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## **“What’s Belonging Got to Do With It?”: An Exploration of Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging in Black Counseling Students Attending Predominately White Institutions in the North Atlantic Region**

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“What’s Belonging Got to Do With It?”: An Exploration of Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging in Black Counseling Students Attending Predominately White Institutions in the North Atlantic Region

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education and Supervision

by

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## ABSTRACT

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) dialogues are raging across campuses throughout the U.S. with specific focus on the needs of Black student populations in the aftermath of the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbury murders. However, if the supportive spirit of the DEI initiatives is undermined by a hostile campus climate and local community, it may negatively impact the learning environment isolating the target population, while also effecting their potential for successful completion of their programs. The current qualitative study aims to explore the perceptions of belonging expressed by Black graduate students enrolled in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited counseling programs in the North Atlantic region (as designated by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). Through individual semi-structured interviews with participants, the researcher seeks to gain a deeper understanding of whether Black students are actively seeking belonging within their programs and how their impressions of belonging are developed when contrasted with the racial climate present and the history of their respective programs at selected North Atlantic predominately white institutions (PWIs). It is also prudent to consider the evaluative properties of this data regarding the efficacy of the DEI interventions within the identified academic spaces. While this data may later inform the recruitment and program development practices of university stakeholders and partners interested in the efficacy of diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, this research initiative also intends to amplify the experiences of Black counseling students in ways that will be enriching for future students of color and individuals with other marginalized identities.

***Key words: belonging, DEI, campus racial climate, predominately white institutions.***

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## **DEDICATION**

*None of this would have been possible without a young couple from Alabama deciding to move to California to start a life together and give us girls the world. Thank you, Doris, and Percy Long for the examples that you set, the love that you gave and the immeasurable blessings you provided while on this planet. I dedicate this work to you and remember you always.*



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## CHAPTER ONE

Between the Charlottesville alt-right protest, the murders of Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and the uptick in racial violence towards Black people and members of other marginalized groups (Treisman, 2019), it is evident that the American political and social climates contain remnants of racial injustice and violence from an era believed by many to have been forgotten. These demonstrations of hate and violence have not been confined to the streets or resolved by protest. They have permeated the walls of many institutions, including universities where the same individuals directly impacted by racial violence meet some of the purveyors and supporters of these acts face to face, within their campus communities (Moore & Bell, 2017). Black students specifically, remain underrepresented in institutions of higher learning compared to their White counterparts, which raises concerns about their exposure to racial stress and other challenges within learning environments situated in racially tense communities (Harris, 2020).

The obstacles for students of color, specifically Black students in higher education are well documented in the literature, particularly at the undergraduate level (Griffin, Muñiz & Espinosa, 2012). Navigating racial hostility on campus and negative peer interactions have been identified among the factors undermining Black students' sense of belonging while pursuing advanced degrees (George Mwangi et al. 2018; Schwitzer et al. 1999; Walls & Hall, 2018). Furthermore, Shavers and Moore (2019) have contributed to the literature regarding graduate student experiences, emphasizing the feelings of nonbelonging and isolation common among Black female doctoral students attending predominately white institutions (PWIs). According to a study by Johnson-Bailey et al. (2009) limited access to social resources and the sense of

rejection in unsupportive campus environments, affected academic and mental health outcomes of Black graduate namely students in the South.

While counseling programs establish goals of providing more inclusive spaces for Black students, programs remain culturally encapsulated as does the field of counseling. Data offered by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), confirmed lower enrollment of students of color in CACREP accredited programs (CACREP, 2018). The 2017 CACREP Vital Statistics Report stated that among the total composition of students reported who were enrolled in master's and doctoral level CACREP accredited programs, only 18.78% identified as Black or African American, 7.76 % Hispanic or Latino, 2.17% Asian American, 0.84% American Indian or Native Alaskan, and 0.14% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. These numbers are considerably lower than the 59.49% of master's and doctoral students who identified as White or Caucasian. Additionally, the report reflected less diversity within the CACREP faculty pool across each of those racial and ethnic groups except for a slight increase in Asian American identifying faculty members (CACREP, 2018).

