-year return rates from their students, highlighting the importance of second-year intervention and support mechanisms (Perez, 2020). Today, many institutions offer sophomore programs to benefit this demographic, with the hopes of ultimately creating a welcoming, friendly, and supportive environment for academic, personal, and professional success (Perez, 2020; Young, 2018).

Characteristics of Second-Year Students

The second year of college serves as a time of transition for college students, both developmentally and environmentally (Gregg-Jolly et al., 2016). Customized interventions of the first year are behind them, and students are forced to make major decisions that will impact their academic, personal, and professional development (Coghlan et al., 2009; Ellis, 2010; Greg-Jolly et al., 2016; Perez, 2020; Sterling, 2018). The plight of the sophomore can be easily comparable to the middle child of the family – the child that feels overlooked and invisible within a functional system of moving parts (Coghlan et al., 2009). Second-year students have rightfully achieved some measure of academic and social integration within the university community; unfortunately, a sizable portion of the group is still at risk (Perez, 2020). As a result, the adjustment period can become extremely difficult for students, with many falling short of expectations or deciding to leave school altogether because of the pressure and demands (Perez, 2020; Sterling, 2018).

Whittle (2018) stated, "remaining a successful student… involves identifying, understanding, and assimilating a complex range of assumptions, behaviors, and practices tacitly represented by the range of disciplines, or fields they are studying; and the demands persist throughout their studies" (p. 93). Developmentally, for traditional age second-year students (19 – 20 years old), this time marks a transitional period from adolescence to adulthood (Coghlan et al., 2009; Perez, 2020). During this time, individuals begin to move from a position of "absolute knowledge," where all knowledge is certain, choices are clear, and there is a right or wrong approach to everything, to "transitional knowledge," where everything is no longer black and white, right or wrong, and subtle shades of gray emerge (Coghlan et al., 2009). Students begin to question the values of their parents, their academic preferences, their circle of support, the

process of developing relationships, and the true value of their educational experience (Coghlan et al., 2009; Perez, 2020). Provencher and Kassel (2017) discovered that the second year of college served as a period of extreme transition. Participants in their study frequently emphasized how their second year of college started without a clear academic focus, and the stress that came with making vital decisions about their academic and career ambitions was overwhelming. In addition, participants struggled with college acclimation, and found it difficult to establish a sense of belonging within their own campus community. As a result, their experiences negatively influenced their identity development, with many viewing themselves simply as a number within a crowd of college students (Provencher & Kassel, 2017).

This period can serve as a rite of passage for students as they disassociate themselves from former communities and support groups and begin to form relationships and make decisions that will affect both their academic and professional careers (Gohn et al., 2001). The transition may be difficult, but the process is necessary for students as they develop skills, gain confidence, create an identity, and develop a sense of purpose (Sterling, 2018, Whittle, 2018).

The Sophomore Slump

The combination of academic demands, developmental issues, institutional requirements, and unmet expectations can have a negative influence on students (Coghlan et al., 2009; Greg et al., 2016; Gohn et al., 2001; Noel-Levitz Research Report, 2013; Orefice & Whitely, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018). Sophomores who are unable to meet these demands can become disillusioned by their new reality and find themselves entering a period of confusion called the "sophomore slump" (Sterling, 2018, p. 138). The sophomore slump is the leading cause of attrition for second-year college students (Sterling, 2018). The term became popular because of research conducted by Mervin Freedman (1956). Freedman was the first scholar to recognize that

second-year students had the potential to find themselves within an academic, developmental, professional, and personal slump. Findings from Freedman's research at Vassar College revealed that second-year students were the least satisfied with their overall college experience. Students who were ambivalent about their reasons for attending college or indecisive about their academic major experienced heightened levels of disengagement, apathy, and stress (Freedman, 1956; Sterling, 2018; Whittle, 2018).

In their 1987 study, Lemons and Richmond proposed a theoretical model of the sophomore slump based on Chickering's model of student development. Chickering's model, first presented in 1969, described seven vectors of college student development – (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) developing autonomy, (d) establishing identity, (e) freeing interpersonal relationships, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. They suggested that the sophomore slump may be linked to problems with four of the seven vectors – developing competence, developing autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

Disproportionate numbers of second-year students report high levels of disengagement and disillusion, experienced by the shock of losing institutional attention from their first year of college (Sterling, 2018). This desired level of support becomes necessary as they try to make critical decisions regarding their academic, personal, and professional lives. As a result, many second-year college students find themselves in a developmental, motivational, and emotional slump. They lose their connection to their college campuses, and many find themselves facing major decisions, greater responsibility, and potential disengagement (Sterling, 2018).

Academic advisors and university administrators must be aware of the challenges associated with sophomore student success (Gahagan, 2018; Perez, 2020; Virtue, Wells, &

Virtue, 2017; Young, 2015). Considering that sophomore programming is one of the latest

initiatives in higher education, administrators must carefully evaluate which opportunities might

best serve their institution (Gahagan, 2018; Perez, 2020; Virtue et al., 2017; Young, 2018). More

specifically, institutions should analyze findings from the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) to acquire a deeper understanding of sophomore trends and identify ways to

enhance their programs, strategic plans, and resources (Young, 2015). In doing so, they may be

able to accurately determine potential gaps in student success. Educational leaders can meet the

growing needs of second-year students by connecting them to faculty, enhancing the advising

process, creating avenues for campus involvement, empowering students through institutional

resources, and ensuring a connection between strengths and academic success (Gahagan, 2018;

Heier, 2012; Perez, 2020; Virtue et al., 2017; Young, 2018). By focusing on these challenges and

possible solutions, institutions can increase motivation, academic performance, and satisfaction

amongst their sophomore students (Gahagan, 2018; Perez, 2020; Virtue et al., 2017; Young,

2015).

African Americans in Higher Education

Numerous efforts have been made by scholars, student affairs practitioners, and

researchers to understand the experiences of African American male college students (Brooms,

2018; College Board, 2011; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Dukakis et al., 2014; Harper et al., 2011;

Solórzano et al., 2000). More specifically, scholars are seeking ways to understand the academic

experiences, social integration, and identity development of African American males as they

transition through various stages of higher education (Brooms, 2018; Brooms, 2020; College

Board, 2011; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Dukakis et al., 2014; Harper et

al., 2011; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). While the college

environment can be extremely stressful for any college student, the transition period for many African American males can be particularly difficult. Therefore, extensive research is necessary to understand this demographic, which continues to lag in terms of their academic, personal, and professional development (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020). In doing so, researchers hope to provide insight into proper preparation, access, persistence, and retention efforts.

Identity Development

Identity development serves as a major point of both internal and external conflict for many African American males at PWIs (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dukakis et al., 2014; Miller, 2021). Culturally relevant programs, groups, mentors, and resources that aim to enhance identity development and coping skills among African American males can improve their academic and college completion outcomes (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dukakis et al., 2014; Miller, 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). When campus resources are available that promote the development of identity formation, African American males are more likely to accept their student role and its positive contribution to their life (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020).

African American male students are more prone to engage with their campus community and develop a sense of belonging if they have the chance to journey through their own identity development process (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dukakis et al., 2014). Campus engagement and co-curricular participation serve as positive catalysts for identity development amongst many African American male college students. Institutions can promote engagement amongst African American males by emphasizing a sense of belonging, identifying ways for students to contribute to campus life, and creating safe spaces for African American males to gather, destress, and connect (Dukakis et al., 2014). By supporting the development of Black males, institutions can

help support Black male student overall development (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020). Furthermore, the promotion of identity development can help African American males develop a sense of self, clarification of academic preferences, and a stronger vision about their overall purpose (College Board, 2011; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Miller, 2021).

Campus Engagement

Investigating students' engagement through out-of-class experiences provides an essential opportunity to understand the experiences of many African American male students on college campuses (Brooms, 2016; 2018; 2020; College Board, 2011; Dukakis et al., 2014; Plater, 2020). Research indicates that student organizations, sports, religion, culture, social life, and employment opportunities can all enrich and expand the academic experiences of college students (Brooms, 2018; Plater, 2020). Campus involvement and participation creates a stronger sense of belonging. Students who participate in co-curricular activities, engage in activism, and participate in internships supplemented by their classes obtain invaluable real-world experiences and gain transferable skills for future success, including leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving competencies (Brooms, 2018; College Board, 2011; Dukakis et al., 2014; Plater, 2020). Unfortunately, many African American males struggle with balancing co-curricular activities, maintaining their academic requirements, and negotiating an active social life (Brooms, 2020; College Board, 2011; Plater, 2020). The lack of campus engagement can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and eventually disengagement (Brooms, 2016; 2018; 2020; College Board, 2011; Dukakis et al., 2014; Plater, 2020).

Feeling Disconnected from Campus

Many African American male students report loneliness, feeling invisible, and lacking a sense of belonging within the collegiate setting (Broom, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020).

Furthermore, many African American students enter college as outsiders, and must work hard to find communities that make them feel welcomed, connected, and empowered. These students feel as though they do not "fit in" and lack a "safe space" on campus to vent, seek assistance, reveal the layers of themselves, and feel comfortable connecting with other African American males (Brooms, 2020; Brown, 2018; College Board, 2011; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Smith et al., 2007).

The sense of belonging amongst African American male students increases on college campuses when they connect with faculty members (Dukakis et al., 2014; Harper et al., 2011; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021)). Studies reveal that faculty are continuously viewed as sources of mentorship, career guidance, and identity development amongst African American male college students (Harper et al., 2011; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021). When African American males are exposed to faculty members or highly competent academic advisors who understand their background and culture, they are more likely to develop a much-needed sense of personal belonging. Unfortunately, many African American male college students tend to struggle asking questions, seeking advice, admitting personal areas of concern, and reaching out to faculty (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021). Strong relationships and support networks with peers, faculty, and staff can be a vital mechanism for facilitating both academic identity and community development (Dukakis et al., 2014; Miller, 2021; Harper et al., 2011). These interpersonal relationships are directly linked to persistence, the development of educational aspirations, completion of a bachelor's degree, and subsequent enrollment in graduate school programs (Dukakis et al., 2018; Miller, 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Feelings of connectedness can be associated with academic persistence (Owens et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Belonging uncertainty, which students from

underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to experience, is commonly associated with apprehension about study skills, academic abilities, and learning potential (Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014). African American males are less likely to take advantage of learning workshops, advising opportunities, and instructional support programs, compared to their White counterparts (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Miller, 2021; Plater, 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Persistence in college can be determined by the successful transition of African American male college students to this new environment and by their perception of the campus racial climate. Because belonging, persistence, transition, and perceived racial climate are significant to student adjustment in college settings, it is important for academic advisors, student affairs professionals, and faculty members to explore these factors to help African American male students successfully integrate into the college environment (Miller, 2021; Owens et al., 2010; Plater, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Campus Climate

Examining the campus climate provides researchers with insight into institutional factors that potentially influence students' college experiences, including peer-to-peer bonding, in-class and out-of-class experiences, and the academic and social milieu (Brooms, 2018; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Miller, 2021; Plater, 2020). Hostile campus environments can be detrimental to the overall success of African American males. Many African American male students tend to feel like outsiders on their own campus, particularly at PWIs (Brooms, 2020). The combined impact of their race and gender identities manifests itself in various forms of racism, as they are often stereotyped, profiled, policed, and denigrated constantly on campus (Brooms, 2020). Many African American male students note feelings of frustration, aggression, hostility, confusion, fear, helplessness, and hopelessness at PWIs (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-

Gunby, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Plater, 2020; Morales, 2021; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Students tend to internalize these encounters, and they slowly begin to diminish their postsecondary aspirations (Brooms, 2020).

The racial climate of the institution can have a major effect on the academic performance of African American male college students (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Owens et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2010; Plater, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Many researchers contribute the poor academic performances of African American male college students to the social, cultural, and environmental characteristics of higher education (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Owens et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014). This demographic is most likely to encounter conflicts within the collegiate setting, as they clash with the cultural norms of their home environment. Their home communities are usually perceived as welcoming and supportive because of the familiarity with the environment; whereas the college environment is less welcoming (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Owens et al., 2010). Individuals within their home environment tend to share the same ethnic characteristics, cultural identities, and spiritual support groups. Many African American male college students experience resistance, alienation, and a college culture that is dissimilar to the one to which they are accustomed (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Owens et al., 2010; Miller, 2021; Plater, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015). As a result, they lack a sense of belonging on college campuses – and this lack of belonging presents a challenge to both their scholastic goals and retention rates (Brooms, 2020; Miller, 2021; Owens et al., 2010; Plater, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Much of the literature on the experiences of African American males at PWIs focuses on the impact of stereotypes and microaggressions within the academic and social environment

(Broom, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020). Researchers have determined that stereotypes can have a significantly negative influence on academic achievement and lead to educational disengagement (Broom, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Dukakis et al., 2014; Harper et al., 2011; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). Stereotypical behavior does not occur just from peers – numerous studies highlight how African American males battle stereotypes, microaggressions, and hostile behavior from faculty members (Brooms, 2020; Miller, 2021). When hostile academic environments are not corrected, they can negatively influence other aspects of the college experience (Brooms, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Miller, 2021; Plater, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Academic Development at PWIs

The academic pathway for many African American male college students can be difficult (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2019; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020; Qaqish, Grant, & Bowles, 2020). Many African American male college students enter higher education facing unrealistic expectations, harsh campus climates, and insufficient academic preparation (Broom, 2020; Decuir-Gunby, 2020). The achievement gap between African American college students and their White counterparts has decreased over the years due to various levels of intervention from federal programs and institutional support (United States Department of Education, 2019); however, White students continue to enroll in colleges and universities at higher levels and they continue to experience higher rates of graduation, giving them a significant advantage over African American students in terms of social and economic access. Despite federal interventions, designated grant programming, and institutional interventions, the academic performances of African American males still pale in comparison to their peers at PWIs (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020;

Johnson, Strayhorn, & Travers, 2019; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020;

Qaqish, Grant, & Bowles, 2020; United States Department of Education, 2019). The average

length of time it takes for many African American male college students to complete their

college degree is much longer than their White counterparts (United States Department of

Education, 2019). The six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students

who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at four-year degree-granting institutions are

highest for Asian students (74%), followed by White students (64%), students of two or more

races (60%), Hispanic students (54%), Pacific Islander students (51%), Black students (40%),

and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

An institution's ability to connect African American males to key academic professionals

can be challenging (Brooms, 2020; Grites, 2013; Johnson et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Owens et al.,

2010; Miller, 2020; Qaqish et al., 2020). Many universities are actively seeking innovative

mechanisms to support this demographic, to make up for any instructional, socioeconomic, or

personal barriers they may have faced, prior to college life (Brooms, 2020; Grites, 2013; Johnson

et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Owens et al., 2010; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille; 2010; Strayhorn,

2015). It is imperative that academic advisors create an environment that is embracing,

nurturing, and less hostile. This can be accomplished through the implementation of a humanized

academic advising model, which highlights advisors who desire to not only be seen as human

beings, but advisors who address the well-being of underrepresented college students (Brooms,

2020; Lee, 2018; Qaqish et al., 2020; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Furthermore, institutions must

emphasize the importance of proactive advising, which focuses on connecting underrepresented

students with the academic resources necessary for future success (Brooms, 2020; Lee, 2018;

Museus & Ravello, 2010).

The lack of mentors serves as another challenge for African American male academic success at PWIs (Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Owens et al., 2010). Research highlights the positive relationship that mentorship has on academic performance, study skills, and professional ambitions (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Johnson et al., 2019; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Owens et al., 2010). Mentorship opportunities can become a catalyst for academic development, as these partnerships provide students with guidance regarding courses, academic projects, research endeavors, major-specific tutorial programming, and career development opportunities (Johnson et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021).

Lastly, stigmas associated with academic support services serve as a challenge for colleges and universities as they address the achievement gap between African American male students and their counterparts (Johnson et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Many African American male college students hold negative perceptions of academic assistance programming such as writing centers, speaking centers, tutorial services, and counseling/mental health programming. As a result, they are less likely to seek assistance from academic support resources and professionals (Brooms, 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Their fears, misconceptions, and lack of awareness can be detrimental towards their academic growth and development (Brooms, 2020; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Critical Race Theory

Overview

Critical race theory serves as a conceptual lens that provides scholars, researchers, and theorists with opportunities to examine racism, inequality, and the inequitable distribution of

both power and privilege within institutions and society (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Parker, 1998; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) defined race as the notion of a distinct biological type of human being, usually based on skin color or other physical characteristics (p. 153). Critical race theorists seek to understand race, and how both the advantages and disadvantages of race influence one group over another within our society (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Parker, 1998; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011). More specifically, they examine the social impacts of racism – any program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In doing so, theorists challenge the misconceptions and false narratives that contribute to political, social, and economic oppression (Harper, 2009). Through critical race theory, scholars can identify how oppressive groups receive inequitable privileges, which Delgado and Stefancic (2012) defined as "rights or advantages, often unwritten, conferred on some and not others" (p. 153) More specifically, privilege, institutional racism, and inequitable power distribution can lead to racial inequity – social advantages and disparities that affect various races (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019).

Critical race theorists seek to dismantle the structures built by the dominant and oppressive groups in society (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Parker, 1998; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), those who are in political, economic, and social power can oppress other groups by limiting their access to rights,

benefits, and privileges. Critical race theory works to expose and dismantle the powers at play.

The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic

studies discourses address but places them in a more extensive context that includes history,

economics, group and self-interests, feelings, and the unconscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

History of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory emerged in the 1970s as lawyers, theorists, and legal scholars

concluded that the advances of the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s had stalled – and in some cases,

rolled back (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-

Billings, 2013; Tate, 1997). Early critical race theorists believed that new strategies and

perspectives were necessary to properly combat substantial forms of racism, discrimination, and

inequitable power distributions (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-

Billings, 2013; Tate, 1997).

Critical race theory builds on the insight of two previous movements – critical legal

studies and radical feminism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical legal studies (CLS) focused

on challenging the traditional legal scholarship that highlighted doctrinal and policy analysis

(Brown & Jackson, 2013; Crenshaw, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;

Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solozano et al., 2000).

Scholars uncovered hidden and systematic practices that oppressed marginalized populations

within the legal system. Critical race theorists borrowed the idea of legal indeterminacy – the

idea that not every legal case has one correct outcome; rather, one can decide most cases either

way, by emphasizing one line of authority over another or by interpreting facts in varying

manners (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-

Billings, 2013; Tate, 1997). The theory incorporates skepticism of favorable and triumphant

histories, such as how *Brown v. Board of Education* deteriorated over time, reduced narrow low-court interpretations, and resulted in delayed progress (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Tate, 1997).