In response to the disparities evident and the visible demonstrations of animus directed towards marginalized group members, campuses and programs across the country have intensified their focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Valandra et al., 2022). This focus varies across programs and regions but has consisted of activities such as the administration of climate surveys, the development of diversity programming engaging the student body in conversations and education around cultural awareness and humility, or the revision of curriculum representing more culturally inclusive texts (Brown, 2021; Durrah et al., 2022). Through these actions university stakeholders seek to acknowledge systemic inequalities, create more inclusive spaces within the higher education community and to establish standards

hoping that they will produce sustainable measures to address diversity issues in the future (Garcia et al., 2021). However, the impact of these initiatives on Black student sense of belonging requires further examination.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Given the paucity of literature dedicated to understanding Black graduate student belonging experiences particularly in counseling programs, and whether the execution of DEI initiatives targeted to support this population impact these experiences, the goal of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of how Black masters counseling students, specifically are evaluating and benefiting from the DEI interventions that have been offered during their studies at their respective, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the North Atlantic region of the United States. Also under consideration, is the effect of the campus racial climate on student perspectives of belonging and the efficacy of DEI measures implemented. With the racial and ethnic disparities evident in counseling related fields and in access to care, along with the racial tension present in society, it is important to examine the ways in which these elements may converge and impact students' abilities to engage in the counseling field. The need for a deeper exploration of diversity needs in counselor education feels not only timely, but imperative.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The presence of satisfying and difficult experiences exists across disciplines and levels of education. However, in disciplines with lower Black student enrollment compared to white counterparts, in settings with a history of institutional practices that have denied access to education for Black people (Gray et al., 2018), it is important to clarify the elements of the environment that facilitate or prevent access to a sense of belonging. The purpose of the study is

to deepen the exploration of belonging, to understand if this is truly the goal of Black graduate students based on their needs and perceptions about the institutions that house their programs. It is also important to clarify whether the students' experiences are informed by external factors such as DEI interventions and the racial climate on campus. Identifying whether DEI and campus climate factors play a role in the students' experiences within their respective counseling programs can help answer the questions surrounding the highlighted problem and research questions.

The insights from Black graduate students currently pursuing their master's degrees in counseling related fields, in a time of social and political upheaval that has disrupted the narrative of colorblindness and racial progress in the U.S., will provide illuminating feedback and counternarratives elucidating the challenges experienced by this population in counseling programs. Having access to semi-structured interview data regarding the specific experiences examined and the impact of campus racial climate, deepens the understanding of the phenomenon beyond a general confirmation of whether or not Black graduate students experience a sense of belonging. The study could also inform future institutional research processes by modeling the exploration of belonging through a critical lens, to understand what it consists of and how it is experienced by students across cultures, gender affiliations and groups.

### **Study Significance**

Americans are facing many sobering realities in an increasingly tense racial climate (Treisman, 2019), marred by an ongoing global pandemic compounded by a polarizing political divide. These issues have triggered a variety of social dialogues regarding systems of oppression and structural failures, notably within the realm of higher education (Valandra et al., 2022). Furthermore, these conversations regarding the deficits in equitable practices to ensure the

inclusion of multicultural students and faculty members on university campuses are not specific to a single region (Morrison, 2010). The issue of racial equity and the stain of racism across systems is not simply a southern problem as may be believed by many (Theoharris, 2018). Students attending schools in regions across the country are subject to complicated social landscapes informed by even more complicated histories of educational policies and practices (Morrison, 2010).

The resurgence in public displays of racial animus and hostility targeting communities of color and other underrepresented groups nationwide, has prompted the call for initiatives to address instances of racial violence, particularly in organizations and university settings (Brown, 2021). These strategies may include the adaptation of institutional mission statements, the facilitation of diversity trainings and the development of university departments initiating student centered DEI programming in an attempt to create a positive shift in the problematic social and working environments present within institutions (Garcia et al., 2021). Ultimately, the implementation of DEI practices in academia, and the response to DEI initiatives raise questions about the efficacy of targeted institutional DEI steps and whether students of color feel well supported despite the uptick in racial violence seen in many of the communities that house these institutions across the country. When programming and strategies to facilitate the success of underrepresented student populations fail, it not only impacts the current student body, but the stories connected to those failures leave the walls of the academy traveling to prospective students, reducing enrollment which impacts the representation of these groups in within the field (Johnson-Bailey et al. 2008).



## **Researcher Positionality Statement**

As a Black woman, raised on the west coast in a city that prides itself on liberalism, pluralism and the freedom of expression, I must acknowledge the many ways in which these and other ideological elements impact not only my worldview, but my interest in the topic identified. Growing up in the Bay Area, I was integrated into an extremely diverse community with individuals representing a variety of religious, social, political and gendered identities. I attended an international school from age four to seventeen which afforded me access to a multicultural curriculum and a trilingual education, all while living in a household infused with strong southern influences due to the contributions of my Alabama native grandparents. They had established their roots in San Francisco at a time when job opportunities for Black people were more readily available than in their rural hometowns, and I being the second-generation beneficiary of this relocation, grew up imagining that the local, regional and global cultures wrapped neatly in our city were reflected similarly throughout the country as a whole.

My academic goals influenced in my relocation to southern and north Atlantic states known for their adherence to more conservative religious, political and social ideologies than those reflective of my hometown, which resulted in a few eye-opening shifts in my awareness. Since my initial phases of racial identity development took place in a geographical location where physical representations and remnants of the atrocities of slavery, Jim Crow and the brutal divestment of land from native populations were either muted or altogether absent from the landscape, the South represented a space where overt systemic and blatant manifestations of racial oppression were painfully evident. However, these difficult realizations were also

enveloped in demonstrations of Southern hospitality and a welcoming community, rendering the shifts in the awareness of my own identity somewhat disorienting.

My time spent in the North Atlantic, contradicted the image of a melting pot that had been embedded in my idealized expectations of the region. What was presented instead was a somewhat segregated global community where ethnic enclaves remained intact, and the pace of productivity exceeded the more laissez-faire west coast approach that was familiar to me. I was evidently foreign to these communities as I was frequently met with greetings from locals such as “You’re not from around here, are you?” and “Where you from girl?”. However, this did not detract from my desire to belong, in fact in many ways it emboldened me and much of the knowledge that I have accumulated over time regarding the expression of my culture and its nuance, has been stimulated by these experiences outside of my community and in proximity to others who have exchanged stories with me about their process of identity development within their respective communities.

Despite my racial proximity to the communities observed for the purposes of the study, the concept of otherness may again emerge in the recruitment of participants and execution of structured interviews. Not simply because of my cultural identity representations, but perhaps because of my social location as a doctoral candidate, my positionality, or perhaps attached to my affiliation with a Southern school. Through this reflexive process I have wondered whether my status as a Black woman will be sufficient to ameliorate the existing power imbalances embedded in my position as a researcher, future educator and a mental health practitioner working within systems that continue to prioritize Eurocentric standards of practice. Would it be enough to persuade student participants that the proposed study is not just another voyeuristic

pursuit that would be used to capitalize off the disclosures of the community in the name of antiracism or equity practices that have yet to materialize?

As a Black female, Counselor Educator in training and licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are not merely theoretical, they are deeply personal. At a time when individuals are highlighting the need for the deconstruction and repudiation of prejudiced and racist practices impacting the climate on university campuses and within classrooms, I am reminded of my own experiences as a graduate student entering the field of counseling as well as in higher education more broadly. My positionality, along with my past and current experiences lead me to wonder how Black counseling students in particular, experience DEI efforts to include them and how they are navigating their academic journeys in what often seem to be very chaotic social environments. If students are reporting positive and inclusive experiences while attending PWIs in the north Atlantic region of the country, it will be important to identify elements that contribute to the successful development of a sense of belonging along with their impressions of the campus climate to understand its effect on their experiences. This data may inform the refinement of targeted interventions to meet the needs of Black students and other underrepresented student groups attending PWIs across the nation as well.

### **Research Questions**

To investigate the experiences highlighted throughout the chapter, the primary research interest relates to the perceptions of belonging and the relevant institutional factors that influence the development of a sense of belonging. The following questions reflect the goal of the research initiative:

1. How do Black counseling students define belonging?

- a. Is belonging a goal for Black counseling students?
  - b. If belonging is not a goal, what is?
2. How do participants experience DEI interventions adopted within their respective departments?
    - a. How do these interventions impact their sense of belonging?
    - b. How would participants describe the influence of the campus community on their sense of belonging?

### **Assumptions**

The answers to the research questions posed are undoubtedly layered and complex. While the concept of belonging and its social impact is clear, it may not be prioritized by segments of the graduate student population in the same way that it is stressed by undergraduates seeking to gain social capital through university enrollment. The focus of the academic ventures may rest exclusively on the desire to further career aspirations as opposed to engaging in social activities or building community within the program. Furthermore, if Black counseling students have not defined belonging in the same ways as their program administrators or identified belonging as a necessary experience within their programs, then DEI interventions focusing primarily on inclusion practices as a vehicle to ensure a sense of belonging, may not produce results necessary to meet the needs of the Black student population. Additionally, the impact or demand on students already navigating racial trauma, who are then expected to participate in programming that may activate the trauma, may create a hostile or unpleasant environment which can negatively impact their participation in, or enjoyment of DEI programming intended to stimulate a sense of belonging, respect and acknowledgement of their experiences.

## **Limitations**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has not only persisted for over two and a half years but has produced multiple new variants of the virus (CDC, 2021). At the time of study initiation, the prospect of overcoming the pandemic and regaining a sense of normality was just beginning to return. However, with continued virus transmission, the necessity for caution and distanced interactions remained prevalent. The use of virtual meeting platforms as opposed to in-person meetings permitted structured interviews despite the pandemic, however the virtual format may have precluded the identification of many non-verbal cues and relational dynamics that are typically present in face-to-face interactions. Potential body language cues for example, may not have been evident since only the upper body of the participant was visible in the virtual meeting. Additionally, given the increased interest in the subject of diversity, equity, and inclusion in response to visible activism and demands for antiracism in educational spaces, students may be exhausted by the topic and somewhat reluctant to participate in a study examining the sensitive subject of their experiences of belonging in predominately white academic spaces.