Furthermore, theorists pulled from radical feminism by examining the relationship between power and the construction of social roles. They focused largely on the invisible collection of patterns and habits that create patriarchy and oppressive domination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory also draws from European philosophers and theories such as Antonio Gramsci and Jacques Derrida, as well as American theorists, writers, philosophers, and scholars such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and both the Black Power and Chicano Movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Scholars hope the examination of social structures through critical race theory will lead to truth, transparency, and eventual change (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Carbodo & Roithmayr, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2000; Zuberi, 2011).

Tenets

Scholars and theorists have outlined several key tenets associated with critical race theory including – 1) racism is normal within our society; 2) critical race theory serves to challenge the dominant ideology; 3) the critique of liberalism; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge and the power of counter-storytelling; 5) Whiteness as property; 6) interest convergence; 7) intersectionality; and 8) revisionist history (Allen, 2016; Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper et al., 2009; Harris, 1993; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000).

First, critical race theory stresses that racism is normal (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). As it relates to U.S. culture,

racism is interwoven within the fabric of our very existence with elements of racism evident

within the education, political, and economic systems (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;

Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Racism is seen as an inherent part of American

civilization, privileging White individuals over People of Color in most areas of life, including

education (Hiraldo, 2010). The White, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual norms of the

dominant group continue to serve as the key reference to all aspects within our society. Critical

race theory works to expose this pervasive nature within our culture (Allen, 2016; Delgado &

Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Within this tenet, theorists examine the difference between idealism and realism. The

idealist perspective focuses on the ideology that race and discrimination are largely functions of

attitude and social formation (Curry, 2018). For these thinkers, race is a social construction

created out of words, symbols, stereotypes, and categories. As such, our society can purge

discrimination by simply ridding ourselves of the texts, narratives, ideas, and meanings that give

rise to it and that convey the message that people of other racial groups are unworthy, lazy, and

dangerous (Curry, 2018).

Racial realism encompasses the view that racial progress is sporadic, and that People of

Color are doomed to experience only infrequent peaks followed by regressions (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2012). Racial realists believe that racism serves as a means by which society allocates

privilege and status. Racial realists recognize the hierarchy that determines who receives benefits

and the context in which those benefits are accrued (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Therefore,

racism is a permanent fixture in society, including higher education.

Bell (1992) argued that racial realism has four major themes that reiterate the ideology

that racism is normal. First, one must consider the historical aspect that little linear progress has

occurred regarding civil rights. Racial history in the U.S. has demonstrated both steady

subordination of Blacks and a pattern of cyclical progress and regression. The second theme

focuses on economics. In the battle for racial justice, one must note the importance of economics

because it is the real indicator of power within this country (Bell, 1992). Third, one must believe

in the idea of fulfillment through struggle. Critical race theorists reject any philosophy that

insists on measuring life's success on the achievement of specific goals because it overlooks the

process of living (Bell, 1992). Therefore, theorists must hold fast to the principle that satisfaction

in the struggle exists, even during times of limited linear progress. Finally, one must consider the

few imperatives implicit in real racism (Bell, 1992). Those who battle oppression must examine

racism from this perspective; if not, Black people will find themselves repeating with their

children what their grandparents suffered (Bell, 1992). For decades, the U.S. promised

democracy, but delivered discrimination and delusions. Racial realism insists on both justice and

truth – critical race theorists are committed to truth and honesty, while insisting on the possibility

for justice. Bell argued that racial realism is a mindset that requires individuals to understand the

permanence of racism, while simultaneously developing a set of strategic approaches for

improving the plight of historically excluded groups within our society (Bell, 1992; Harper et al.,

2009). Curry (2018) noted:

> "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean
>
> efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of
>
> progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt
>
> in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all
>
> history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on

what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to

acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status." (p. 353)

Second, critical race theory serves as a general critique of liberalism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Litowitz, 1999). Liberalism refers to the political philosophy that the government serves to maximize liberty (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). More specifically, the government is positioned to legally enforce formal equality in treatment. Critical race theorists are discontented with liberalism as a framework for addressing U.S. racial problems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). They argue that liberalism fails to bring about parity between races for the simple reason that formal equality cannot eliminate the deeply entrenched forms of racism which are encountered daily by People of Color. Critical race theorists strongly believe that liberal solutions to affirmative action and free speech are nothing more than White compromises which ultimately fail to advance the interests of People of Color (Litowitz, 1999). While liberalism professes to value equality, it prevents the reforms necessary to achieve true equality between the races. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) depicted liberalism as a system of civil rights litigation and activism characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress. Bell (1992) viewed liberalism as a form of bogus freedom checks that White leaders failed to honor. Critical race theorists work to dismantle liberalism. They view politics as a zero-sum struggle between entrenched classes or groups. In this view, all politics is power politics, and the legal system merely serves as an instrument of oppression by the group that happens to be in power (Bell, 1992; Litowitz, 1999).

Liberalism distrusts grand unifying theories, preferring to emphasize process over ends. Because of the value liberals place on liberty, liberals tend to be wary of the sort of power that focuses on quick change (Allen, 2016; Bell, 1992; Daftary, 2020; Litowitz, 1999; Ogbonnaya-

Ogburu et al., 2020). They prefer a more incremental approach to political change that depends on the consent of the governed, even when the governed are often ignorant, misguided, and bigoted. Critical race theorists believe that the law should eliminate White racism at any cost (Allen, 2016; Bell, 1992; Daftary, 2020; Litowitz, 1999; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2020).

Third, critical race theory serves to challenge the dominant ideology (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Scholars use critical race theory to challenge key theories and concepts within contemporary society such as colorblindness and White privilege (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Colorblindness operates under the ideology that all races should be treated and supported equally. Critical race scholars agree that colorblindness fails to consider the disadvantages and systematic oppression placed on People of Color (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hiraldo, 2010; Parker, 1998; Zuberi, 2011). Colorblind policies provide a false sense of generosity where people believe that policies serve to benefit everyone in a neutral manner, when they truly serve towards the advantage of the dominant group. Colorblindness allows the dominant group to ignore racist policies that perpetuate inequality within society (Hiraldo, 2010). As a result, particular groups such as African Americans suffer when practices, polices, and guidelines for the masses fail to consider systemic layers of oppression, racism, power, privilege, and discrimination (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Hiraldo, 2010; Zuberi, 2011). Systemic oppression refers to the policies and practices entrenched in established institutions that harm racial and other minoritized groups, while benefiting the dominant group. Today, systemic racism and oppression can be identified within numerous layers of the American society, including the economy, political, and educational systems (Desmond-Harris, 2015).

Privilege refers to the myriad of social advantages, benefits and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race within a society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2020). In general, White people enjoy a myriad of privileges because of the color of their skin, such as the assurance that store clerks will not follow them around, that people will not cross the street to avoid them at night, that their achievements will not be regarded as exceptional or "credits to their race," and that their mistakes will not be attributed to biological inferiority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). White people benefit from a system of favors, exchanges, and courtesies from which People of Color are frequently excluded (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2020).

Fourth, critical race theory focuses on the centrality of experiential knowledge (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). The knowledge of People of Color is valuable, powerful, and meaningful in contemporary dialogues about race, power, and privilege. Counter-stories, poems, and experiences from People of Color can be utilized to understand the plight of marginalized individuals (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). The use of counter-stories provides People of Color with a powerful voice to tell their narratives involving marginalized experiences (Hiraldo, 2010). Critical race theory works to emphasize the lived experiences of the dismissed and the oppressed; and in doing so, these individuals find power, healing, and restoration (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). A factor contributing to the demoralization of People of Color is self-condemnation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Members of minoritized groups internalize the stereotypic images that certain elements of society have constructed to maintain their power. Therefore, counter-storytelling can serve as "medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial

oppression" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). The story of one's condition leads to the

realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting

mental violence on oneself (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Fifth, critical race theorists examine "Whiteness as property" and the effect it has on

power and privilege, both historically and within the current social climate (Bell, 1992; Harris,

1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The concept refers to the notion that Whiteness itself has value for

its possessor and conveys a host of privileges and benefits (Delgado & Stefancic,

2012). Although Whiteness was originally constructed as a form of racial identity, it has evolved

over time into a form of property, historically and contemporarily, protected by those with the

power to govern (Harris, 1993). In the early history of the U.S., only White males with property

received power. The significance of property ownership as a prerequisite to citizenship was tied

to the British ideology that only people who owned the country, not merely those who lived

within it, were eligible to make decisions (Ladson-Billings, 1998). African Americans found

themselves in a conundrum. As slaves, they owned no property, and they were constructed as

property. Whereas White people consistently benefited from the construction of Whiteness as the

ultimate property – possession (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This foundation equated

Whiteness to power and privilege. The set of benefits, assumptions, and privileges that

accompany Whiteness have become an asset that liberals have sought to protect. Accordingly,

White people have come to both expect and rely on these privileges, and over time these

expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by law (Harris, 1993). Even though

the law is neither uniform nor explicit in all instances, the property interest in Whiteness forms

the background of our legal system by shaping the way in which legal disputes are framed,

argued, and adjudicated within contemporary society (Harris, 1993). Property functions as

Whiteness – rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude – making the American dream of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" a more likely and attainable reality for White people as citizens (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Sixth, critical race theory emphasizes the concept of interest convergence (Bell, 1992; Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper, 2009; Hiraldo, 2010). Bell (1992), the pioneer behind the idea of interest convergence, argued that interest convergence occurs when the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits their interests. Interest convergence occurs when the dominant group supports an issue pushed by a subordinate group, as long as it simultaneously benefits the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper, 2009; Hiraldo, 2010). Bell claimed that *Brown v. Board of Education* was a glaring example of interest convergence. While it was a great triumph for civil rights litigation, Bell argued that it resulted more from the self-interest of elite White people than an actual desire to help Black people (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In the U.S., society encourages the dominant culture to be self-focused, and others are often viewed as threats (Allen, 2016). Therefore, critical race theory focuses on the opposition and elimination of racism and sexism, and the ultimate empowerment of People of Color (Allen, 2016).

Seventh, critical race theory focuses on the concept of intersectionality (Allen, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Crenshaw (1991) defined intersectionality as the manner in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of one's experience (p. 1244). Intersectionality highlights how People of Color not only experience levels of oppression because of the color of their skin, but People of Color can experience oppression based on various levels of identity

including race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and ability/disability (Allen, 2016; Delgado &
Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Eighth, critical race theory emphasizes the practice of revisionist history (Harper et al.,
2009). Revisionist history reexamines historical occurrences within the U.S. and replaces
majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that align more accurately with the experiences
of racialized minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). Revisionists suggest
that U.S. history should be scrutinized and reinterpreted, as opposed to simply being accepted at
face value and truth. It requires a more nuanced understanding, as well as taking a critical
perspective toward examining events within U.S. history (Harper et al., 2009).

Critical race theory provides scholars with opportunities to understand how a regime of
White supremacy is both created and maintained within the U.S. (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Zuberi,
2011). White supremacy refers to the belief that White people constitute a superior race and
should therefore dominate society, typically to the exclusion or detriment of other racial and
ethnic groups (Thomas, 2019). The eventual hope is that discoveries from critical race theory
will be utilized to spearhead efforts that promote social justice, change, and advancement for
People of Color. By dismantling the current social order, one challenges the limitations of U.S.
society and creates opportunities for social justice (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw et al.,
1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011;
Parker, 1998; Smith et al., 2007; Zuberi, 2011).

Critical Race Theory to Critique Today's Higher Education Climate

Critical race theory first emerged as a framework for understanding racialized
experiences within higher education in the mid-1990s (Hiraldo, 2010). Both educational leaders
and critical race theorists used this lens to bring a new level of accountability and scrutiny to

U.S. colleges and universities, with research focusing on campus climates, curriculum development, institutional hierarchy, and funding distribution models (Hiraldo, 2010; Hiraldo, 2019; Lee, 2018). Today, many educational researchers use critical race theory to understand racialized experiences on college campuses and identify recommendations for both equity and empowerment of Students of Color (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Harper, 2018; Hiraldo, 2010; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Patton (2016) offered three propositions regarding critical race theory and higher education. First, the United States higher education system has a White supremacist history that continually influences contemporary postsecondary institutions. Second, imperialism and capitalism reproduce racial oppression and assorted inequities at U.S. colleges and universities. Third, postsecondary institutions are places at which racist conceptions are produced and rewarded (Patton, 2016). These three propositions serve as major barriers to the academic, personal, and professional experiences of African American male students on White college campuses (Harper et al., 2018). Using critical race theory, scholars have assessed how educational environments can be detrimental to the learning experiences of People of Color. As a result, research indicates college campuses can easily transition from a place of academic empowerment to a place of hostility and oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harper et al., 2018; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2021; Patton, 2016; Smith et al., 2007). If the campus climate is plagued by racial hostility, discrimination, microaggressions, and macroaggression, learning environments can potentially diminish the aspirations of African American male students. The racial climate of a campus can become positive when colleges and universities increase student diversity, develop curriculum that emphasize cultural competency, create institutional resources

for mentorship, and place a greater emphasis on hiring and retaining faculty and staff from all

walks of life (Brooms, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Harper, 2018; Hiraldo, 2010; Miller, 2021;

Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Critical race theory

reveals how inequities of access, power, and resources perpetuate the current achievement gaps

within higher education (Cain & Smith, 2020; Comeaux et al., 2020; Raymundo, 2020). More

specifically, critical race theory allows institutional leaders to develop mechanisms that highlight

individual differences, challenge dominant ideologies, promote social justice, celebrate

experiential knowledge through the power of individual voices, and protect interdisciplinary

perspectives. Higher education owes it to their students to acknowledge its dominant ideological

thoughts and practices, giving students a voice and representation on campus (Cain & Smith,

2020; Comeaux et al., 2020).

Researchers should consistently evaluate how institutions uphold the dominant narrative,

and how they reinforce systems of oppression on their own campuses (Hiraldo, 2019). To

complete this evaluation process, both college administrators and educational researchers must

examine how units, departments, and institutional stakeholders can work together to dismantle

institutional structures that prevent People of Color from succeeding both inside and outside of

the classroom. In doing so, it promotes accountability and forces stakeholders to critically

analyze not only institutional policies but actions of their own accord. Furthermore, Hiraldo

(2019) stressed the need for colleges and universities to develop intercultural competency - "the

ability to communicate and connect with individuals who have different social, cultural, racial,

and language experiences" (p. 145). Intercultural competency creates a means for institutions to

serve People of Color more effectively through intentional resources, trained professionals, and a

stronger commitment to both equity and inclusion. Moreover, it can help build a stronger

foundation of trust, particularly with marginalized populations and People of Color. These recommendations ensure that universities dismantle regulations, guidelines, and collegiate expectations that promote one demographic over another, and ensure a more equitable playing field for all students to succeed (Hiraldo, 2019).

Harper et al. (2018) found that Black student success was more complex than theorists, researchers, and administrators often acknowledged. Notable academic and professional achievements amongst Black students required a more robust consideration of the historical and current racialization of policies, practices, and institutional cultures (Harper et al., 2018). Critical race theory tenets provide researchers with a structure for analysis regarding higher education and the racialized experiences of African American male college students at PWIs. Racism, discrimination, and microaggressions encountered in classrooms and elsewhere must be explored to acquire a true perspective of access and achievement. Professors, institutional leaders, policy makers, and practitioners cannot improve Black student success until their actions are grounded in more complete qualitative truths and more critical interpretations of statistics (Hiraldo, 2018).

Summary

I provided an extensive review of the literature on the second year of college, African American male students within higher education, and critical race theory. I examined characteristics of second-year college students and reviewed common characteristics of the sophomore slump. I also provided an extensive review of the African American student experience by examining the historical relationship between African Americans and higher education, the contemporary climate for African American male college students, and the numerous challenges that many African American male college students encounter on predominantly White campuses. The literature review concluded with a review of critical race

theory, and how scholars use critical race theory within higher education to understand the

racialized experiences of Students of Color on college campuses.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological research study to acquire a deeper understanding of African American male college student experiences during the second year of college. More specifically, I examined the experiences of African American male college students at predominantly White institutions from both a phenomenological perspective and a critical race perspective and utilized findings from this study to identify potential opportunities for student support, retention services, and intentional institutional programming for student success. To accomplish the goal, the following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of African American males during their second year of college at predominantly White institutions?

RQ2: How do African American male second-year students at predominantly White institutions navigate barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump?

In this chapter I discussed my methodology for this qualitative research study. More specifically, I outlined the research design, participants, ethical considerations, data collection and analysis, and various trustworthiness methods. Data collection and analysis explored the phenomenon of the sophomore slump from the perspective of African American male college students at PWIs through a critical race theory lens.

Phenomenology

I conducted this study using a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry. Phenomenology involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. This creates the basis for a reflective analysis that portrays the true essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This approach seeks to disclose the phenomena of behavior. Researchers

work to determine the underlying structures of the experience by interpreting the descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs (Berrios, 1992; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). There are two levels of empirical phenomenology. Level 1 focuses on the original data that is comprised of naïve descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue (Moustakas, 1994). Level II functions by having the researcher describe the structures of the experience, based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant's story accounts (Moustakas, 1994). The aim is to determine what an experience means for individuals who have had the experience, and obtain comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon (Berrios, 1992; Moustakas, 1994).

In a phenomenological study, the various experiences of participants are analyzed and compared. This allows the researcher to properly identify the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The assumption of the essence becomes the defining characteristics of a purely phenomenological study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The task of the researcher is to accurately depict the essence of the experience. To accomplish this task, prior beliefs about the phenomenon of interest are set aside (bracketed); in doing so, this keeps them from interfering with researcher's ability to understand the elements, structure, and the eventual essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). When the belief is suspended, consciousness itself becomes heightened and it can be examined in the same way that an object of consciousness can be examined (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology has been utilized in recent studies to successfully obtain a thorough understanding of underrepresented high school and college students. Boyd and Mitchell (2018) employed phenomenology and critical race theory to understand how Black male college

students persisted throughout higher education, as they faced stereotypes both inside and outside of the classroom. Kind-Keppel (2019) employed phenomenology and Tribal Critical Race Theory to explore how Native American college students defined their experiences at both tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and PWIs. Briggs (2018) used phenomenology to explore the barriers and obstacles that second-generation Caribbean Black male students experienced in Toronto, as they transitioned from high school to the labor force.