Another manifestation of this exhaustion may be present given the lack of visible change or sustainable impact given the demands on Black students to engage in the process of effecting change. Student realizations that structural reform and systemic change are long processes may have influenced their responses or potentially, their engagement in the study. Plus, mistrust of their educational institutions given the limited reform or progressive change despite DEI interventions, may also have impacted some of their connections with me as a researcher representing or working within a similar system, collecting personal information and poignant

narratives about impactful experiences that the student participants have navigated through their current academic pursuits.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Belonging**

For the purposes of the study, the operational definition of belonging is the experience of inclusion, value and oneness shared with identified peers.

### **Black**

Blackness is not monolithic, and its expression varies across ideological and cultural experiences given its status as a socially constructed racial identity marker. However, it was appropriate for recruitment purposes to define the term to include individuals who self-identify as African American or as of African descent living in the United States.

### **CACREP**

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is the counseling board which provides guidance on academic and clinical standards of the graduate programs that it governs through its accreditation process. With over 900 institutions registered, the board oversees the activities of counseling masters and doctoral programs across the country, to ensure the quality of the education is sufficient to prepare future counselors to meet the needs of the industry and the populations that they will serve.

### **Counseling Graduate Programs**

Counseling graduate programs focus on the theory and practice of counseling while highlighting various concentrations and professional tracks. These specialties include curriculum to prepare students for licensure and careers in clinical mental health, marriage and family therapy, rehabilitation counseling and school counseling. In addition to each institution may

choose to offer a different concentration, however for the purposes of this study, students focusing on any of the listed concentrations were recruited for participation.

### **Predominately White Institutions**

Educational institutions, some established prior to desegregation, which facilitated the exclusion of non-white individuals from accessing specific spaces, are referred to as predominately white institutions (PWI) in the study. While students of color are currently admitted to these institutions, they remain underrepresented minorities within the student population, with the majority of students representing the dominant white culture.

### **DEI**

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been instituted across disciplines, institutions and organizations in response to public and private outcry regarding the persistence of harmful practices rooted in structural racism within systems. DEI programming, policy and interventions seek to facilitate the equitable inclusion of multi-cultural populations and to demonstrate a commitment to promoting values that support these communities and undermine the traditional practices that enabled their exclusion.

### **North Atlantic Region**

A cluster of states in the northeast segment of the country, identified by their proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. The region consists of the following states: Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

### **Summary**

With the saturation of messaging in the public sphere regarding the instances of discrimination, racially motivated violence, animus and bias experienced by Black Americans in

general, Black graduate students pursuing counseling degrees must also feel the effects of these phenomena. As individuals committed to the improvement of mental health symptoms and quality of life for their current and future clients, the heaviness of racial trauma will at some point impact the clinical work. Whether students are struggling to manage the racialized experiences of their clients or having a difficult time making meaning of their own identity processes and experiences with racial oppression, without access to a safe academic space to process those experiences Black students may feel isolated or othered.

The residual impact of this othering and isolation may cause students to withdraw from counseling programs, or to experience burnout preventing them from contributing to the field in meaningful ways post-graduation. This result carries implications for the field of counseling more broadly as the demand for Black counseling professionals increases. The ability to meet those demands is in jeopardy if Black graduate students are unable to successfully complete their programs due to feelings of disillusionment based on unpleasant, racially charged experiences with peers, faculty members or within the broader campus environment. Therefore, it is imperative to gain a deeper perspective of any challenges that they are facing, in addition to understanding the successes achieved in their academic programs at this pivotal time in the current American social climate.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

The following chapter serves as an orientation to the literature relevant to the research topic. Beginning with the exploration of racial tensions often forgotten in the northeast region of the United States the literature will focus on the impact of desegregation in the North and distinguished from the often-discussed history of racial violence permeating the South during the post-Jim Crow era. Following this overview, the relationship between the desegregation of schools and the establishment of institutional racism within predominately white institutions of higher learning will be clarified with specific focus on the experiences of Black students attending PWIs. Finally, the concept of belonging and its many contributing factors will be highlighted along with an explanation of the theoretical frameworks used to execute the investigation of the research questions presented.

#### **Desegregation in the North**

The American north broadly represents the antithesis to the south in the minds of many, not merely geographically, but socially as well. Considered to be a more progressive, well integrated, and inclusive area of the country that actively fought for the freedom of slaves, the north is often considered a bastion of multiculturalism, while the southern region of the United States is typically characterized as the epicenter of racial hostility and aggression in America (Matthews & McGovern, 2015). However, the theory of White supremacy and the accompanying violent application of this fallacious concept is not at all proprietary to the South (Sokol, 2014). It has persisted beyond southern American borders, saturating social climates and territories throughout the country and the world. Additionally, the spread of racism has permeated American systems and institutions including education and the law, rendering their

reform slow and attitudinal shifts even slower in many cases. The following section focuses on the complex historical process of desegregation in the North Atlantic region, in order to contextualize the racial climate surrounding the universities housed within the region examined in the study.