I employed phenomenology for this study because it provided an opportunity to thoroughly analyze the essence of the phenomena – the sophomore slump – through counter-stories, perspectives, and experiences of second-year African American male college students. Phenomenology provides an opportunity to go beyond the surface and uncover the true, raw essence of the experience via stories, emotions, values, beliefs, and experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Sokolowski, 2000).

Participants

Participants in phenomenological research were generally chosen through purposive criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Purposive criterion sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at the moment of selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). These criteria ensure that the selected individuals have common experiences regarding the studied phenomenon (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Furthermore, I utilized snowball (purposeful) sampling to seek referrals from students, faculty, and staff at PWIs to recruit potential participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). To launch the recruitment process, IRB-approved communication efforts (email and social media posts) were distributed to higher education/student affairs colleagues at institutions across the country. Soon after the initial round of recruitment e-mails and social media posts, several students contacted

me about participation. Within the first week, I successfully recruited three participants. By the second week, two additional students agreed to participate. Once their interviews were completed, I utilized snowball sampling to further my recruitment efforts (Naderifar et al., 2017). Participants were asked to refer potential students for future participation. As a result of their referrals, four additional students agreed to participate within the next two weeks. While my recruitment efforts actively sought participants from institutions across the U.S (no intentional geographical restrictions were utilized for the study), all participants came from institutions within Tennessee. For this study, participants identified as African American male college students at PWIs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were seniors currently enrolled at PWIs. As stated in Chapter 1, I originally planned on interviewing second-year students. Unfortunately, the global pandemic of COVID-19 forced institutions across the U.S. to alter how they functioned (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). As a result, many second-year students were temporarily prohibited from engaging within in-person learning courses, student organizations, sporting activities, and social events (Inside Higher Ed, 2020; Smalley, 2020). Therefore, I interviewed seniors who discussed how they navigated barriers commonly associated with the second year of college, before the 2020-2021 pandemic of COVID-19.

To explore the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs, I interviewed nine participants. Two participants were enrolled at small, private, liberal arts institutions; two students were enrolled at mid-sized public institutions; and five students were enrolled at large, division-one, public research institutions. Each participant self-identified as a male student who had completed their second year of college at a PWI. The participants represented a variety of academic disciplines, including finance, agricultural studies, forestry,

engineering, education, and worship arts. During the interview, each participant shared their thoughts, opinions, perspectives, and lessons about their second year of college.

Pseudonyms were utilized to aid in protecting participants' identities (Orimadegun, 2020). According to Boyd (2001), most phenomenological studies reach the point of saturation after interviewing between two and ten individuals. For the purposes of my study, I continued to interview participants until I reached saturation and felt that continuing the process no longer produced new data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

Researchers can employ interviews to collect data for phenomenological studies (Brooks et al., 2018; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The main purpose of the interview was to obtain a description of the meaning behind the phenomenon (Brooks et al., 2018; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The phenomenological interview is complex and requires a great deal of time to scrutinize the studied phenomenon with the necessary amount of depth (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The researcher must maintain excellent skills as it relates to probing, summarizing, paraphrasing, clarification, reflecting, self-reevaluation, and empathetic listening (Brooks et al., 2018; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The phenomenological interview should be semi-structured (Brooks et al., 2018; Kyale & Brinkman, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2020). This format allows the participant to speak freely, reflect, and make connections as they describe their lived experiences (Kyale & Brinkman, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are characterized for incorporating both pre-planned questions and free-flowing follow-up questions as the conversation progresses. This format allows the researcher to intentionally steer the conversation, based on the participant responses (Brooks et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher

to address the phenomenon profoundly, in a controlled setting (Moser & Korstjens, 2018;

Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

To collect data for this study, I conducted virtual interviews with African American male

college seniors at PWIs. The interview process encompassed informal engagement and open-

ended questions focusing on a wide range of topics including academics, co-curricular

involvement, mental health and wellness, racialized experiences, and career aspirations. I

developed an interview guide with pre-planned questions covering a range of topics including

classroom experiences, co-curricular life, racism on campus, and personal support services

during their second year of college (see Appendix A for the interview guide). I started the

interview with open-ended questions and invited the participants to freely discuss. The questions

encouraged participants to tell their stories, including feelings and emotions about various

experiences. Participants offered counter-stories, experiences, and lessons that captured their

collegiate experiences comfortably and authentically. Our dialogue revealed a range of attitudes,

perceptions, motivations, emotions, and feelings about the African American male collegiate

experience and the various routes each participant took to maneuver through their second year of

college. Follow-up questions and probing helped me obtain additional details about their

experiences. I recorded the interviews for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occured after each virtual interview, until I reached the point of saturation

(Brooks et al., 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data was analyzed, in

regard to both critical race theory and the research questions. More specifically, I compared data

to several critical race theory tenets, including the following – racism is normal within our

society; critical race theory challenges dominant ideology; the centrality of experiential

knowledge and the power of counter-storytelling; and interest convergence (Allen, 2016; Bell, 1992; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harper, 2009; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Zuberi, 2011). I used the interview data to identify themes and patterns regarding both the presence and impact of racism, power, and oppression on the participants' collegiate experience. Furthermore, I examined how students navigated common barriers associated with the sophomore slump and the second year of college, including academic obstacles, faculty relationships, campus engagement, mental health, and professional development (Coghlan et al., 2009; Ellis, 2010; Gohn et al., 2001; Greg-Jolly et al., 2016; Sterling, 2018, Whittle, 2018; Willcoxson et al., 2011). I searched for relationships between participants' racial experiences and their progression throughout their second year of college. I transcribed each interview, making notes of participant's responses to each question. Data analysis occurred through the implementation of five steps: a) bracketing and phenomenological reduction; b) delineating units of meaning; c) clustering of units of meaning to form themes; d) summarizing each interview and modify if necessary; and e) extracting general and unique themes for all of the interviews to create a summation (Groenewald, 2004).

I launched my analytical process by employing bracketing and phenomenological reduction (Givens, 2008; Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Sokolowski, 2000). To ensure that I was not allowing my positionality to interfere with the data analysis process, I employed bracketing. Bracketing is a method that enables researchers to suspend their natural attitude and naïve understanding of their human mind, and to disclose the realm of transcendental subjectivity as a new field of inquiry (Neubauer et al., 2019). While it was impossible for me to completely suspend all of my personal biases, bracketing forced me to consistently review how I applied my own

understanding and perspectives during data collection and analysis. In transcendental

phenomenology, also known as the descriptive approach, the researcher's goal is to achieve

transcendental subjectivity – a state wherein the impact of the researcher on the inquiry is

constantly assessed, and the biases, assumptions, and prejudices are neutralized so that they do

not influence the object of the study (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Sokolowski,

2000). The researcher is to stand apart, and not allow their subjectivity to inform the descriptions

offered by the participants (Neubauer et al., 2019). The lived dimension of experience is best

approached by a researcher who can achieve the state of the transcendental I – a state wherein

the objective researcher moves from the participant's descriptions of facts of the lived

experiences to a universal essence of the phenomenon at which point consciousness itself could

be grasped (Neubauer et al., 2019). The transcendental I brings no definitions, expectations,

assumptions, or hypothesis of the study; instead, the researcher uses a blank slate to develop a

true understanding of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The goal was to consistently ensure that my analysis came from the content expressed

within the transcripts, rather than my personal or professional experiences. I must be honest and

recognize that this process took intentionality. The task of setting one's assumptions aside was

no simple assignment, and some argue that it is nearly impossible to truly accomplish (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016). To ensure the ongoing bracketing process, I routinely forced myself to reflect

on the research questions, the data, and emerging patterns while constantly checking myself for

emotional reactions or personal connections. I had to ensure that my analysis came directly from

the data within each interview, rather than my assumptions or personal connections from my

experience as an African American male college student at a PWI. I consistently asked myself,

"What did the participant say? Did he specifically articulate this opinion or idea during his

interview? Am I misinterpreting his words?" Am I developing significant assumptions with no data to support my findings?" I had to consistently step back from the data, review the research questions, and ensure that any analysis came as a direct result of the findings. My aim was to remain as diligent as possible to the goals of phenomenological research and utilize bracketing to obtain the true essence of the phenomenon without the interference of my own values and beliefs. It was imperative that I employed bracketing to develop analysis that accurately reflected the experiences of the participants, and not my personal experiences, biases, or assumptions. As the researcher, it was my responsibility to ensure that all analysis served as a direct reflection of thematic developments within each interview.

As discussed earlier, phenomenological reduction "to pure subjectivity" is a deliberate and purposeful opening by the researcher to the phenomenon, with its own meaning (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher ensures that their own presumptions and judgements are not allowing the researcher's meanings, interpretations, or theoretical concepts to enter the unique world of the participant (Givens, 2008; Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Sokolowski, 2000). To complete this task, I repeatedly listened to the audio/virtual recordings of each interview and became familiar with the interview data. This allowed me to develop a holistic sense, also known as the "gestalt" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 50), which emphasizes individual and unique experiences of the participants. I also maintained a journal of reflections, to constantly compare my data evaluations to any personal assumptions or pre-conceived notions. In doing so, I continuously checked my own ideas and truly focused on the data provided by each participant.

A pivotal aspect of phenomenology is identifying the core, or the essence, of the phenomenon (Lin, 2013). The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of the African

American male experience, as participants navigate barriers associated with the sophomore slump at PWIs. To accomplish this feat, I utilized eidetic reduction (Lin, 2013). Eidetic reduction allows researchers to go beyond surface-level findings and reveal deeper and more meaningful understandings of the experience through careful, diligent, and intentional analysis (Lin, 2013). This occurs when researchers go beyond, behind, and beneath the easily identifiable clues in order to expose the meanings and structures of the phenomenon on a more significant and hidden level (Lin, 2013).

Once bracketing and phenomenological reduction occurred, I focused on delineating the units of meaning (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). During this phase, the researcher makes a substantial amount of judgement calls, while consciously bracketing their own presumptions and opinions, to avoid inappropriate subjective judgements (Groenewald, 2004). The units of relevant meaning extracted from each interview are scrutinized, and any redundant units are eliminated. To accomplish this feat, I considered both the literal content and the number (the significance) of times a meaning was mentioned (Groenewald, 2004). I created a transcription database to document the data after each interview. By organizing the analytical process in this manner, researchers can examine the data, review the findings, and identify emerging themes in a strategic and effective manner (Johnson et al., 2010).

Patterns were examined and analyzed through the perspectives of both phenomenology and critical race theory. By examining themes through the lens of racism, power structures, and the emphasis on one's experience, I obtained a deeper understanding of the dynamics between racial structures and higher education. Critical race theory unveiled new layers regarding the

experiences of African American male sophomores at PWIs. I analyzed content and identified potential connections. In doing so, I discovered codes, patterns, and themes.

Once I delineated the units of meaning, I focused on clustering units of meaning and forming themes (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). With the list of non-redundant units of meaning identified, I once again bracketted my presumptions and judgements to remain true to the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By rigorously examining the list of units of meaning, I elicited the essence of meaning for the units within the holistic context (Groenewald, 2004). Clusters of themes formed by grouping units of meaning together and identifying significant topics, also called units of significance (Groenewald, 2004). I focused on going back to the interview transcriptions and forth to the list of non-redundant units of meaning to derive clusters of appropriate meaning (Groenewald, 2004; Stuckey, 2015). There were overlaps in the clusters, which were expected considering the nature of human phenomena. By interrogating the meaning of the various clusters, I identified central themes that revealed the essence of the clusters (Groenewald, 2004).

Once I clustered the units of meaning and form themes, I summarized each interview. This process focused on validation (Groenewald, 2004). According to Bystad and Munkvold (2007), validation includes activities that allow stakeholders or case members to verify and possibly influence case descriptions or interpretations. These activities can be conducted in several stages throughout the data collection and analysis. A summary that successfully incorporated all of the various themes elicited from the interviews provided me with a holistic context. At this point in the data analysis process, I conducted member checks by returning to the participants to determine if the essence of the interviews were accurately captured and depicted. Any necessary changes were completed because of these validity checks (Groenewald, 2004).

Lastly, I focused on creating general and unique themes for all the interviews and developing a full summary (Groenewald, 2004). I searched for common themes throughout the interviews, as well as individual variations. I worked diligently not to cluster common themes if significant differences existed. The unique experiences were important counterpoints to highlight regarding the phenomena. I concluded the analytical process by writing a composite summary, which reflected the context from which the themes emerged. I worked to transform participants' daily experiences into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the research (Brooks et al., 2018; Groenewald, 2004).

For this study, I uncovered the essence of the African American male second-year experience at PWIs by reviewing themes, patterns, codes, and units of measurement. I documented counter-narratives from participants to obtain a deeper understanding of their personal encounters. Through careful evaluation, critical thinking, and consistent reflection towards both my research questions and the theoretical framework of critical race theory, I clarified the essence of the African American male sophomore experience.

Trustworthiness

To develop trustworthiness, I employed several methods. Member checks serve as one of the most popular tactics of ensuring trustworthiness within qualitative research (Givens, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Noble & Heale, 2019; Shenton, 2004). The first form of member checking focused on returning interview transcriptions to study participants. This format was useful for the fact-checking process (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Participants were asked to read transcripts of their interviews, to ensure that I accurately captured their counter-stories, experiences, expressions, and judgments (Shenton, 2004). Considering that one's thoughts can be misconstrued during the recording or transcription phase, I used this process to

accurately capture the intentions of the participants (Birt et al. 2016; Shenton, 2004; Twining, Heller, Nussbaum, & Tsai, 2017). In addition, it created opportunities for participants to provide new data if they desired, while deleting any data they no longer wished to include within the study (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). From there, I employed member checking by providing study participants with the analysis of their interview data. With this method, each participant received my critical interpretation of their interview. This method placed a major emphasis on confirmation, modification, and interpretation. This method did not enhance the trustworthiness of the whole data set, but it provided individual participants with a chance to ensure trustworthiness within their own data (Birt et al., 2016). Thirdly, I employed member checking by utilizing synthesized data from the entire study. Participants were able to recognize their own experiences within the synthesized themes (Birt et al., 2016).

A second form of trustworthiness involved examining the background and experiences of the researcher. The credibility of researchers, according to Shenton (2004), is especially important in qualitative research as they serve as the essential instrument of data collection and analysis. The trust of the researcher can be just as vital as the adequacy of the procedures themselves (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs; 2014; Shenton, 2004; Twining et al., 2017). To promote trustworthiness, I included an insider/outsider and positionality statement. This section provides the reader with information about my background, educational experience, second-year collegiate struggles, and my personal reflections on the presence of racism within post-secondary education. By providing an open and honest reflection of my background, beliefs, and experiences, and by employing bracketing and reduction, I separated my personal judgements from the true essence of the phenomena (Elo et al., 2014; Shenton, 2004; Twining et al., 2017).

A third form of trustworthiness focused on ensuring the appropriate, best-suited methodology for the intended study. The adoption of research methods well-established in both qualitative investigation and information science helped with the promotion of trustworthiness. Shenton (2004) stressed the importance of incorporating correct methodological procedures for the research study. Therefore, the specific procedures employed, such as the lines of questions, the interview format, and the methods of data analysis were derived from previously successful and similar studies. Through careful analysis, I selected my analytical process after reviewing the research, consulting with academics, and assessing the goals of the designated study (Shenton, 2004).

Lastly, I promoted trustworthiness by employing tactics that promote honesty during the data collection process (Shenton, 2004; Twining et al., 2017). Participants were provided with the option to freely exit the research study at any point if they desired. By providing the option to opt-out of the study at any point, it ensured that the data collection process involved those who were genuinely willing to participate and prepared to offer data freely (Shenton, 2004; Twining et al., 2017). I worked to diligently establish a rapport with participants from the beginning of the process and helped them understand that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers. By employing these methods, participants were more likely to contribute ideas and discuss their experiences freely without the fear of losing credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations serve as a major aspect of the research scope and design (Crenshaw, 2014; Orimadegun, 2020). I obtained approval from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting the study. The IRB determined whether the risk to potential participants was minimized and reasonable in relation to

the relevance of the expected knowledge and outcomes (Orimadegun, 2020). More specifically, the IRB reviewed my background information, aim and objectives, research design, the participant selection process, the treatment of participants, data management, ethical considerations, and statistical analysis (Orimadegun, 2020). For this study, participants signed consent forms, providing them with essential information regarding the nature of the study, and acknowledging any potential risks before they agree to participate. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and they had the freedom to discontinue their engagement at any point during the study. I assigned pseudonyms to both the participants and their institutions and took all necessary precautions to ensure confidentiality (Check, Wolf, Dame, and Beskow, 2014). A copy of the University of Tennessee Standard Consent Form is attached (Appendix B) for this study (University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board, 2019).

Insider/Outsider Issues and Positionality

My positionality highlighted my perspective as an "insider" because of my knowledge and personal experience with this topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Positionality brings awareness to the ways that the researcher may influence the process, as well as the way the process affects the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I approached this subject from an insider's perspective because I interviewed African American male second-year college students who may have found it easier to connect with me as the researcher. I am an African American male researcher. I graduated from Davidson College, a predominately White liberal arts institution in North Carolina. During my second year of college, I struggled with many of the defining elements of the sophomore slump – selecting an academic major; identifying career options; wrestling with mental health issues; struggling with my inability to find my place on campus; cultural barriers; fear of asking for help from administrators and faculty; financial

concerns; and feelings of racial isolation. My grades plummeted during my second year because of the aforementioned reasons. My overall well-being improved through the assistance of faculty/staff mentors, and my grades improved dramatically during my junior and senior years.

I admittedly embraced the ideology of realism and personally believed that racism serves as an ever-present factor within our society, including educational experiences at PWIs. Therefore, racism will be an issue that many students, like myself, continue to face daily. It is my belief that extensive change is necessary to promote inclusivity and equity on all academic levels. However, I hope that studies like this one will continue to bring erroneous ideologies to light, while creating meaningful and intentional conversations about critical race theory and post-secondary education. I ensured that my background, personal history, and ideology did not influence the way that I completed the study. I acknowledged my identities, biases, encounters, and assumptions about the experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. To accomplish this task, I employed bracketing methods and consistently set aside my presumptions and judgements throughout the analytical process. As a result, the essence of the phenomena unfolded without the interruption of my own experiences or opinions.

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

In Chapter 3, I presented the research questions and the proposed methodology for conducting a phenomenological study that explores the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. I discussed purposeful and snowball sampling to identify participants and I reviewed the procedures for data collection and analysis. Lastly, I discussed trustworthiness, ethics, my positionality, and insider acknowledgements to highlight important procedures that I employed to continuously separate my personal experiences from the study results.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

In Chapter 4, I present the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. To accomplish this, I collected the counter-stories, experiences, and lessons from nine African American male college seniors at PWIs throughout Tennessee (see Figure 1). Through their interviews, six themes emerged (Figure 2). The first four themes emerged through a phenomenological analysis: *academic confusion, mental health, faculty relations,* and *maturation*. Two additional themes emerged from a critical race analysis: *campus hostility/peer engagement* and *greater representation*. I interweave participants' individual experiences and highlight the strategies they employed to navigate barriers associated with the sophomore slump.

Phenomenological Themes

In this section, I present the four themes that emerged through a phenomenological analysis of the data. The themes illuminate participants' shared experiences during their second year of college. I provide participants' narratives, highlighting how their experiences connect to the theme.

Academic Confusion

Academic confusion emerged as the first theme within phenomenological analysis. With participants attending a myriad of institutional types (small private, liberal arts, mid-sized, and large research), their academic experiences varied in terms of classroom size and institutional resources – but their experiences centered around academic confusion. I present three sub-themes, to illustrate their individual and collective experiences – *identifying majors*, *engagement with institutional personnel*, and *academic success*.

Name	Major	Institution Pseudonym	Institution Type
Sam	Engineering	Regional State University	Mid-size public research
Paul	Education	Trojan State University	Large, D-1, public/research
Davis	Worship Arts	Grace College	Small, private, liberal arts
Kendall	Mathematics	Mercy College	Small, private, liberal arts
Stephen	Psychology	Founders State University	Mid-size public research
Roman	Forestry	Trojan State University	Large, D-1, public/research
Robert	Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication	Trojan State University	Large, D-1, public/research
Jack	Engineering	Trojan State University	Large, D-1, public/research
Lawrence	Finance	Trojan State University	Large, D-1, public/research

Figure 1: Participants

Emergent Themes: **Phenomenology**
Academic Confusion *Sub-Themes: Identifying Majors; Engagement with Institutional Personnel; Academic Success*
Mental Health
Faculty Relationships
Maturation
Emergent Themes: **Critical Race Analysis**
Campus Hostility and Engagement *Sub-Themes: Campus Hostility and Peer Engagement; Institutional Skepticism*
Greater Representation

Figure 2: List of Themes and Sub-Themes

Identifying Majors

The first sub-theme to emerge from the data focused on *identifying majors*. Participants expressed frustration and difficulty in identifying academic majors of interest. Participants provided individual stories regarding the immense amount of time, effort, energy, and patience expended on identifying an academic major that aligned with their core values, interests, and long-term goals. Sam, a senior engineering major at Regional State University, shared his experience:

> I was originally studying exercise science… but [switched to] engineering because I liked it, and because I wanted to do biomedical engineering. But they [did not] have it here. I was [also] looking at a biology minor and mechanical engineering major, with the goal of going to graduate school for biomedical engineering…but then I chose civil [engineering]…I went from exercise science to civil engineering. And then I took my first biology class and I hated it.

Sam spent most of his second-year transitioning between academic majors within STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), in search of a discipline that aligned with his goals and ambitions. Upon identifying a potential area of study, he started taking classes, only to discover his disdain for the subject knowledge. His extended search process and inability to identify academic studies that piqued his interest contributed towards his academic confusion.

Davis, a senior worship arts major at Grace College, had a similar experience. He found himself teetering between several disciplines, noting:

> During my sophomore year, I switched my major from music and business to pastoral studies. Then I decided this wasn't for me. So, I switched to a digital media major for the second semester sophomore year. Then, I discovered the track wouldn't work for me in

terms of my career aspirations of working with computers and productions, and realized

the program only offered two classes within that area. So, it was good information, but it

would not help holistically because I don't see myself behind the camera. So, I didn't

think that was my fit.

Davis spent a great deal of time during his second year of college researching and analyzing

academic programs at Grace College. Despite his efforts, he struggled to identify a particular

area of study that successfully balanced his academic interests and his long-term career goals,

contributing to his academic confusion.

Paul, a senior education major at Trojan State University, came to college determined to

study engineering; however, his academic ambitions shifted as he discovered his passion for

teaching.

I didn't do well my first year. I wasn't enjoying [engineering] at all. The summer after

freshman year, I worked at a camp. I worked with kids, and it was pretty cool. So, I said

"Maybe I want to do education." I was just trying to figure out the right path for me, and

to pray over it, because I didn't want to change again. I talked to some advisors in the

teaching program, and they described different options, and by the end of the sophomore

year, I declared that I wanted to be a high school math teacher.

Paul made the decision to switch majors after gaining valuable experiential learning

opportunities over the summer (leading into his second year). Through personal research,

consulting with his family, and seeking guidance from his academic advisor, he found the

courage to officially change his major, placing him within an academic department that aligned

with his skills, passion, and long-term goals.

Kendall shared a similar experience with Paul. As a football and track athlete, he enrolled at Mercy College with the hopes of continuing his co-curricular engagement while majoring in mathematics; however, his plans shifted during his second year of college. He shared:

I got here and I discovered that I would have to take numerous pre-requisite courses to be a math major, and it would take five years [instead of four]. I found this out during my sophomore year, and it really broke my heart. I came [to college] with a timeline and a goal, and that would throw everything off.

Kendall's academic goal of obtaining a mathematics degree hit an obstacle upon learning departmental requirements. This revelation forced him to reconsider his path forward. He elaborated, "So, I ended up switching from a math degree to a finance and economics degree." Kendall's desire to graduate within four years served as the guiding factor in selecting an academic discipline. The academic mandates within the mathematics department threw his collegiate trajectory off track, resulting in a period of academic confusion. Kendall's ability to readjust and identify a new area of study allowed him to employ his academic ambitions and mathematical competencies within a new area, and still meet his desired graduation timeline of four years.

Engagement with Institutional Personnel

The second sub-theme to emerge from the data focused on *engagement with institutional personnel*. Participants leaned on the expertise of their academic advisors to identify their majors. Participants stressed how their advisors played an essential role as they solidified their academic major of interest, and how they provided them with vital information regarding course offerings, internships, short-term career paths, and long-term opportunities within various

industries. As such, these relationships provided participants with the understanding, support, and comfort to navigate the second year of college.

Davis described how his academic coach provided him with significant information for strategic planning during his second year of college. He noted, "I would discuss my progress in class and my options in my major as I transitioned [between academic disciplines]." Davis was grateful to have an academic coach with whom to discuss academic planning. Lawrence's journey followed a similar trajectory. As a senior finance major at Trojan State University, he revealed his second-year academic advisor took significant strides to make him feel welcomed, valued, and heard. He stated, "My academic advisor – I loved her! Whenever I met with her, she always remembered all of my details and my information and my interests." Lawrence stressed the importance of the open dialogue he had with his second-year academic advisor. More specifically, he indicated the advisor was welcoming, receptive, helpful, and accessible.

Robert's experiences reflected those of Lawrence. As a senior majoring in agricultural leadership, education, and communication at Trojan State University, he faced pressure to hone his academic skills and professional ambitions. The positive, welcoming, and inclusive relationship with his second-year academic advisor provided him with the confidence and competence to craft a career path that aligned with his passion, skills, and interest.

> I had no clue what classes to take and what was available when I entered [my] sophomore year. Unless you try to figure it all out by yourself, you have to figure out which class goes with which majors. The advisors already know exactly what we need to take and when to take them. So, it's important to trust them and build a relationship with them because they have connections with schools that will send you in the right direction.

Stephen's experience was not unlike those of Lawrence and Robert, although his advisor

was slightly more removed. As a senior psychology major at Founders State University, Stephen

highlighted the positive relationship he had with his academic advisor during his second year of

college, stating "We weren't super close, but we had a pretty good relationship. If I ever needed

anything, she was like, 'You know where to find me!' So, I reached out for classes." Stephen

indicated that he appreciated her help in determining which courses were most appropriate for

his intended career.

While participants stressed the need to utilize academic coaches and advisors to navigate

academic confusion, some noted their disengagement with other campus resources. More

specifically, participants indicated a lack of participation with institutional resources geared

towards career and professional development, including their career services centers. Participants

noted their ease with utilizing academic success resources, but stressed they lacked the

foundation, understanding, or willpower during their second year of college to meet with career

counselors. Kendall reflected on the career development resources at his institution.

> No, I wasn't really big on [career services]. In high school, they would have all of these
>
> expos and events and my mother was very big on me being cautious about having all of
>
> my information out everywhere, you know? So, when I got here, I was still hesitant to
>
> attend fairs and have my information out like that for everyone to see because at the end
>
> of the day I knew what I wanted to do. But at the back of my head, I was still hesitant.

Kendall did not understand the purpose of his institution's career services center. As such, he

missed numerous opportunities to acquire vital information regarding internships, co-ops,

mentoring, and perhaps even long-term professional success. He spent the vast majority of his

second year conducting his own research or relying on family members and friends to obtain

necessary information for future success.

Robert refused to visit his institution's career services center, despite pleas from family

members and loved ones.

> I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do. So, yeah, just coming into college to begin
>
> with… there's so many majors and options to study. My mom was always trying to get
>
> me to do it, and I didn't go at the time. I was just young and not ready for it. I was young
>
> and wanted to experience college life and parties. I wasn't thinking about [my] career at
>
> the time. I was pretty much by myself at that point, just trying to figure out what I
>
> want[ed] to do. I didn't really reach out to many people. I don't know why. I kind of wish
>
> that I did. I would have been better off now.

While his institution offered vital information for his academic journey, Robert declined to

utilize any career services resources, particularly during his second year of college. His priorities

during this time in his collegiate journey centered around exploring the social aspects of college

life.

Academic Success

The third sub-theme to emerge focused on *academic success*. Participants noted how

their second year of college resulted in academic confusion due to issues related to classroom

performance. Some participants revealed their inability to perform at the same level as their

peers, while others discussed how their mistakes hindered academic success during their second

year of college. Sam said, "I realized that I didn't understand [the course content]. My peers got

it, and I was lost. So right there, I knew it was a problem." He began to question his academic

competence and compared himself to his peers. Sam continued, "My sophomore year was the

first time that I failed a class – Calculus 2." Sam had a tough time adjusting to the rigor of his

second-year classes. His grades paled in comparison to his peers, leaving him concerned about

his path forward.

Davis admitted his second year of college was his worst year, academically, because of a

lack of balance between his curricular and co-curricular responsibilities. He noted:

There was so much homework that I didn't do. Naturally, I'm a good test-taker. I can

usually walk in the room, look at a test and get a B on it because that's how my brain is

wired. But during this time, I struggled because that first semester of my second year I

was not focused – so, my grades tumbled. I was very much involved in other activities,

which weren't bad, but they took away from my academics, my [grade point average],

and my grades.

Davis described how his inability to create balance between his academic obligations and co-

curricular opportunities resulted in a decline in his grade point average (GPA). Thus, the

combination of academic confusion regarding potential disciplines and his inability to complete

assignments in a timely manner resulted in a tumultuous academic year.

Thematic Summary – Academic Confusion

Participants experienced academic confusion due to issues related to identifying

academic majors, mastering classroom content, and utilizing various student success resources

throughout their institution. Participants spent substantial portions of their second-year

transitioning between academic departments, in search of a discipline that aligned with both their

personal interests and long-term career goals. The redeeming quality for many participants was

the exceptional assistance of their academic coaches and advisors, who provided poignant

support regarding program requirements, course offerings, institutional regulations, and

deadlines. Lastly, some participants noted aspects of academic confusion (upon securing a desired major) due to either their inability to master the content, or their unwillingness to dedicate the necessary amount of time, effort, and work towards their studies. While their academic journeys differed, participants maneuvered their way through various institutional barriers to identify both a major and the necessary resources to succeed.

Mental Health

Mental health concerns emerged as the second theme. Participants discussed the rigorous nature of the second year of college and emphasized how it negatively affected their mental health. More specifically, participants described instances in which their inability to balance academic demands, career ambitions, and co-curricular opportunities resulted in periods of anxiety, stress, depression, and isolation.

Sam noted how the complexities of his family and personal life resulted in elevated levels of pressure during his second year of college.

My uncle passed, and a lot of other men and family members were in jail. So, [my family] put a lot of pressure on me. And I was putting that pressure on myself too, and I wasn't meeting the expectations that I thought that others had for me.

Sam struggled to balance the heaviness associated with his uncle's death and the incarceration of several family members, while maintaining his own expectations as a college student. He went on to say, "I was smoking weed and dealing with depression – that's how I really coped, and it really interfered with school. I just couldn't find a balance." Due to the mounting pressure associated with his family, Sam resorted to unhealthy copying mechanisms. His inability to align his expectations with his reality led him down the road to depression. Paul revealed his struggles with stress and anxiety during his second year of college.

The pressure was much higher during the second year because I performed so terribly. I had a lot going into it, and a lot to make up. Once you get into that hole, it's so hard to get out. During my sophomore year, I had a huge weight on me. I was trying to get scholarships back. It was me climbing up a hill. I had greater expectations and much greater stress level and pressure.

The overwhelming pressure to re-build his GPA resulted in both stress and anxiety. Paul believed he was constantly fighting an uphill battle to regain his academic footing. The level of stress and pressure associated with academic performances and scholarship requirements took a toll on Paul's mental health.

I didn't use the campus resources as much as I should have. I had so much happening here and so much happening back home that I tried to do it all myself. I tried to take on that responsibility on my own and I tried to not lean on anyone. I didn't look to any wisdom and guidance as I should have.

Paul emphasized his struggle with finding a balance between his collegiate responsibilities and his personal obligations at home. He eventually found himself operating within his own bubble, believing that he could take on all the duties and pressure alone, without the assistance of others. He stated, "Once I left engineering, I felt my ties had been cut from those mentors I [originally] connected with… So, I couldn't go to them [anymore] for any wisdom or tips." Paul journeyed through his second year in isolation, believing that he had no access to a support network. He went on to say, "I felt that I was going through everything all by myself. I didn't really have any mentors during that time that I felt that I could really go to, here at Trojan State University. I had nowhere to turn, so I tried to just do it all on my own." Paul spent his first year of college cultivating strong relationships with faculty, staff, and peers within the engineering department.

Upon his decision to switch academic majors during his second year of college, Paul found himself in an isolated state of confusion and helplessness.

The pressure to balance the academic rigors of college negatively affected many participants. More specifically, the pressure to succeed intensified during their second year of college. According to Stephen:

> The pressure was [greater] during the second year. The first year, there [is] a lot of tension and trying to get adjusted to school, and that culture shock and being without parents. It's kind of eye-opening. But the first year is much more relaxed and you're still taking your first few courses. During that second year… you realize things are about to get intense, really quickly.

Like Paul, Stephen tried to balance the pressures of college life; however, the burden of responsibilities increased between the first year and second year of college, particularly as he made decisions on his own, without the guidance of his parents and guardians.

While some participants noted their inability to cope with mental health issues, others found campus resources to address the situation. Kendall discussed his struggle with mental health, and how he made the decision to visit his college's counseling center. At first, he did not feel he would make a connection with the counseling staff. He stated, "I told myself, 'I'm not going to talk to this White lady – she doesn't understand what I'm going through and my pain.' So, I would honestly just lock myself up in my room." Kendall tried to manage his anxiety on his own, but to no prevail. He soon realized he needed professional assistance.

> Finally, I decided to talk to [the counselor], and she was awesome! She helped me become a better person. She taught me that stress is normal for a college student, but how I handle it was the difference. I can't lock myself up and let it eat me alive. I needed to

get out, even with my anxiety and stress. I wasn't really a people-person. I could turn it

on and off, but if I could stay in my room all day, I would. I learned my sophomore year

that getting out is not a bad thing.

Thematic Summary – Mental Health

Participants noted the immense pressure associated with the second year of college. They

were forced to reckon with their academic goals and ambitions, identify co-curricular

engagement opportunities, and develop long-term goals for professional success, while

simultaneously balancing personal matters including family emergencies and personal insecurity.

These factors resulted in various levels of frustration, anxiety, stress, isolation, and depression.

Their ability, or inability, to successfully balance their responsibilities affected their mental

health and well-being.

Faculty Relationships

Faculty relationships emerged as the third theme within phenomenological analysis.

Participants described how positive relationships with faculty members played an essential role

in their academic journey during the second year of college. They stressed the importance of

building and maintaining positive relationships with instructors, and how those relationships

helped them develop their short- and long-term academic and career plans. However, participants

also noted their difficulty with establishing student-faculty relationships. Among the reasons for

this were personal intimidation and class sizes.

Participants such as Roman, a senior forestry major at Trojan State University, stressed

the importance of developing relationships with faculty and indicated these relationships helped

him maneuver the academic year successfully. He noted, "Anytime I needed help and asked a

professor, they were always pretty easy about scheduling a time… even if it was just for a [simple] question, they would answer it then and there." Davis, a worship arts major, concurred:

> My professors were the most impactful – one was Hispanic, one was Black, and one was a White male – a diverse group. I did have some professors strictly about the business, and we didn't talk outside of the classroom session. But other professors talked to me about business and careers and contracts and the business side of things, and keeping records of my money, and how I travel, and protecting my brand and taxes, because many [musical production specialists] get behind on their taxes.

Davis stressed how his relationships with professors extended beyond academic discussions and opened the window for meaningful conversations about essential strategies for post-graduate and long-term professional success.

Jack, a senior engineering major at Trojan State University, echoed similar sentiments. He reflected on how his level of comfort changed regarding faculty relationships, and how they became more positive and meaningful between the first and second year of college. He indicated, "By my sophomore year, I got more comfortable meeting staff and professors, and going to office hours, which is good." Like Jack, Robert expressed great comfort with his academic department faculty. His relationship with his department's faculty internship professor provided him with essential mentorship, guidance, and resources as he outlined his career goals.