In 1950, prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, a group of seven Black students who applied to the University of Delaware to obtain undergraduate degrees, were denied admission (Redding, 1958). As a result, they sought a legal remedy for the rejections which they argued were discriminatory (Redding, 1958). A Delaware court ruled in their favor, and they were ultimately able to attend the university as a result of the judge's decision. While this decision may seem to be evidence of an early progressive approach to desegregation demonstrated by northeastern courts, subsequent integration efforts were not accompanied by a holistic spirit of antiracism or an overwhelming acceptance of the Black community (Kelleher, 2017). According to Sokol (2014) the history of the north is filled with stories of pioneering Black and White activists, fighting in tandem for equality along with violent protests against the integration of schools and public spaces occurring in the streets simultaneously.

Across parts of Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania, covert methods of redistricting were employed to facilitate the continuation of segregation in schools well into the 1960's, despite prevailing rhetoric in the Northeast of colorblindness as a form of racial acceptance and integration (Sokol, 2014). The slow and antagonistic response to desegregation is a prime example of the persistence of prejudicial and biased attitudes despite policy reforms to enact social change (Bell, 1995). Desegregation presented a challenge to those opposed to integration across the entire country (Theoharis, 2018). The blending of races through the dissolution of Jim Crow and other racist systemic practices previously sanctioned by law,

implied the inclusion of Black residents in traditionally white neighborhoods, along with the prospect of Black workers occupying jobs held by White workers, and Black students attending schools historically reserved for white students exclusively. These societal changes, while equitable and fair required an attitude shift that many were unable and unwilling to abide by (Theoharis, 2018).

### **Institutionalized Racism at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)**

As profiled in the previous section, legal prohibitions on Black student enrollment, in the early development of PWIs, were purposive and rooted in White supremacist ideals. In the cases of many institutions, they were also deployed at a time when slavery was still intact (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). During this formative period, the goal of enrollment for these colleges was to avail White students of academic resources facilitating access to social capital (Harris, 2020). Access to these schools based upon racial and social stratification, ensured that the population intended to benefit substantively was prioritized with exclusive access to economic and social opportunities (Harris, 2020). The fruits of their scholastic labor would not only produce eventual economic benefits but would increase upward mobility and social positioning for White students in attendance and their progeny.

Broadening this concept of social capital, Harris (2020) offers a reflection of the institution as an “extended family”, where relational and other substantive advantages are afforded to students attending PWIs. The maintenance of racial, economic, and socially constructed hierarchies is promoted through the creation of an educational inheritance, with individuals outside of this lineage being denied access (Moore & Bell, 2017). While these non-white and economically disadvantaged uninvited group members were blocked from entry, their privileged counterparts were establishing PWIs as white spaces therefore facilitating

institutionalized racism and discrimination on campus (Moore & Bell, 2017). Even after school integration policies mandating the gradual inclusion of Black students were enacted, resistance to changing the establishment was evident.

The opposition to desegregation influenced racial hostility within classrooms as well as the restriction of Black students from certain organizations and student led activities (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). The systemic changes were slow and attitudes of white superiority and entitlement to resources over Black students were persistent. This historical standard of isolation and rejection of Black students in these hostile learning environments examined in the forthcoming section, serves as the foundation for understanding many of the interactions that continue to taint PWI campus climates and peer dynamics between white students and black counterparts (Griffin, Muñiz & Espinosa, 2012).

### **Belonging**

The concept of belonging has emerged as a theme in numerous studies across disciplines, institutional settings, and educational levels. Within the context of academic settings, access to the experience of belonging can be challenging for Black students, particularly due to the presence of institutionalized racism and historical factors that inform social dynamics (Brondolo et al., 2012). Another layer of complexity is embedded in the experience of entering spaces historically inaccessible to Black or POC group members due to institutionalized racism. The awareness of racism, stereotypes attached to one's identity and how one will be received in spaces based upon problematic social constructs, can also have an impact on the establishment of a sense of belonging (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

With focus on school-aged, undergraduate and graduate populations, studies have outlined the experiences of belonging broadly and as experienced by Black students. While these

group experiences contain differences regarding the phenomenon of belonging due to different developmental and identity needs, some convergence exists between groups reflecting a more global context for belonging, how it is constructed and the function of the experience in the lives of Black or POC group members. Gray et al., 2018 for example, describe belonging for Black students within the secondary school context as a phenomenon connected to engagement in social interactions and access to opportunities at school or in the classroom confirming that you fit in the environment. The interpersonal, instructional and institutional opportunity structures as they have been designated by Gray and colleagues, provide a school-based context for the potential circumstances and interactions facilitating belonging for Black students (p.98).