> Having a relationship with your professor or advisor or supervisor is really helpful for your success. Whenever I got an internship, I got closer to my faculty internship supervisor, and she helped me look for opportunities in the future. So, it's good to get a supervisor or a teacher or professor that you're closer to.

While some participants noted the positive and welcoming nature of the student-faculty relationship, others noted their inability to develop connections with their professors. Several participants described how large lecture classes led to apprehensions about speaking with authoritative figures and how their assumptions led them to believe their instructors would not be interested in their personal struggles. Lawrence recalled:

> With the classes that weren't lecture style classes with 300-400 people, I was more comfortable speaking to the professors. But it was hard to connect with other professors. When there are 400 people in the class, I just feel like it's hard to stand out – but the smaller the class size, the more comfortable I was about asking the professor for help about my struggles and my question.

Sam's sentiments parallel those of Lawrence. He struggled to develop relationships with faculty because he felt they would lack an interest in his struggles:

> I don't think I ever came to any faculty regarding any major issues I was having. Sometimes, I would come if I had a problem in class, especially a class that I was really struggling in. I would try to take notes, and I might come to them anyways. I would sometimes go to office hours depending on the class. But I never came to them with anything more serious because it didn't feel like their place to handle that other stuff. I never thought that they would help with my other struggles. I didn't think they would want to stop the world to help me with my personal issues.

Sam's assumptions about his professors kept him from pursuing intentional relationships. His only out-of-class interactions emerged if he had an academic need regarding his coursework. Otherwise, he believed his personal issues and concerns went beyond their interests.

Kendall's inability to develop strong faculty relationships came from his general lack of interest in pursuing relationships with his instructors. He disregarded the need to develop those academic bonds during his second year of college, noting:

I was really stubborn. If I didn't like the class, I wasn't trying to create a relationship with the professor. When I switched to my accounting classes, I was actually trying to make a connection with my professors. But I should have done that with my writing teacher as well. And even with me struggling, he really tried to make that connection with me because even after class ended, we would sometimes hang out and talk for 5–10 minutes. But me being immature at that time, I didn't take advantage of what was before me.

Kendall noted how he disregarded most efforts to connect with faculty members, beyond small talk. While he developed faculty connection for his accounting class, he lacked the same effort and intentionality for the rest of his courses. Even when professors tried to reach out to him and establish a connection, Kendall disregarded their efforts.

Stephen disclosed that his personality prevented him from taking the initiative to develop relationships with his professors. He stated, "I just went to my classes and went back to the dorm and did my own thing." However, he did indicate that he would seek faculty assistance if the need was great. He emphasized, "If I was in dire straits and needed some help, I would push through and ask for help."

Theme Summary – Faculty Relationships

The student-faculty relationship emerged as a central theme and an essential tool for student success. Participants identified positive outcomes from their connections with professors

and departmental faculty members. Their collective insight highlighted the vital relationship between faculty interactions and positive outcomes including the selection of academic majors, classroom engagement, self-esteem and value, co-curricular opportunities, and post-graduate success. However, their insight also revealed the difficulty in establishing faculty relationships. Participants noted how class size, individual personalities, pre-conceived notions and assumptions about instructors, and/or their general lack of interest kept many from establishing or maintaining relationships with professors.

Maturation

Maturation emerged as the fourth theme within phenomenological analysis. Participants signaled that their second year of college served as a period of reflection, self-awareness, and harsh reality checks. For them to succeed during their second year, they had to be intentional about their academic endeavors, co-curricular activities, and long-term plans. The lessons learned throughout their second year taught them how to critically analyze their situations, identify potential solutions, and implement the necessary steps for future success.

Davis described his second year as a period of growth and maturity. He stated, "For every college student, you have those coming-of-age moments where you start to understand more about you, life, culture, the world, and area you live in. My second year, I definitely grew a lot in terms of maturity." The second year of college provided Davis with clarity regarding his life and the world around him. As such, he discovered opportunities to learn, connect, and grow. Paul stressed that the second year of college was a humbling experience. He stated, "The transition from freshman (sic) to sophomore year was different. I definitely used some of the stuff that I learned from my freshman year (sic) into my sophomore year. My first two years were definitely the most humbling experiences of my life." Paul believed that his second year provided him with

opportunities to reflect on both his successes and mistakes and identify opportunities for personal enhancement as he progressed towards his academic and professional goals.

Roman found the difficulties of the second year necessary for his growth and development.

> I would describe [the second year] as moreso eye-opening because I was finding out who I was in myself at that time… and going through certain things outside of school and personally. Overall, I would say that it was a time that I needed to go through. It was difficult at times, and it was easy at times… The good times were super good, and the bad times were super bad.

Roman believed that his second year served as a period of self-analysis, as he learned more about himself in relation to both his academic obligations and personal life. While difficult at times, he believed that the experience was necessary for his own development.

Theme Summary – Maturation

While the second year of college was stressful for many participants, it also emerged as an opportunity for development. Participants indicated that lessons and mistakes from their second year were necessary, as they learned more about their personal interests, goals, and ambitions. The second year opened the door to new challenges and responsibilities – but each experience provided participants with clarity regarding their passion, goals, and ambitions. As Roman noted, their experiences (both the highs and the lows) were necessary aspects in their growth and success.

Critical Race Theory Lens

Two themes emerged from a critical race analysis. Critical race theory explores racism, inequality, and the inequitable distribution of power and privilege within institutions and society

(Brown & Jackson, 2013; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Crenshaw et al.,1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). The first theme, *campus climate and peer engagement*, explored how students acclimated to the culture of their institution. The second theme, *greater representation*, explored the need for more African American faculty and staff at PWIs, along with greater institutional commitment towards multicultural student services initiatives.

Campus Climate and Peer Engagement

The fifth theme, *campus climate and peer engagement*, centered around peer interactions and co-curricular engagement. Participants highlighted issues associated with the campus climate, including the omnipresent nature of racism both inside and outside of the classroom. They noted institutional efforts (of varying degrees) that promoted a sense of awareness, including campus-wide cultural programs. Despite these initiatives, students revealed a variety of experiences that underscored the consistent presence of racism on their college campuses, with specific instances of microaggressions, isolation, loss of "voice," campus demonstrations, and unwarranted monitorization from campus police and peers. As such, two sub-themes emerged within this emerging theme – *Campus Hostility and Negative Peer Interactions* and *Institutional Skepticism.*

Campus Hostility and Negative Peer Interactions

The first sub-theme to emerge is *campus hostility and negative peer interactions*. Participants revealed difficulty acclimating to their college campuses because of racialized incidents with peers, both inside and outside of the classroom. The combination of negative interactions, microaggressions, and unmerited monitorization by campus police forced participants to exclude themselves from co-curricular opportunities. Roman tried to identify

ways to cope with the constant hostility of his college campus. He noted, "I was so used to it, I just shrugged it off – even though I shouldn't have done it. I just handled it internally, in my mind." Roman had to identify strategies to deal with the omnipresent nature of racism on his campus – and his inclination to simply ignore events (processing them internally and walking away) revealed his willingness to do whatever it took to maneuver around commonplace incidences of hostility. Jack shared, "I didn't have a rough past about racial discrimination, but I've definitely seen it before [on campus]." Whenever he found himself within a crowd with White peers, Jack emphasized that it, "automatically makes you question, for a minute, various sayings and interactions and behaviors from people." He noted a revealing experience with one of his student organizations:

> I was a part of a student organization and there were times when we talked about the experiences of Black males on campus. And during my sophomore year, I heard about experiences happening to my friends. The social interactions were always interesting. You never know if people have malicious intent with everything. And many White people don't know how to interact with Blacks and Hispanics. With a White institution, the people that I meet are the people I always have to guess and be aware of, and it makes my daily interactions hard.

The ever-present nature of hostility on his campus resulted in concern, with Jack questioning his engagement with peers and the significance and intentionality behind their interactions.

While Trojan State University's programmatic initiatives promoted a greater sense of awareness, belonging, and respect, Jack experienced racialized incidents throughout his second year.

People were pretty bold, I would say, which is disappointing. I was walking to class, and one of the [fraternity] houses close to the [academic] building was having a party. And one of the requirements [to get into the party] was on a big sign that said, "…You can't be Black!" It was a massive banner at the front of the house. They blatantly plastered it on the banner!

Jack's encounter underscored his frustration and disappointment with Trojan State University regarding their efforts to promote awareness and inclusion. More importantly, it furthered his disdain for the campus and his White peers. Paul's disengagement came from exclusionary actions, scrutiny, and unmerited monitorization from both his peers and campus administrators.

I think that was probably the toughest thing about being at this university. For me personally, for a good half of my time here, I felt like I didn't belong. I felt like a specimen that scientists were looking at half of the time. Whether it was random people on the sidewalk and how they acted, or police officers lingering around me as I walked, even if I was dressed well. I felt like someone was always staring at me. The professors and faculty and higher-ups definitely promoted [cultural awareness]. Honestly, most of the hostility came from the students.

Paul's efforts to engage with his campus fell flat as the actions of institutional stakeholders, particularly his peers, left him feeling isolated, judged, scrutinized, and unappreciated. No matter his efforts, he felt like an outsider at his own institution. While Trojan State University promoted cultural awareness and respect, his peers made it extremely difficult to cope with hostility. Jack described how tensions around racism, inequality, and accountability reached a boiling point during his second year, as African American students led an on-campus protest because of a Black-face incident.

The students here are... a lot. For a lot of people here, it was a culture shock. I know we were around a national election period, and we had a march across campus and that was a lot going on. It was very straining on our mind because we're thinking, 'Wow, it's 2019 and we're still marching for freedom.' It's a shock that we're having to do this for equality. And then the election was coming up, and Trump… I've never had any racists experiences happen to me, but I know it's out there. You hear stuff. So, it was kind of shocking.

Jack dealt with intense hostility from his campus peers, as he and his friend participated in demonstrations and peaceful protests. Their efforts to promote equality were often met with aggression. Paul described a racial incident he encountered one evening, as he walked from his residence hall to the campus recreational facility. He recalled, "One day, I was walking and there were a bunch of White students that I encountered. Three seconds after I walked in front of them, one of them made monkey noises at me. I was like, 'Are you serious?'"

Racialized incidents and campus hostility from fellow peers prevented participants from fully engaging in co-curricular opportunities. The combination of scrutiny, monitorization, aggression, and blatant racism from their peers forced participants to re-evaluate their place within the institution.

Institutional Skepticism

Institutional skepticism emerged as the second sub-theme within campus climate and peer engagement. Participants revealed that racialized incidents, negative student interactions, and difficulty with campus acclimation forced them to re-examine their views of their institutions. While campus leaders emphasized a message of unity and progression, participants held great skepticism towards senior administrators and institutional efforts. Students engage in the

institutional DEI efforts in which they are granted; unfortunately, these DEI efforts have the potential of being more performative than impactful. More specifically, these efforts have the possibility of serving as checkpoints of compliance, rather than leaving a significant impact on the culture, climate, and overall experience of the campus body. Although Grace College consistently promoted initiatives that highlighted diversity, equity, and inclusion, Davis felt they were performative. He believed more initiatives could have been implemented by the administration to truly promote a more welcoming academic and co-curricular learning environment for all students:

> It wasn't bad, but I don't want to call it great and amazing. At my university, we had a cultural fest in September each year, and there is a weeklong event that highlights cultures. The campus culture was intended to be welcoming and understanding. But part of that I would attribute to the dynamics of the students who attended the school… I would say that the institution put things into place to make students of all races and backgrounds, especially African Americans and Black [people], feel safe. But were they aware of how much more they needed to do or where they lacked? No.

While Davis appreciated the programmatic efforts from offices and departments throughout Grace College, he desired more intentional efforts from the institution to create an inclusive atmosphere for all students.

Stephen's interactions with his professors left him questioning their motives, intentions, and their desire to see all students succeed:

> There were times when I tried to reach out and email professors, and they would for whatever reason not respond to me, but always responded to White classmates. And you start to examine it. You don't want to make it about race, but the differences... the way

they talk to classmates differently than me – yeah, it made me kind of upset, to be
completely honest. Not necessarily anger or sadness… but a level of disappointment. I
should be the same priority as my White counterparts. I shouldn't have to feel less than
someone else.

Stephen desired to feel valued, included, and supported like his White peers, both inside and
outside of the classroom. With the inequitable distribution of attention, he developed a cynical
attitude towards his professors. When asked about his level of trust with campus administrators,
Stephen summed his feelings up by stating "To be honest – I didn't feel connected to campus."
Stephen's disengagement parallels the sentiments of Robert, who expressed great difficulty
connecting with his institution. He noted, "It definitely impacted my social life… sometimes I
would just get nervous to talk to someone. It always felt like we stood out from everyone else."
Participants expressed how feelings of isolation, nervousness, and exclusion routinely arose
during their second year. They felt like outsiders within their own institution, lacking the same
level of support and engagement as their White peers.

Jack described the extent to which racialized campus incidents affected his perception of
his peers and his institution, stating, "You never know what's going to happen one day – a racist
person can come up and do something. We definitely got a lot of looks and disrespectful
remarks. It's hard to experience." Random acts of hostility and vitriol forced Jack to constantly
hold suspicious and incredulous feelings towards his institution. Considering he could never
fully prepare for random acts of hostility, he remained on high alert. Sam noted, "I honestly
didn't feel like I had a voice during my second year… I didn't feel like a number, but I couldn't
find my voice for a while." Sam's comments highlighted a loss of power and revealed his
inability to successfully identify his niche within his own campus community.

Theme Summary – Campus Climate and Peer Engagement

Participants described the negative consequences of racialized incidents, inequitable classroom engagement, and unmerited scrutiny and monitorization from administrators. These occurrences hindered opportunities to fully engage in co-curricular initiatives, connect with student organizations, cultivate essential faculty relationships, and acquire a greater sense of ownership and respect for their institution. The omnipresent nature of racism on campus led to the loss of voice, isolation, disappointment, and weariness about their institutions.

Greater Representation

The final theme to emerge, *greater representation* focused on the expressed need for more African American faculty, staff, and administrators on college campuses. Participants emphasized how their second year of college improved once they connected with African American faculty, advisors, and administrators who understood their background, interests, hopes, fears, ambitions, and the barriers that constantly stood between them and their academic and professional goals. As such, participants noted the influence of African American faculty and staff and stressed the need for greater representation.

Sam frequently visited his campus' multicultural resource center because the office provided him with the necessary resources for his personal development. More specifically, two of his mentors worked within the center, offering him an abundance of strategies for success.

> The multicultural student affairs office is one of the best things that we have on campus, especially if you can get involved in it. They helped me. Two of my four mentors worked there. I got tutoring from them because they offered it for free. It was a great resource because everyone would go in there and sit and talk; you could be in there for like two hours. And with my mentor being a Black man, it was even better to have that presence.

Sam utilized campus resources, like the multicultural student affairs office, to recharge and acquire the necessary tools to succeed. Moreso, he appreciated that his mentor, a Black male professional, was employed within the center. When asked about the role of African American professionals within his collegiate life, Sam believed their presence played an essential role in his growth and development.

> It was like having your uncle there on campus whenever you needed them. My mentor and I are very close. He's my uncle figure. We don't have any reason not to be. So having someone as a resource – I would come sit in his office and he would talk to me and see if I needed anything. It was great!

Sam cherished the ability to establish relationships with African American faculty, staff, and administrators who understood his needs and ambitions. Sam's relationship with his mentor, an African American administrator within the multicultural student affairs office, provided him with a safe space to unwind, ask questions, and seek advice.

> Jack believed his second year of college took a positive turn when an African American professional staff member within one of the academic colleges sought him out, checked in on him, understood his needs, and connected him with vital resources for success.

> During my sophomore year, there was a program manager for diversity programs that really helped me out. He would come to our residence halls and check on us. He would come to the lobby of our buildings and check in with us and make sure we were okay. It was very helpful to have him there to remind us of why we were there. And having that support network in college, especially if you're uncomfortable talking to faculty and professors; your ego can keep you from asking questions. You don't want to appear like

the dumb one or appear like a weak [link] in the chain. So, someone like him making it

as easy as possible to get help… it definitely helped me a lot.

Jack's relationship with the diversity programs coordinator created a space for accountability,

mentorship, and resources, and served as a constant reminder of his value and contributions to

campus. He provided Jack with a place to be vulnerable, ask questions, and gain support

without the fear of scrutiny or embarrassment.

Lawrence referenced the diversity office on his campus and the impact it made on his

trajectory. Thanks to their diligence, Lawrence acquired the necessary boost of confidence to

continue throughout his second year, both virtually and in-person:

The office of diversity within [my academic college] and the workers there were

definitely mentors to me. Outside of student organizations and emails, they were

always checking in on me and seeing how I was doing [and] seeing how my grades

were going. They tried to emphasize my co-curricular experiences as well as my

academic life and goals. I definitely would not be where I am today without them. I

would definitely say for African Americans, and African American males – getting

them mentors on campus [is important]. You need someone to talk to, and someone

to… like discipline you and give you words of wisdom and advice. They said they see

someone in you, and they want you to succeed. They sought me out, and that was

important. So, for African Americans, we need someone that we can look up to and talk

to. That gets major points to me. I promise you, if I hadn't met those people in the

office of diversity, I would be lost.

Consistent with both Sam and Jack's experiences, Lawrence's interactions with the diversity

programming staff within his academic college provided him with much-needed affirmation

and encouragement about his academic and co-curricular ambitions. The check-ins, wisdom, and advice shared cultivated a culture of gratitude, and it offered Lawrence with the right amount of aid to help him maneuver around obstacles during his collegiate journey.

Paul stressed the need for all institutions to take a more intentional, proactive, and long-term approach for representation, and identify ways to both recruit and retain faculty and staff of color. He revealed his only experiences with African American faculty and staff members during his second year of college came from a handful of professors and the friendly janitors who cleaned the student activities center at night.

I've only had three African American professors during my time here. Adding more Black faculty and staff at the university would definitely make me feel more comfortable here. They have Black staff in particular centers, like the multicultural resource center, and some of my mentors here are Black, and I really look up to them. But we need more of those options. It ensures that we're not going to the same people all of the time. We really need more representation. Most of the representation that we see is usually only through Greek Life, in regards to African Americans. But if you can have more Black faculty and staff, and not just the janitors…and if we can see more people, that would be great. The best math professor that I've ever had was Black!

Beyond the need for representation, Paul recommended institutions provide additional funding for programs, initiatives, and student organizations centered around the academic, personal, and professional success of underrepresented students.