Contributing to a definition of belonging and the specific attributes that stimulate a sense of belonging, Hoffman et al. (2002) initiated a study to develop a sense of belonging measurement tool primarily for higher education use. The research group constructed then revised the instrument by conducting focus groups with first year college students at the University of Rhode Island. Beyond the general social factors connected to a sense of belonging enumerated in other studies, specific facilitating partners and experiences were highlighted as dimensions of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). The components identified by the researchers were “perceived peer support, perceived faculty support, class comfort, perceived isolation, and empathetic faculty understanding (Pascale, 2018).

The measure was tested by administering it to clusters of students participating in freshman seminars and learning cohorts then amended based upon the data collected. Hoffman et al. (2002) specifically examined the associations between student/peer relationships versus student/faculty relationships as they related to the establishment of a sense of belonging. Regarding the student/peer relationships, the following four dimensions of belonging were

identified: “perceived classroom comfort, perceived isolation, perceived academic support and perceived social support” (p. 239). The corresponding student/faculty relationships evaluated, amplified the presence the following three dimensions of belonging: “empathetic understanding, perceived faculty academic support/comfort, and perceived faculty social support/comfort” (p. 251). Holistically, data from this initiative and instrument development process, indicated that supportive, meaningful faculty and peer relationships marked by feelings of value and connectedness with others, were internalized by students producing a salient experience of belonging.

The ingredients central to a sense of belonging identified by Hoffman et al. (2002) have been echoed by other researchers, particularly within the context of undergraduate education. Cook-Sather et al. (2018) defined belonging with a similar emphasis on the establishment of a connection, along with feelings of respect and the experience of being valued as a member of a community among a few other experiential factors (as cited in Strayhorn, 2012). Vaccaro & Newman (2016) provided an overview of belonging literature which emphasized concepts of group membership and affiliation with the university as well as a psychological sense of community, value to the community and respect within the group as predictors of a sense of belonging (Elkins et al., 2011; Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012;).

However, in their research, Vaccaro & Newman (2016) were able to identify qualitative distinctions between the impressions of belonging expressed by students who were members of privileged or dominant groups as opposed to students who represented minoritized groups. Interestingly, they were able to uncover the fact that safety was reported exclusively by minority participants as a predictor of belonging and developed a framework to clarify the differences between the two groups of respondents. The concept of environmental and psychological safety

and the association between Black and underrepresented group members who experience lower levels of belonging while attending PWIs presents a significant issue when considering the needs of undergraduate as well as graduate students pursuing specialized degrees to advance their career aspirations.

While instances of institutionalized racism and the establishment of primarily white spaces exist in systems outside of higher education, the experiences offered by institutions of higher learning extend beyond the work or study space and into living spaces. Graduate students like undergraduates have often relocated and positioned themselves within the broader campus environment to make the learning process more accessible. Therefore, negative group interactions and conflict are not necessarily confined to the buildings, they become extensions of the lived experiences of the students pursuing their education within that environment (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Dickerson (2019) reinforces this concept by highlighting qualitative studies indicating that varying degrees of dissatisfaction and social isolation are experienced by Black graduate students in part due to hostile social environments established on campuses, however the studies do not specifically focus on the issue of psychological safety.

Other studies have shown that negative perceptions of campus racial climate also influence the sense of belonging that Black student perceive while pursuing their education in that environment (Harris, 2020). In addition to group dynamics, the knowledge of the “reputational legacy of racism” assumed by the institution historically, can also impact student of color namely Black students’ perceptions of inclusion and acceptance in those spaces (Dickerson, 2019). While graduate student academic needs differ from the undergraduate population in substantive ways, both groups require similar access to learning, mentoring and opportunities for professional enrichment through their academic efforts, so environmental and

campus climate issues may negatively impact their ability to access the resources necessary for future success.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Campus Racial Climate Framework**

For the purposes of this investigation, the Hurtado et al. (1999) campus racial climate framework has been adopted as the theory supporting the conceptualization of the research questions and data. My assumptions regarding the influence of the current American social climate on a university campus, the resulting deployment of DEI interventions, as well as the impact on Black students enrolled in counseling programs on campus, can be examined through the contextual dimensions offered by the framework. According to the model, students interact with internal and external forces that inform the racial climates on campus. The two external dimensions identified are categorized as “government or policy” informed and constructed by “sociohistoric” events present in the broader community or social environment (Hurtado et al. 1998).

Next, there are four internal campus dimensions that interact fluidly with the two external constructs presented. The first dimension is the historical legacy of the institution including past efforts to exclude or include diverse groups. Second, is structural diversity which captures the number of racial or ethnic group members represented on campus. The third dimension is the psychological climate on campus, which informs group perceptions of each other and finally the behavioral climate dimension, which influences relational dynamics between groups (Hurtado et al, 1998). With each of these elements in mind, one can gain a deeper understanding of the interactions between the domains that generate the racial context experienced by specific groups within the counseling program. Additionally, the model provides a framework for designing



questions that may clarify these interactions and highlight their impact on student perceptions of belonging.

### **Critical Race Methodology**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a philosophical framework emanating from legal scholarship, which emphasizes the need for a conscientious review of policies and procedures that fail to acknowledge the erasure of race, gender and class from dominant legal discourse and policy. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) offer a methodological process for adopting CRT in order to engage in qualitative investigations through a critical lens, and in within their framework they highlight 5 foundational elements available for consideration when working to deconstruct hegemonic structures and principles through research. The first element requires the acknowledgment of “the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination” which highlights the intersecting relationships between identities, experiences, and statuses of POCs and their exposure to subjugation and oppression as a result of the ideological factors (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). The second factor emphasizes a “challenge to dominant ideology” which includes the repudiation of research practices, concepts and frameworks reinforcing the concept of White supremacy, while also effectuating the erasure of scholarship emanating from communities of color (p.26). The critique of dominant discourse or concepts that maintain stereotypes and harmful narratives is effectuated by the “counter-storytelling” or the identification of “counternarratives” offered by members of marginalized groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

A “commitment to social justice” is the hallmark of the third element identified by Solorzano & Yosso (p.26). This standard appeals to the researcher’s ability to honor the identities of participants and empower them through liberatory research practices that

deconstruct the oppressive structures that exist to reinforce racism, sexism and the marginalization of subordinated groups. The fourth element of the critical race methodology (CRM) reinforces the need for an observance of “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (p.26), which cautions against the erasure of the narratives of people of color through the use of traditional theoretical frameworks. Liberatory researchers must establish the validity of community and participant narratives, by prioritizing and accessing their subjective realities through storytelling and strengths-based approaches to engagement.

The fifth and final element of the proposed framework calls for the deployment of a “transdisciplinary perspective” as opposed to the prioritization of a single historical, theoretical or disciplinary focus which facilitates the exclusion of other relevant theories. Through this practice intersectional shared history, experience and exposure to oppression is clarified, further empowering marginalized communities by increasing their access to multiple perspectives that accurately reflect the nuance and complexity of their individual and collective journeys. With factors of campus racial climate and belonging examined through a critical race lens, the goal of the study is to engage current Black graduate students in interviews to identify any counternarratives about their sense of belonging in counseling programs and the utility of cultivating this experience through university and program led DEI programming. If universities are willing to evaluate at their practices by incorporating the kind of qualitative data derived from student narratives about their experiences within their respective institutions, then DEI interventions may be refined to better reflect the needs of Black students who may be seeking something other than belonging as they complete their graduate studies.

## **CHAPTER THREE: STUDY METHODOLOGY**

The following chapter describes the methodology used in the qualitative study, along with the processes involved in data collection, analysis and the establishment of trustworthiness. Understanding the experiences that underlie Black counseling students' development of a sense of belonging in their graduate programs based at PWIs is the primary research goal. Gaining their perspectives regarding the impact of campus racial climate and DEI programming on their experiences of belonging within their respective programs, will be examined qualitatively amplifying the voices of the student participants and highlighting areas of need for university stakeholder consideration.

### **Philosophical Approach**

The exploration of campus racial climate, student satisfaction and other higher education outcomes are often initiated through the quantitative research process (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). This method of evaluation is less time consuming, potentially more cost-effective with larger sample sizes and the use of numerical data collected from a representative sample of the student population, allows university stakeholders to easily identify trends as well as shifts in data over time. However, this process does not explain the elements of the student experiences that produce the trends or statistical patterns. Therefore, the qualitative approach to research emerges as an asset to me as I seek to better understand the nuances and subjective realities related to issues of interest.

Within the qualitative research tradition there are numerous paradigms available to scientists interested in acquiring a more subjective understanding of human experiences and resolving assumptions underlying those realities (Hays & Wood, 2011). Kivunja & Kuyini (2017) focus intently on the "Positivist", "Interpretivist", "Critical" and "Pragmatic"

philosophical approaches promoting them among the more prominent research paradigms frequently used to conceptualize the issues. The lens through which a researcher considers the questions of interest, is important as it informs the methodological and analytic aspects of the investigation, while also guiding the process of theory development regarding the data collected from the participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 36). For this study, I have chosen a fusion of both the critical and social constructivist paradigms to approach the research initiative. This allows me to honor the philosophies that the participants create through their own experiences while also acknowledging the social, political, and historical factors that may inform the development of their own realities (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

## **Qualitative Approach**

### **Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis**

The previous section reviewed specific philosophical traditions applied in the framing of research questions and rationales. The subsequent process that ensues once the inquiry has been grounded in an overarching research paradigm is the selection of a specific approach informed by the chosen research philosophy. Among the standard investigative traditions, phenomenology emerges as a predominately constructivist approach reinforcing the significance of a consolidated essence of an experience, as well as the ways in which one situates knowledge regarding a specific set of phenomena (Hays & Wood, 2011). Within the purview of phenomenology, there lies an intricate approach known as the Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis (TPA).