Donate more money! I was involved in minority (sic) mentoring programs, but these programs don't get enough finances as other programs, even in Greek Life. Non-NPHC organizations have more money, resources, and representation than others. It's kind of

bias and crazy to me. It's a larger conversation, but why are we not placing more

institutional funds and resources into minority-serving groups and organizations.

Minority (sic), Hispanic…we have to do most of the work on our own. Other

organizations have the resources and funds to do major initiatives, like homecoming

funds for floats.

Paul advocated for a more equitable distribution of funds and resources for diversity initiatives.

With a greater emphasis on multicultural programming, Paul hoped to see organizations geared

towards underrepresented and underserved populations achieve greater prominence and

engagement at Trojan State University.

Theme Summary – Greater Representation

Participants stressed how African American faculty and staff positively influenced their

academic, personal, and professional development. The presence of like-minded and culturally

sensitive advocates during the second year of college provided participants with a safe space for

vulnerability, honest conversations, and growth. Their presence was invaluable for participants,

highlighting the need for more African American faculty and staff members throughout their

college campuses. As such, greater representation has the potential to affect the lives of

numerous students during their second year of college, particularly on racialized or hostile

college campuses.

Essence of the Lived Experiences of African American Male Students During their Second

Year of College of PWIs

The last step in phenomenological analysis is integrating individual encounters and

descriptions into a unified statement, revealing the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas,

1994). I captured the essence of the African American male student experience at PWIs during

their second year of college in a composite description that emerged from the synthesis of participants' counter-stories and experiences.

The essence derived from participants' stories revealed how their journey through the second year of college at PWIs was extremely challenging, both inside and outside of the classroom, as participants searched for clarification, validation, and safe spaces for growth and development. Participants acknowledged how the second year of college was comprised of both academic trials (identifying a major, developing faculty relationships, and balancing academic obligations) and issues surrounding co-curricular engagement. The pressures associated with academic studies, peer comparisons, and post-graduate preparation continuously clashed with external factors including family obligations, personal insecurities, and mental health issues. Racialized instances of discrimination, microaggressions, police monitorization, and cultural incompetence led to isolation, skepticism, a lack of "voice," and an unwillingness to connect to the institution. Through the intentional support of academic coaches and student support services (multicultural affairs resource officers), participants maneuvered through barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump and found ways to succeed during their second year of college.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the collective and diverse lived experiences of nine African American male college seniors from PWIs. More specifically, I shared the experiences of their second year of college. Themes emerged that informed and illuminated participants' experiences. In the first theme, *academic confusion*, I presented the experiences of participants as they navigated various paths towards their academic disciplines. In the second theme, *mental health*, I revealed how the pressures of the second year contributed to

elevated levels of anxiety, stress, isolation, and depression for the participants. Next, I presented the third theme, *faculty relationships*, which described the benefits of student-faculty relationships, while highlighting the difficulties in establishing and maintaining such relationships. In the fourth theme, *maturation*, participants described how their second year of college was a "wake-up call," as they identified ways to grow from their academic woes and personal mistakes. Utilizing CRT as an analytical tool, two additional themes emerged. First, in *campus climate and peer interactions*, participants described how the omnipresence of racism resulted in hostile living and learning environments. The last emergent theme, *greater representation,* highlighted the need for institutional investment in African American faculty and staff, and reviewed the potentially positive outcomes (e.g., retention, academic performance, mental health, etc.) on African American male college students during the second year of college. In Chapter 5, I connect the study's findings to the literature, present implications, and share suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Recommendations

In this chapter, I connect the study's findings to the literature, offer implications for higher education, and present suggestions for future research. Qualitative research is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). With my desire to obtain the stories, perspectives, and experiences of African American male second-year college students at PWIs, phenomenology served as the most appropriate pathway for discovery. Furthermore, phenomenology was selected for this study because it provided an opportunity to thoroughly analyze the essence of the phenomena – the sophomore slump – through the experiences and perspectives of African American male college students at PWIs. Lastly, CRT was selected as a conceptual lens because this theoretical framework granted me an opportunity to examine racism, inequality, and the inequitable distribution of racialized power and privilege within the structure of a college campus.

This study analyzed the lived experiences of African American male college students as they transitioned through their second year of college. The phenomenon focused on the sophomore slump, and how participants navigated barriers to achieve academic, personal, and professional success. While extensive research has been conducted on the lived experiences of second-year college students (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Reyes, 2011; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2015), little research has been conducted on the specific experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. As such, this exploration contributes to literature. This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of African American males during their second year of college at predominantly White institutions?

RQ2: How do African American male second-year students at predominantly White institutions navigate barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump?

Through the employment of phenomenology and CRT, this study captured participants' collective voice, while acknowledging their diverse perspectives as individuals. The study offers institutional stakeholders – such as college deans, academic advisors, career coaches, student affairs practitioners, and senior administrators – with potential implications for higher education, focusing on strategic second-year programming, advising methods, and institutional investment in both resources and faculty/staff positions.

To answer the research questions, I collected data from nine African American male college seniors at PWIs throughout East Tennessee. I transcribed the interview audio files, engaged in bracketing and phenomenological reduction, developed units of significance, organized codes, and derived concepts from participants' collective and diverse responses. The following sections summarize the study's findings and their connection to the literature. Recommendations for both institutional implementation and additional research are presented.

Summary of Findings

This study's findings illuminate the lived experiences of African American male college students at PWIs during their second year of college. Participants' individual perspectives and collective voice are presented in six themes. *The following themes emerged by conducting a phenomenological analysis of the data:*

Academic Confusion – Identifying how African American male college students at PWIs navigated barriers associated with selecting academic disciplines, mastering subject matter, and balancing academic and co-curricular responsibilities.

Faculty Relationships – Analyzing the relationship between African American male college students and collegiate faculty, and its influence on classroom performance, campus engagement, and career success at PWIs.

Mental Health – Examining how pressure associated with the second-year collegiate experience affected the mental health and wellness of African American male college students at PWIs.

Year of Maturation – Understanding how participants identified opportunities for personal growth and reflection during their second year of college at PWIs.

The following themes emerged by conducting a CRT analysis of the data:

Campus Climate and Peer Engagement – Understanding how racism effected the level of institutional engagement by African American second-year male college students at PWIs.

Greater Representation – Examining the need for institutional investment in additional African American faculty and staff positions, and understanding their potential influence on the academic, personal, and professional development of African American male students during the second year of college at PWIs.

Academic Confusion

The findings from this study highlighted the academic experiences of African American male students during their second year of college at PWIs. Matriculating through higher education brings a myriad of obstacles that range from getting connected to seeking academic resources (Harper et al., 2018; Lee, 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2008). These issues are exacerbated for students representing historically disenfranchised and underserved communities (Harper et al., 2018; Lee, 2018). Several participants within this study noted their academic confusion and disengagement during their second year of college. Sam discussed his level of academic confusion as he transitioned from one academic department to

another. He had a challenging time identifying an academic discipline amongst exercise science, biomedical engineering, biology, and civil engineering. In addition, he struggled with his inability to grasp subject matter like his counterparts. Davis had similar struggles but highlighted how his academic disengagement occurred because of his inability to balance academic obligations with co-curricular demands. As a youth worship leader, he placed more emphasis on his out-of-class experiences, causing his grades to plummet during his second year of college.

The experiences of Sam and Davis align with national data regarding both second-year students and African American students (Heier, 2012; Young, 2015). During the second year, many students experience a demise in their academic performance, as they struggle to balance the various demands of college life (Heier, 2012; Young, 2015). The academic rigor, institutional expectations, campus climate, and the stigma associated with seeking assistance keeps many African American male students from acquiring the necessary resources for academic success (Harper et al., 2018; Lee, 2018).

While most participants in this study revealed individual struggles with identifying academic disciplines, outlining their career trajectories, and mastering subject matter, many noted the positive influence of their academic advisor. More specifically, participants indicated they would not be where they are today, had it not been for the assistance, guidance, and support of their academic advisor during the second year of college. Research associates academic advising with higher retention, campus engagement, and elevated graduation rates (Lee, 2018).

Lawrence highlighted the level of comfort he had with this academic advisor, and how he could comfortably stop by her office, ask for information, and be vulnerable when necessary. Robert noted that his advisor's ability to empathize with his concerns, understand his goals, and push him towards his ambitions played a significant role in his academic and professional

success during his second year of college. Research highlights the positive influence of developmental advising, and its potential to both decrease academic confusion and increase student success amongst African American students (Johnson et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). Developmental advising emphasizes relationship-building with students so "teaching and learning about crucial academic and life concerns occur" (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 4). Several research participants noted how their academic advisors employed techniques associated with developmental advising to intentionally cultivate positive and long-standing relationships. As a result, participants found an overwhelming sense of ease connecting with their advisors for insight regarding academic disciplines, institutional courses, and student success strategies. Developmental advising has a proven record of significantly increasing gains within underrepresented students on college campuses, including PWIs (Johnson et al., 2019).

Not only is it important to develop unique advising techniques when working with underrepresented college students, but academic advisors must demonstrate cultural awareness and competence to increase the likelihood of impact (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018). Culturally sensitive advisors explicitly acknowledge the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students, seek to empower them in decision-making, advocate on their behalf, and connect them to co-curricular opportunities that affirm their sense of community on campus (Johnson et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018). Many participants noted their level of comfort when entering the offices of their advisors. Despite the varying levels of hostility from peers and student organizations across their individual campuses, participants overwhelmingly perceived a keen sense of satisfaction, safety, and security when engaging with their academic advisors. Regardless of the racial and gender differences between the participants and their advisors, they

commended these practitioners for their ability to meet students where they were and develop

action plans that aligned with their academic, personal, and professional ambitions.

Most participants discussed their level of comfort with academic coaches and advisors,

while simultaneously indicating their level of discomfort with career coaches and career

counselors. During their second year of college, several participants chose not to visit their career

services centers, meet with career counselors, or attend career-related programs including

professional development workshops and career fairs. Kendall revealed that his original

skepticism about career services came from his mother and her distrust of career counselors.

Robert revealed how people within his inner circle, including family, friends, and peers,

consistently urged him to connect with career coaches – and despite their recommendations, he

disregarded their advice. African American students statistically demonstrate a lower level of

institutional engagement in career-based programing, as compared to their White counterparts

(Dickinson et al., 2017). Proper intervention, programming, and encouragement can potentially

increase the number of African American male students engaging with career coaches, co-

curricular learning opportunities, and long-term professional development training initiatives

(Dickinson et al., 2017).

Faculty Relationships

Numerous studies have situated faculty members as one of the most essential institutional

agents for retention, student engagement, and academic success (Astin, 1993; Dika, 2012; Kim,

2010; Kim & Sax, 2013; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Pascarella,

1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007). The relationship between

students and their instructors can increase students' motivation to achieve their academic,

personal, and professional ambitions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Davis revealed how his interaction

with college professors, both inside and outside of the classroom, served as essential sources of guidance and mentorship during his second year of college. More specifically, he noted how several of his professors provided him with post-graduate tips on branding and marketing, accounting skills, record-keeping, and long-term professional success. His encounters align with research emphasizing how student-faculty relationships can result in greater student engagement and post-graduate success (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Kim & Sax, 2013; Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Robert emphasized how the relationship with his faculty internship coordinator served as a pivotal source of professional development. Their ongoing relationship provided Robert with the necessary resources to clarify his long-term career plans, seek internships, and enhance his workforce development skills. The relationship between African American students and their professors can indirectly affect GPA and classroom engagement through their academic self-concept (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Kim & Sax, 2013). If African American college students perceive their professors as caring and invested, they are more likely to both receive and process critical feedback without it threatening their sense of fit at PWIs or diminishing perceptions of their academic potential (Neville & Parker, 2017). African American college students who receive and are responsive to constructive criticism from caring faculty may experience an elevation in their academic self-concept (Cole, 2008), which may indirectly enhance their academic engagement and achievement (Beasley & McClain, 2021).

Furthermore, researchers found interactions with caring faculty positively influenced African American students' perceptions of the campus climate, sense of belonging, and willingness to engage with both student organizations and student support services (Beasley, 2020; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Grantham et al., 2015). Harper's (2010) study of 319 Black men found positive student/faculty relationships resulted in an

increase in classroom motivation, course participation, and campus engagement. Through their interactions with African American students in various settings, including classrooms, social functions, and athletic events, faculty not only contributed to boosting students' engagement, but they also strengthened their academic identity (Harper, 2010).

As noted, the significance of role models and the need for cultural sensitivity among faculty has been valuable in better understanding the barriers to successful relationships between White faculty and African American students (Guiffrida, 2005). While the relationship between African American students and their professors continues to show positive outcomes, research reveals consistent hesitancy from African American male college students to form essential learning opportunities with their instructors (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Neville & Parker, 2017). Lawrence stressed his hesitancy to connect with professors, especially in large courses. The smaller the class size, the more likely he was to hold conversations with his instructor and professors outside of the classroom. Sam felt it would be highly inappropriate to have personal conversations with his professors about how his out-of-class obligations (family issues, difficulty acclimating to campus life, and microaggressions from White peers and student organizations, etc.) influenced his academic performance inside the classroom. As such, he went through the vast majority of his second year without forming student-faculty relationships. Kendall and Stephen believed it would be pointless to form relationships with their college professors, despite the efforts of college professors to reach out and connect with them. Their hesitancy to form these essential relationships align with research regarding the nature of student-faculty engagement amongst underrepresented student populations. According to a 2009 longitudinal study from Beginning Postsecondary Students' (BPS), 66.9% of African American men "never" had an informal meeting with a faculty member. In contrast, 27.4% of Black men noted they met

with faculty "sometimes," whereas only 5.7% said they did so "often" (Bush & Bush, 2010). The data indicated Black men have limited informal interactions with faculty. Black men are least likely to have such experiences with faculty or receive the necessary support from the institution (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Mental Health

The findings from this study revealed many participants struggled with mental health during their second year of college. Paul revealed the level of stress and anxiety he faced as he transitioned from one academic department to another. The constant feeling of rejection and isolation negatively affected his psyche, with Paul believing no one at the institution understood or cared about his internal struggles. African American students attending PWIs are more likely to experience elevated levels of stress due to the mental and physical requirements of higher education (Clark & Mitchell, 2018). More specifically, African American students struggle to balance personal, financial, academic, and family obligations, resulting in adverse health effects, including anxiety and clinical depression (Clark & Mitchell, 2018).

Lawrence revealed the pressures of the second year were far greater than those of his first year, with him citing factors associated with the sophomore slump, including the level of coursework, career preparation, and the constant feeling of institutional scrutiny by peers, faculty, and staff. Symptoms including hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, isolation, sadness, worrying, and irritable mood are detrimental to the daily functioning, intellectual development, and overall academic, personal, and professional success of African American male college students (Clark & Mitchell, 2018). Single experiences of acute stress do not cause these symptoms to develop. Instead, they are more likely to develop when students experience an accumulation of intense experiences over time (Cohen et al., 2007; Ingram & Wallace, 2018;

Lipson et al., 2018; McEwen, 2004). African American male students are more likely to experience mental health issues due to a combination of factors including academic confusion, faculty relations, hostile campus environments, and family issues at home (Cohen et al., 2007; Ingram & Wallace, 2018; Lipson et al., 2018; McEwen, 2004). Understanding and addressing the mental health needs of racially diverse students is essential for holistic student development, persistence, academic achievement, and higher retention. Studies have found a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety amongst underrepresented students, as well as higher levels of functional impairments relative to White students (Ingram & Wallace, 2018; Lipson et al., 2018).

Research suggests mental health treatment is lower amongst BIPOC students, with studies indicating higher levels of stigma amongst African American students (Ingram & Wallace, 2018; Lipson et al., 2018). Despite the immense pressure during his second year of college (the passing of his uncle, the incarceration of several family members, and academic confusion), Sam decided to utilize alternative methods (e.g., state what he did) to cope with his stress and anxiety. By the end of his second year, his anxiety and stress transitioned into clinical depression. His decision to cope with stress on his own terms, rather than seeking professional help, aligns with national trends for African American male college students (Ingram & Wallace, 2018). Roughly 40% of college students with mental health issues received proper and professional treatment from mental health counselors and medical professionals; unfortunately, diagnoses, medication use, and therapy were extremely low among Students of Color compared to White students (Lipson et al., 2018). Kendall, who spent years struggling with anxiety before college, visited his institution's counseling center towards the end of his second year. His initial level of apprehension about mental health services aligns with the stigma highlighted in previous research (Lipson et al., 2018), but he eventually decided to speak with a professional and noted

the improvement, clarity, and relief he received through his sessions. While he initially struggled with the idea of speaking with a White mental health counselor about his concerns, he agreed his decision to seek professional health served as a turning point during his second year of college.

Year of Maturation

Many participants believed their second year of college served as an opportunity for growth, development, and reflection. While it marked a period of mistakes and lessons, it also provided participants with opportunities for personal maturity. Maturation refers to the physical, mental, social, intellectual, emotional, and moral changes individuals experience as they advance through life (Rohit, 2019). More specifically, it refers to changes resulting from the natural unfolding of inherited tendencies or the actualization of innate potentialities. The major characteristics of maturity are relative freedom from the constellation of inferiority, egotism, and competitiveness (Rohit, 2019). Emotional maturity is a process in which the personality is continuously striving for greater sense of health, both intra-psychically and intra-personally (Smithson, 1974).

Paul proffered his second year of college served as a time of reflection, as he identified behaviors and mistakes that led to academic woes. In addition, he examined how his immaturity hindered both his academic ambitions and long-term career plans. Although he faltered throughout the year, his mistakes forced him to analyze his behavior, coping mechanisms, and support network. Kendall labeled the second year of college as a necessary "wake-up call," forcing him and his peers to examine their motivation toward his academic obligations, co-curricular engagement, and personal health. As a college athlete, he had to identify his priorities and ensure his academic obligations came first. Davis expressed his second year of college served as his official "coming of age" moment, during which he started to learn more about life,

culture, and his place within the world. Although it was not his strongest year academically, Davis stressed his second year served as an opportunity for him to experience emotional maturity and to identify ways to employ new insight into his behavior, character, and motivation for both retention and graduation.

Periods of growth and maturity are common amongst college students, particularly underrepresented students, as they utilize various levels of adversity for both personal and professional development (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Students often identify mechanisms to balance responsibilities associated with academic coursework, co-curricular engagement, financial obligations, family concerns, and career-related ambitions. They develop a greater level of interdependence, as they detach from parents and guardians, and use personal encounters, lessons, and perspectives to guide their academic, personal, and professional journey (Covarrubias et al., 2015).

Campus Climate and Peer Engagement

The employment of a CRT framework to analyze participants' experiences and perspectives illustrates the subtle, yet powerful, nature of race and racism, and its influence on African American male college students as they maneuvered barriers associated with the sophomore slump (Comeaux et al., 2020; Matsuda et al., 1993; Yosso et al., 2004). Since the publication of Ladson-Billings and Tate's 1995 study, CRT has proven useful in examining various phenomena in higher education (Harper et al., 2018). This approach to data analysis gives voice to the unique life experiences of African American male college students, and exposes discourses, practices, and structures that reinforce White supremacy (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2009; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The first tenant of CRT states racism is endemic within our society (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). As such, higher education professionals must understand how racism permeates the lives and development of college students (Raymundo, 2021). According to Jack, racial discrimination was omnipresent throughout his second year of college. While program coordinators hosted cultural and social events throughout campus to promote awareness and respect, actions from his peers (particularly White peers) caused Jack and his close friends to continuously re-evaluate the true intentions of his institution around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Davis shared comparable stories. His institution regularly held programs to celebrate the growing aspects of diversity and multiculturalism on his college campus, but those efforts fell short because administrators failed to examine "the pulse" of the campus community to understand the needs of BIPOC students.

Whiteness as property refers to the function of Whiteness in maintaining privilege and exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC; Raymundo, 2021). Many higher education professionals prioritize Whiteness through their differential interactions with White and BIPOC students (Raymundo, 2021). Stephen described how his White professors rarely responded to his email inquiries for help, although they consistently responded to his White peers when they had questions or concerns about subject matter. Despite institutional efforts highlighting the need for cultural awareness and respect, Stephen struggled to accept those beliefs when authority figures displayed conflicting behavior. Stephen's experience with his White professors engaging him in a different manner than his White colleagues reinforces the notion that many PWIs maintain institutional practices that both protect and support White students at the expense of underrepresented populations (Raymundo, 2021). Higher education practitioners often ignore the role of racism in student development because they downplay the

influence of racialized incidences on students' experiences (Harris & Poon, 2019). As a result, these perspectives and practices normalize racism and uphold systems of White supremacy within the field of higher education. Higher education leaders, researchers, and practitioners must identify how racism and White supremacy, in all forms, systematically influences the holistic development of African American male college students (Comeaux et al., 2020; Raymundo, 2019).

Whiteness is a form of property, and it both creates and maintains inequality in the United States (Harris, 1995). Predominantly White institutions, as the property of White people, remains the normative, unspoken discourse within higher education (Comeaux et al., 2020). Paul's experience with police monitorization highlighted institutional efforts to ensure White dominance. Despite his academic success or daily professional attire, Paul believed his skin color made him a constant target of examination and scrutiny from faculty, staff, peers, and campus police. It reinforced the notion that his university, a historically White institution, upheld racialized practices and a hostile campus culture without considering the impact on underrepresented populations.

Microaggressions and macroaggressions serve as examples of the "Whiteness-as-property norm through which material benefits of elite college campuses, safe and inclusive learning environments, and active campus engagement (free of hostility) have been relished primarily by White people – members of the dominant race" (Comeaux et al., 2020, p. 20). As a result of these practices and outcomes, African American students attending PWIs remain locked in a battle over property, which often results in negative encounters and have the power to diminish future outcomes (Comeaux et al., 2020). Numerous participants within this study noted the impact of these encounters on their social life, their ability to engage in campus activities, and

their inability to establish their niche on campus. Thus, the combination of racialized incidents and the sophomore slump can lead to institutional disengagement.

Racism and racialized behavior represent structurally embedded practices and procedures that continuously marginalize underrepresented students and student organizations (Comeaux et al., 2020). These endemic, routine, and customary campus practices can occur in both subtle and blatant manners – and can have a major influence on the physical and emotional well-being of students, particularly BIPOC students (Comeaux et al., 2020; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005). Jack's encounter with the racist banner outside of a fraternity house near his academic building reinforced his skepticism about cultural awareness on his campus. It forced him to disengage with co-curricular learning opportunities throughout his second year of college. Robert concurred, indicating he struggled to find his place on his college campus. His inability to connect with peers due to racialized incidences, microaggressions, and hostile interactions forced him to cautiously monitor the way he communicated to anyone outside of his inner circle.

Racism continues to have toxic and enduring effects within higher education, and these issues tend to be exacerbated in segregated White environments, including student organizations, campus events, and sororities/fraternities (Comeaux et al., 2020). Many of the participants in study noted the continued effects of racism on their respective campuses, with incidences ranging from microaggressions and discriminatory actions to large-scale campus demonstrations and protests. Jack reflected on the tumultuous campus climate during his second year of college. Between a "Black face" incident and the racialized climate of the 2020 national election, he and his peers feared close interactions with White colleagues. Paul's story about his White peers making monkey sounds as he walked to the campus recreation center echoed Jack's sentiments

about the omnipresent nature of racism on campus, and the feeling to disengage from co-curricular opportunities.

Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) conducted a study of 4,037 Students of Color from over 30 colleges and universities. Their findings included higher numbers of African American students reporting racial incidents to campus authorities than their peers; more than one half of the Black students described feelings of exclusion from events and activities in peer environments while also experiencing racially hostile comments on a regular basis (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). On all of the campuses represented in their study, Black students reported more experiences of hostility than other Students of Color (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012).

The research findings from this study highlighted participants' apprehension to connect with co-curricular opportunities. Stephen summarizes his sentiments when he indicated he did not feel connected to campus because of the extensive amount of hostility. He found a greater sense of comfort and safety by disengaging altogether except for his required academic obligations. Racialized and discriminatory spaces for Black students include those in which one constantly encounters microaggressions, stereotypes, and both overt and covert racism (Lee, 2018, Solorzano et al., 2001).

Furthermore, CRT focuses on the centrality of experiential knowledge (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). The use of counter-stories provides People of Color with a powerful voice to tell their narratives (Hiraldo, 2010). Critical race theory emphasizes the lived experiences of the dismissed and the oppressed, and in doing so, these individuals find power, healing, and restoration (Allen, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Christian indicated he endured his second year of college "without a voice" because he felt powerless on campus. Many African

American students encounter the same issues; feeling undervalued, excluded, and unwelcomed on their campus, despite their academic and co-curricular contributions to their institution (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2009; Stayhorn, 2008). A supportive and inclusive learning environment can statistically increase the rate of campus satisfaction, co-curricular engagement, and academic success for African American and other underrepresented students (Harper et al., 2009; Stayhorn, 2008).

Greater Representation

Findings from this study highlighted the need for greater representation of African American faculty and staff at PWIs, the desire for more institutional investment in multicultural programming, and the potentially positive attributes they bring to both the daily campus experiences and the success of African American male students during their second year of college. Many participants provided stories in which their limited interactions with African American faculty and staff provided a sense of comfort, along with accountability, greater affirmation, and feelings of support as they maneuvered White learning spaces. Sam highlighted how the multicultural resource center and staff played a pivotal role in his academic, personal, mental, and professional development. He revealed the center served as a safe space. Like Sam, Lawrence stressed how the diversity office at his college provided academic and professional guidance. He revealed the times when staff members within the office checked on him, monitored his campus engagement, provided academic resources, and ensured he had the necessary tools to succeed.

The presence of African American faculty and staff can support the holistic experiences of African American male college students (Lee, 2018). Their willingness to provide insight on living arrangements and roommate concerns, academic opportunities, career planning, and

campus engagement can serve as essential resources for students during their second year of college (Lee, 2018). All higher education practitioners should focus on affirming student experiences, supporting them during challenging times, and serving as advocates when needed. However, racialized experiences, along with the historic and prevalent nature of power, privilege, and oppression within higher education, highlight the need for greater representation and mentorship for BIPOC students (Lee, 2018). Jack acquired the necessary skills to succeed during his second year of college after meeting the program manager for diversity within his academic college. The program manager checked on him, visited his residence hall, provided academic resources, and connected him to various support services for both current and future success.

When one is affirmed, they feel heard, understood, and believed (Lee, 2018). As several participants noted, the presence of African American faculty and staff provided them with opportunities to express their voice, develop a sense of comfort, and identify safe spaces. Affirming relationships with African American collegiate mentors can lead to high-quality interactions between students and other individuals on campus, including peers, professors, and academic advisors (Lee, 2018). Students who experience high-quality interactions within academic environments are more likely to persist than peers with low-quality interactions (Kuh et al., 2005). Furthermore, students from historically underrepresented backgrounds perceive high quality interactions as not only those that encourage academic success, but those that place value on their experiences (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2014).

African American faculty and staff can affirm student experiences and combat microaggressions by engaging in daily practices of microaffirmations (Lee, 2018). Microaffirmations (Rowe 2008) are a compilation of small gestures extended daily that foster

inclusion, listening, comfort, and support. Microaffirmations have the potential to empower individuals who feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (Lee, 2018). Because of the common experiences of African American students at PWIs, microaffirmations communicate important messages that they are welcomed, visible, and capable of performing well, which leads to a greater sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and resiliency (Lee, 2018; Powell et al., 2013; Rowe, 2008). Different from random acts of kindness or empathy, microaffirmations strategically recognize and validate individuals in ways that empower them to thrive while dealing with feelings of being marginalized, hopeless, or lost (Rowe, 2008). Daily microaffirmations include active listening, along with validating both student experiences and feelings (Powell et al., 2013).

The presence of African American faculty and staff on college campuses can serve as a catalyst for higher academic achievement, persistence, and retention amongst African American male college students (Lee, 2018). As the findings from this study indicate, African American male students face a myriad of academic, personal, and co-curricular problems. Proper mentorship from African American faculty and staff may provide essential guidance and support, without overgeneralizing students experiences (Lee, 2018). Critical race theory expresses a commitment to anti-essentialism in which all individuals experience the world in unique ways. As such, no experience of one person is the same as of another person (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The experiences of People of Color vary based on background, upbringing, interests, skills, and personal view of the world (Lee, 2018). Proper mentorship and guidance from African American faculty and staff have the potential to ensure support that considers the broader context of racism students encounter, while simultaneously providing individuals with unique

opportunities to succeed (Lee, 2018). This strategy potentially ensures each student receives

ample resources to matriculate through higher education (Lee, 2018; Museus & Ravello, 2010).

Mentorship from African American faculty and staff can provide proper advocacy for

student success amongst African American male second-year college students at PWIs.

Advocacy is rooted in both a commitment to social justice and a commitment to dismantle

oppressive policies and institutional norms within education (Ladson-Billings, 2018; Lee, 2018).

Advocacy-oriented institutional employees recognize the impact of social, political, economic,

and cultural factors on student development and experiences (Lee, 2018). Therefore, student

affairs practitioners, faculty members, and allies who focus on equitable experiences for college

students can help diminish institutional, communal, or policy factors that hinder academic and

social engagement. They can collaborate with institutional stakeholders across to develop and

launch campus-wide visions for guiding change in the most strategic and effective manner (Lee,

2018). Lastly, they can demonstrate a true commitment to students by helping them acquire and

maintain the necessary resources for holistic student development (Lee, 2018).

Strayhorn (2008) argued supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff are

associated with higher levels of satisfaction for African American male students in college.

Faculty and staff play prominent roles in students' sense of belonging, persistence, and resilience

in college (Brooms, 2020; Brooms & Davis 2017; Luedke, 2017; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide,

2013; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Developing meaningful and positive relationships can position

faculty and staff to help mentor, guide, and support student efforts (Brooms, 2020). Meaningful

engagement between African American faculty and African American students has proven to be

invaluable, particularly around academic and social development. Successful mentoring

programs with African American faculty and African American students have increased the

retention and degree attainment amongst African American males (Brooms, 2016; Brooms & Davis, 2017). The presence of African American male faculty and staff members in these environments can significantly enrich the campus climate by providing a source of comfort for students (Luedke, 2017).

African American male college students feel more empowered about their self-discovery and identity development through interactions and relationships with African American faculty (Brooms, 2014; Moore & Toliver, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The level of engagement in the classroom is typically enhanced by the presence of African American professors; however, African American males have relied on interactions outside of the classroom, especially with African American professors, for their social adjustment. The development of informal student-faculty relationships influences African American males' academic, social, and personal development (Dancy, 2010). Several studies have identified African American faculty mentors as vital institutional agents who provide critical sociocultural capital for Black males in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2010; Guiffrida, 2005; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Bringing together students and invested faculty (as role models) creates a community offering alternative images of what it means to be Black men, provides a safe place for self-expression, and contributes critical support for Black males' academic efforts (Brooms, 2016; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008).

Implications for Higher Education

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of African American male second-year students at PWIs. I highlighted the experiences of African American male college students through a phenomenological perspective, as they navigated barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump. Furthermore, I examined the experiences of

this demographic from a critical race perspective to gain additional knowledge on the extent in which race, power, and privilege influence the experiences of second-year African American college students at PWIs. Below, I provide implications for faculty, student affairs practitioners, researchers, and institutional leaders about practical methods for promoting holistic student development amongst African American second-year male college students at PWIs. Institutions must be intentional and strategic about current and future practices that influence the academic experiences of African American male students during this critical point in their academic journey. By acting upon the study implications, administrators could see a decrease in factors that contribute to hostile, oppressive, and racists learning environments, and that cultivate a more welcoming culture of respect, awareness, and belonging. The following implications emerged from the data: 1) continue promoting developmental advising techniques; 2) conduct proper assessment of the campus culture; 3) develop student-faculty mentoring programs; 4) develop mental health programs in collaboration with multicultural resource centers and sorority/fraternity offices; 5) create professional development programs in collaboration with multicultural resource centers and sorority/fraternity offices; 6) invest in the recruitment and retention of African American faculty and staff; 7) develop cultural competence educational programs for student organizations; and 8) invest in second-year programs.

Continue to Promote Developmental Advising Techniques

Findings from this study emphasized that academic advisors serve as pivotal and essential sources of information for African American male students during their second year of college. Many participants experienced academic confusion because of their inability to identify disciplines, understand subject matter in the classroom, or balance academic and co-curricular obligations. Developmental advising focuses on relationship-building, competency training, and

the development of trust between the practitioner and the student (Johnson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, developmental advising places a major emphasis on acquiring a deeper and more

meaningful understanding of the student, and it increases overall satisfaction and engagement

amongst BIPOC students (Johnson et al., 2019). African American male students experience

numerous racialized incidents in the classroom, including microaggresions, inequitable treatment

by faculty, and hostile behavior from their peers (Johnson et al., 2019). These encounters can

negatively affect their academic and social development. Student success professionals and

academic coaches who receive strategic training on developmental advising techniques may have

the proper skills to meet students where they are, understand their concerns, develop proper

action plans, and connect them to the necessary institutional resources for future development

(Johnson et al., 2019). In addition, academic advisors and student success professionals should

be knowledagable of strategies to address institutional racism, inequitable policies, and other

initiatives that hinder the growth and success of African American male students during their

second year of college. Student success offices and college units should focus on this advising

method when training academic advisors to serve African American male students during their

second year of college at PWIs. This student demographic must identify successful techniques to

balance academic obligations, campus hostility, career goals, family matters, and long-term

goals. Through developmental advising methods, institutions can provide second-year African

American male students with meaningful opportunities to form connections, ask questions, and

acquire the necessary skills to succeed both inside and outside of the classroom (Johnson et al.,

2019).

Conduct Proper Assessment of the Campus Climate

Central to the experiences of participants in this study, respondents described an elevated level of racial hostility on their college campuses. Participants highlighted institutional programs that celebrated multiculturalism on college campuses. Unfortunately, these efforts were constantly overshadowed by incidences of racism, microaggressions, racially inspired monitorization, and White privilege. While many institutions focus on surface-level programming (food, fun, festivals, and famous people), fewer institutions devote the necessary time and effort to address racism throughout their campus, including the treatment of underrepresented students, unwarranted police monitorization, the inequitable distribution of institutional resources for DEI efforts, and the omnipresent aspects of a hostile campus environment (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Moreu et al., 2021; Smith, 2020). These experiences left many participants within this study wondering if the administration was aware of the institutional disconnect between coordinated programming and hostile student encounters. As such, institutions should conduct climate surveys to capture a more meaningful understanding of campus life. Climate surveys provide an accurate reading of respondents' perception of the social climate, and they can be utilized to create concrete steps for effective implementation (Moreu et al., 2021). Climate surveys assess a variety of constructs such as respondents' perception of the institution's commitment to diversity, their personal values related to diversity, and their level of discomfort around people from other social groups within the institution (Moreu et al., 2021). To implement the most meaningful initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, administrators should capture data about the campus atmosphere, student engagement, and institutional resources. With this data, administrators could l have more information to make

sound decisions and implement student success initiatives that benefit African American male second-year students at PWIs.

Develop Student-Faculty Mentoring Programs

Both this study and previous research emphasizes the positive effect of student-faculty relationships on the academic performance, campus engagement, mental health, and retention of African American male students at PWIs (Beasley, 2020; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Grantham et al., 2015). Study participants revealed how advice, guidance, and support from their professors served as catalysts for their personal and professional success. While these relationships are proven to be statistically successful in promoting holistic student development, many African American male students lack the confidence or understanding to develop in-class or out-of-class relationships with faculty members. As such, institutions should consider the development of student-faculty mentoring programs specifically for second-year African American male students. This demographic faces questions about academic disciplines, career paths, skills, interests, passion, co-curricular opportunities, and long-term career planning. Formal mentoring programs with faculty can provide students with motivation, confidence, and preparation for future success (Beasley, 2020; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Grantham et al., 2015). More specifically, student-faculty mentoring programs can provide second-year African American male students with the essential resources necessary to hone their career plans, as they prepare to focus on their academic disciplines during their junior and senior years (Beasley & McClain, 2021). Like advisors, faculty can provide students with meaningful discussions about institutional resources and opportunities for connection. Faculty can help diminish the stigma associated with various campus resources (career development, counseling

services, etc.) and help students align their academic options with long-term goals (Beasley &

McClain, 2021).

Develop Mental Health Programs in Collaboration with Multicultural Resource Centers and Sorority/Fraternity Offices

Many participants mentioned the extensive level of pressure associated with the second

year of college at PWIs. African American second-year students are asked to balance their

academic obligations, co-curricular opportunities, family issues, professional ambitions, and the

hostility associated with living and learning in White spaces (DeFreitas et al., 2018). African

American male students often find themselves searching for tactics to help them balance their

academic obligations, social demands, and personal responsibilities (Arday, 2018; Lipson et al.,

2018). In addition, they are forced to consistently reckon with racialized campus environments

that are often hostile due to the omnipresent nature of microaggressions, stereotypes, inequitable

treatment by faculty and staff, and periods of isolation. The amalgamation of factors can result in

anxiety, stress, and depression (Arday, 2018; DeFreitas et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2018). Mental

health services carry a stigma within the African American community, with many African

Americans opting to deal with mental health issues on their own, rather than seeking professional

help from trained practitioners (DeFreitas et al., 2018). A collaboration between institutional

counseling centers and various offices focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (multicultural

resource centers, diversity offices within academic colleges, etc.) could lead to the development

of effective mental health initiatives specifically for second-year African American male

students. According to participants, institutional offices and centers focusing on multicultural

student success served as their hub for information, guidance, support, safety, and campus

engagement. Staff within these offices are highly regarded for their programs, initiatives, and

advice. These centers are vital to the success of African American male college students as they navigate racialized campuses throughout their academic journey (DeFreitas et al., 2018). More specifically, the initiatives and services offered are relevant as African American male students encounter racism in the classroom, the research lab, the residence hall, their student organizations, and throughout the greater campus community (Tichavakunda, 2020). Potential partnerships with mental health and counseling centers may provide skeptical African American male second-year college students with clarification on services provided (DeFreitas et al., 2018). These collaborative efforts may diminish the stigma associated with mental health services. In addition, counseling and mental health services should consider collaborating with institutional offices for sorority and fraternity – more specifically, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). NPHC affiliation has been found to support African American students as they develop social and cultural capital on college campuses (Garcia et al., 2021). These organizations play a centralized role in affirming students' ethnic and racial identities within predominantly and historically White institutions. Furthermore, previous studies reveal that NPHC engagement can significantly support Students of Color in their persistence through hostile campus environments (Delgado-Guerrero et al, 2014; Garcia et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2011). With these organizations historically serving African American college students, this may serve as another opportunity to promote mental health. Institutional leaders can collaborate with NPHC fraternities to effectively implement programming focusing on education, awareness, and treatment methods. In doing so, they could develop effective interventions for African American male students during their second year of college, while reducing the stigma associated with mental health.

Establish Professional Development Initiatives in Collaboration with Multicultural Resource Centers and Sorority/Fraternity Offices

The findings from this study revealed few participants utilized their career services centers. Participants lacked a conceptual understanding, during their second year of college, of career counselors and coaches. As such, participants missed opportunities to learn about resume development, cover letters, internship opportunities, graduate school preparation, and workforce development initiatives. Like the efforts for mental health services, institutions should develop opportunities to connect African American second-year male students with career services initiatives (Malin et al., 2017). Institutions should explore the idea of "Backpack to Briefcase" programs to help second-year African American male students clarify their majors, acquire a deeper understanding of technical and transferable skills, teach the significance of internships and co-ops, develop essential marketing and branding documents (e.g., resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profiles), connect with both academic and professional mentors in the field, and develop both short-term and long-term strategic plans (Malin et al., 2017). Through these initiatives, African American male students could potentially sharpen both their competence and confidence.

Invest in the Recruitment and Retention of African American Personnel (Faculty, Staff, and Professional Practitioners)

Numerous studies highlight the need for greater representation within higher education, particularly at PWIs (Brooms, 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Luedke, 2017; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Musoba et al., 2013; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Most participants noted extremely limited interactions with African American faculty and staff, with one participant indicating how campus janitors served as one of his main sources of interaction with African American employees. Research highlights how African American representation, both inside and outside of

the classroom, provides African American students with greater motivation to engage in their

studies, participate in co-curricular opportunities, consider career development programming,

and persevere through the hostility of the campus climate (Brooms, 2020; Brooms & Davis,

2017; Luedke, 2017; Museus et al., 2017; Musoba et al., 2013; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Institutions, particularly PWIs, should develop intentional and strategic outreach efforts to

diversify their faculty and staff. More specifically, institutions should focus on addressing

tokenism in the workplace, providing greater support regarding the navigation of campus

resources, ensuring and promoting value amongst colleagues, addressing hostility within office

and departments, and being strategic about identifying institutions, networks, and associations

for BIPOC faculty/staff recruitment (Steele, 2018). In addition, institutions should enhance the

onboarding experience and create opportunities for faculty/staff mentorship, networking,

professional development, and programs centering on health and well-being in White spaces

(Steele, 2018). As institutions invest more resources into African American employees, it has the

potential to positively impact the holistic development of African American male college

students and provide them with the guidance, support, and coaching needed to overcome barriers

associated with the sophomore slump and PWIs.

Develop Cultural Competence Training Program for Student Organizations

Despite efforts to host diversity programs and cultural celebrations, institutional efforts

were overshadowed by the student words, behaviors, and hostility. Participants spoke of the

ever-present nature of microaggressions, stereotypes, and unwelcoming behavior associated with

campus engagement, resulting in limited participation from African American male college

students during their second year of college. Institutions should develop cultural competence

training programs specifically for student organizations. These educational ventures could

provide student leaders and members with vital information and clarity about strategies for

promoting awareness, respect, and a greater sense of belonging – and help them connect their

values and goals to the mission of the institution (Barnes & Brownell, 2017; Repo et al., 2017).

The second year of college provides students with opportunities to better understand their

academic interests, career options, and the importance of co-curricular engagement. Intentional

cultural competence facilitations may empower student leaders with vital training on

unconscious bias, inclusive communication, inclusive leadership, stereotypes, and strategies for

promoting respect throughout the campus community.

Invest in Second Year Programs

Many colleges and universities invest in first-year programming (Wang & Kennedy-

Phillips, 2015). These endeavors focus on new student programs, academic success initiatives,

and co-curricular engagement. Unfortunately, few institutions make the same investment in

second-year students (Sterling, 2018). Therefore, institutions should strategically develop

second-year initiatives to promote the holistic development of students during this critical phase

of their collegiate journey. These efforts could provide students with essential training,

mentorship, and guidance as they develop strategies for academic and professional success.

These cross-campus collaborations should include advisory members from academic success

centers, career services offices, leadership development programs, international education/study

abroad offices, multicultural resource centers, and academic units across the institution (Sterling,

2018). Second-year programs should provide students with opportunities to connect with faculty,

staff, and professional practitioners (e.g., coaches, counselors, and advisors) as they maneuver

barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump. With these endeavors in place,

institutions can intentionally work to decrease the likelihood of academic confusion and increase campus engagement.

Future Research

While this study provided insight into the lived experiences of nine African American male second-year college students at PWIs, opportunities exist for additional research. First, researchers could employ a more intentional timeline for data collection. I collected stories from African American male college seniors. This decision was made because of a need to capture the lived experiences of students before COVID-19 altered the landscape of higher education in spring 2020, shifting the ways in which students interacted with professors and peers on campus. To examine their on-campus experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, I narrowed the scope of my search and focused my data collection on students who completed (or nearly completed) their second year of college before COVID-19. However, future research should consider interviewing participants either during the latter half of their second year or during the first semester of their junior year. This may address participants forgetting aspects of their experiences, and it may provide more clarity about the impact of numerous factors on their second year of college. With students, faculty, and staff adjusting to the new normal of pandemic policies, a future study could analyze the lived experiences of second-year African American male students at PWIs during the COVID-19. This may provide a deeper analysis of how practitioners support academic, mental, personal, and professional development within the new landscape of higher education.

Second, scholars could complete a similar study focusing on the lived experiences of African American male students based on their institution's geographical location in the United States. The experiences of second-year African American male college students in more

conservative states and regions of the country may differ from the experiences of African American male students in more liberal states and regions of the country. As such, a more targeted study could provide additional clarity about their lived experiences in relation to racism, power, and privilege on predominantly White college campuses.

Researchers could replicate the study at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These institutions typically differ in terms of institutional make-up, organizational structure, funding models, staffing, and student success including retention and graduation rates. A replicated or comparative study between the two institutional types may provide additional clarity about the second year of college for African American male students and identify ways to help them maneuver barriers associated with the sophomore slump.

Lastly, future research should focus on the root causes of institutional skepticism regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on college campuses. Many participants were skeptical of campus-wide initiatives, and their lack of impact creating a climate that truly embraced inclusion, respect, and a greater sense of belonging. Future research should address the origins of student skepticism, what reinforces these sentiments, and what institutions and senior administrators can do to reduce it within their college campuses.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the lived experiences of African American male college students at PWIs, and how they navigated barriers associated with the sophomore slump through both a phenomenological methodology and a critical race perspective. Findings from this study provided implications for the holistic development of this student demographic, while highlighting the influence of racism, structural, and power dynamics on college campuses. Educational practitioners can utilize this information to re-evaluate structures and policies, and

implement measures to promote a more equitable and inclusive educational experience. Critical race theory provides a framework to critique institutional policies, programs, structures, and campus climate within higher education (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Harper, 2018; Hiraldo, 2010; Miller, 2021; Morales, 2021; Plater, 2020). Applying CRT in this study allowed me to complicate longstanding and narrow (mis)interpretations of factors that affected the lived experiences of African American second-year male college students at PWIs (Harper et al., 2018).

Researchers have conducted numerous studies that highlight the challenges associated with the second year of college (Gohn et al., 2001; Graunke et al., 2005; Heier, 2012; National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives, 2008; Sterling, 2018; Willcoxson & Joy, 2011). However, the perspectives of African American male students have not been highlighted in previous studies, as it relates to their lived experiences and how the sophomore slump influences their academic, personal, and professional journey. Collegiate administrators and instructors must seek a thorough analysis of the lived experiences of African American male college students, to obtain a better understanding of the implications for practices, policies, and institutional procedures. Racism that exists throughout PWIs must be examined alongside the barriers associated with the sophomore slump. Doing so could provide faculty, academic advisors, student affairs practitioners, and senior-level administrators with implications for institutional enhancement and effectiveness.

Moving forward, institutions must place an emphasis on the holistic development of African American male college students, particularly during the second year of college. With so many students experiencing the burden of the sophomore slump, it is imperative to implement policies, resources, and endeavors that focus on their academic, personal, mental, and

professional development. With an intentional and strategic mindset, support mechanisms can be established to promote the success of African American male students and potentially maintain a campus climate that promotes scholarship, retention, and inclusion.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview #_____
Date_____/_____/_____

Opening Statement – First, I want to thank you for participating in this study. My name is Craig Pickett, Jr. and I am a doctoral candidate within the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Tennessee. Over the next 60 – 75 minutes, I will ask you a series of questions regarding your experience at your current institution. I encourage you to be as open and honest as possible, depending on your level of comfort. Your responses will help us create a better understanding of collegiate experiences from the perspective of African American male students during their second year of college at pre-dominantly White colleges and universities. Please note that all of your responses will remain confidential. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you need to stop, take a break, or end the interview at any point in time, please let me know. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. I would like your permission to record this interview, so I may accurately document all content from this session. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin the interview? Then with your permission, we will begin the interview.

Questions – High School Experience
Q1. Please describe your high school experience.
Q2. Describe the level of ease or difficulty associated with your high school classes.
Q3. Tell me about your college search process.
Q4. Describe your expectations concerning your college experience.

Questions – First-Year Experience
Q5. Describe your transition from high school to your current institution.
Q6. Tell me about any first-year programming or events that you utilized as you transitioned to your institution.
Q7. As you reflect on your first year of college, how would you describe your overall experience?
Q8. Tell me how your expectations regarding college and your reality about college were either similar or different.

Questions – Second Year – Academic Success
Q9. Describe your experience as a second year at your institution.
Q10. Tell me about your declared or anticipated major. Did you select your major during your second year of college? If so, how did you choose that area of study?
Q11. Describe your course load during your second year of college.
Q12. Please describe your level of comfort (ease or difficulty) with your classes during your second year of college.
Q13. Please describe your level of comfort, as it related to meeting with your faculty members.
Q14. Tell me about your level of comfort seeking help/assistance from faculty, staff, or support services at your institution during your second year of college.

Questions – Second Year – Faculty/Staff Engagement
Q15. Tell me a story about a memorable interaction between you and a faculty member.
Q16. Tell me a story about a memorable interaction between you and a staff member.

Questions – Second Year – Campus Experience

Q17. Describe the campus social life as a second-year student.

Q18. Tell me about your experience with student organizations, fraternities, or community service organizations.

Q19. How did your experiences with student activities, fraternities, or community service evolve between your first year at your institution and your second-year experience?

Questions – Second Year – Career/Professional Plans

Q20. Reflecting on your second year, what were your short-term career goals (within the next 5 – 7 years)?

Q21. How did you come up with those career plans?

Q22. How confident were you, in terms of you career plans?

Q23. What were your long-term career plans (10 – 15 years)?

Q24. Tell me about your interaction with the Center for Career Development during your second year.

Q25. Tell me about your excitement, concern, or fear regarding your short-term and long-term career goals during your second year.

Questions – Second Year – Financial Factors

Q26. Without giving specific details regarding the dollar amounts, tell me about the types of financial aid that you received during your second year of college.

Q27. Tell me about any part-time or full-time employment opportunities that you held, while attending school during your second year.

Q28. If you worked, how many hours-per-week did you work?

Q29. Tell me a story about how your part-time or full-time employment obligations affected your academic or personal life.

Questions – Second Year – Campus Experience with Cultural Competency

Q30. Tell me about your experience at your institution as an African American male student during your second year.

Q30-A – Share a story regarding your experience as an African American male student at your institution during your second-year student.

Q31. How would you describe the campus at that time, in terms of cultural awareness and respect?

Q31-A – Share a story regarding your experience with cultural awareness and respect at the University.

Q32. How would you describe the institution's efforts in terms of diversity during your second year?

Q33. How did your experience as an African American male affect your academic life at your institution?

Q33. Share a story of how your experience as an African American male affected your academic life at your institution.

Q34. How did your experience as an African American male affect your social life at your institution?

Q35. Did you or someone you know ever experience racism, discrimination, or hate violence at your institution.

Q35-A.) If yes, tell me a story about when you or someone you knew experienced an incident of racism, discrimination or hate violence at your institution.

Q36. What were your hopes for your institution, in terms of cultural awareness and diversity?

Questions – Second Year – Mental/Physical Health

Q37. Describe how the pressures of a first-year student compared to the pressures of the second year.

Q38. How did you find ways to cope with the pressures of college life (academic, social, cultural, financial, etc.)?

Q39. Tell me about a time when you utilized a campus resource (an office, a student program, or a faculty/staff member) to deal with the pressures of college life.

Questions – Second Year – Family/Support Network

Q40. Talk about your support network as a second-year student.

Q41. Tell me about a time when you used one of your support networks to get through a difficult or stressful time at your institution.

Q42. How did you identify ways to succeed, both inside and outside of the classroom?

Q43. What is the biggest piece of advice that you would give to an African American second-year male students?

Q44. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Consent Form

<div align="center">

Consent for Research Participation

</div>

Research Study Title: *The Year of Exploration - Understanding the Lived Experiences of African American Male Students during the Second Year at Predominantly White Institutions*

Researcher(s): *Craig Pickett, Jr.*, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
        Dr. Dorian McCoy, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

<div align="center">

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

</div>

We are asking you to be in this research study because you self-identify as an African American male college senior, currently enrolled at a predominantly White institution.

<div align="center">

What is this research study about?

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The purpose of the research study is to understand the lived experiences of second-year African American male students at predominantly White institutions. Furthermore, this study will examine how second-year African American male college students navigate the barriers commonly associated with the sophomore slump phenomenon.

<div align="center">

How long will I be in the research study?

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If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for approximately 60 – 75 minutes.

<div align="center">

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

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If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in a 60 – 75 minute interview with the principal investigator. The interview will take place on the campus of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in a closed classroom/meeting space within Hodges Library. Participants will meet with the principal investigator, and the principal investigator will use that time to ask the participant approximately 45 questions regarding their experience at second-year African American male college students at a predominately White institution.

<div align="center">

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

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Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your grades, your relationship with your instructors, or standing with The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you can contact the PI with your decision. The PI will ensure that data from your participation is promptly disregarded and deleted, to ensure compliance.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the lived experiences of African American male students during their second year of college. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by altering all names and replacing them with pseudo names, both in the interview transcriptions and the study report. The researchers will be only individuals with access to your consent forms, audio-recorded interviews, and the transcriptions.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

Participants will be entered into a drawing for a $150 Visa Gift Card. All participants will have equal odds of winning the gift card. While our hope is that you will complete the entire interview, please note that you will be automatically entered into the drawing, whether or not you complete the full interview as long as you are 18 years of age or higher. All participants will have their names entered into a random drawing, and the winner will be notified by e-mail. The winner will be ask to provide their mailing address, and the Visa Gift Card will be sent via mail to the raffle winner.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

Craig Pickett, Jr.
Cpicket3@utk.edu
(704) 779 – 1477

Dr. Dorian McCoy (Associate Department Head and Associate Professor, College of Education, Health and Human Sciences)
dmccoy5@utk.edu
865-974-6140

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Adult Participant   Signature of Adult Participant   Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Research Team Member   Signature of Research Team Member
          Date

Vita

Originally from Charlotte, NC, Craig Pickett, Jr. grew up in a military family. As such, he spent his childhood in various states across the country, along with a short stint in Panama City, Panama. After graduating from Harding University High School in Charlotte, Craig transitioned to Davidson College where he acquired his bachelor's degree in Political Science. Soon afterwards, he completed his master's degree in Student Affairs in Higher Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. After transitioning to Knoxville, TN for work, he matriculated to the University of Tennessee to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Higher Education Administration. His research interest includes student success, resources for underrepresented students, and the second year/sophomore experience. After graduating, he plans to continue his career within student affairs and higher education, with the hopes of creating intentional programs and initiatives that promote the academic, personal, and professional success of all students, particularly underrepresented students. Craig is incredibly grateful for all of the support from his wife (Porschia Clark Pickett) and his daughter (Carrington Ann Pickett), along with his church family, work family, and his support network of friends and mentors across the nation.