As explained by Moustakas (1994), the transcendental approach represents a layered, multistep process for engaging with the data and yielding descriptions of phenomena isolated from the subjective knowledge or biases of the researcher (p.33). The prescribed steps in the

search for a “fresh” understanding of an experience consist of “epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and a synthesis of meanings and essences” (p.43). Ultimately, what underscores the transcendental process is the setting aside of one’s presuppositions, the identification of significant statements offered by the participant, the clarification of the “how” and “what” experienced and the consolidation of contextual descriptions of the phenomenon highlighting the “essence” or core of the experience under examination (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

### **Research Setting and Sampling Procedure**

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) has grouped specific U.S. states into regions: The North Atlantic (NARACES) region, including New York, Delaware, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia; The North Central (NCACES) which includes North Dakota, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri; and finally, the Southern (SACES) which includes Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama and Texas (CACREP, 2018) (See Figure 2 below for full list of states per region). The NARACES region was selected as the location for the study and recruitment to take place at specified institutions with CACREP accredited counseling programs. Given the specificity of the topic and experience, it was important to identify participants with experiences related to the issue under examination. Purposive sampling served an appropriate strategy for locating study participants within this special population. Through quota sampling, the goal was to recruit 2-4 students from each of the program sites participating in the study.

<b>Institutions with CACREP Programs by ACES Regions</b>					
<b>ACES Region</b>	North Atlantic (NARACES)	North Central (NCACES)	Rocky Mountain (RMACES)	Southern (SACES)	Western (WACES)
<b>Number of Institutions</b>	<b>71</b> (20.34%)	<b>90</b> (25.79%)	<b>18</b> (5.16%)	<b>138</b> (39.54%)	<b>31</b> (8.88%)
<b>States in Region</b>	Connecticut Delaware District of Columbia Maine Massachusetts New Hampshire New Jersey New York Pennsylvania Rhode Island Vermont	Illinois Indiana Iowa Kansas Michigan Minnesota Missouri Nebraska North Dakota Ohio Oklahoma South Dakota Wisconsin	Colorado Idaho Montana New Mexico Utah Wyoming	Alabama Arkansas Florida Georgia Kentucky Louisiana Maryland Mississippi North Carolina South Carolina Tennessee Texas Virginia West Virginia	Alaska Arizona California Hawaii Nevada Oregon Washington

Figure 2. A list of states offering CACREP accredited programs broken down by state and ACES region. (CACREP, 2018).

Upon approval from the University of Arkansas internal review board (IRB), program coordinators and faculty members at the identified institutions, were contacted for assistance in advertising the study and supporting the recruitment of potential participants identifying as Black or African American who are enrolled in the counseling master’s program. Additionally, faculty advisors from active chapters of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) counseling honors society were contacted in support of the recruitment effort. Once the coordinators and advisors were identified and engaged, they were provided with a prepared outreach email, or flyer identifying the researcher, and explaining the purpose of the study. The outreach emails also included access to the initial screening survey along with basic information regarding the follow-up interview to be administered should participants elect to be included in the activity. A total of 186 total contact attempts were made from March to June 2021 to program coordinators & CSI Faculty Advisors in CT, D.C., DE, MASS, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, and RI. The following section provides additional details regarding the collection of data and survey instrument used in the study.

## **Recruitment**

Multiple phases of recruitment were initiated over the course of a three-month period. In the first phase, emails were sent to program coordinators exclusively at NARACES schools. The initial offer was for individuals who participated in the recruitment survey to be entered into a drawing for a \$10 Amazon gift card, with no financial incentive offered for the individual interviews. There were very few responses to the survey during this initial outreach process therefore, a second phase of recruitment was initiated with the creation of a flyer advertising the study which was posted on two listservs and Facebook.

After much trial and error and lots of consideration for the needs of this population in terms of building trust, communicating respect for their perspectives, and honoring their time limitations, adjustments were made to the design of the study. The time allotted for interviews was reduced to a 60-90 minute maximum as opposed to a 90–120-minute timeframe. Additionally, participants engaging in the interview were offered a \$75 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the study. This incentive was offered in addition to the drawing for the \$10 Amazon gift card offered to survey participants broadly. Overall, the most fruitful form of recruitment was facilitated primarily through the program coordinators and not through posts on listservs or Facebook groups.

## **Participants**

The initial recruitment plan was for master's level counseling students who identified as Black or African American to be selected for the study. However, given the difficulty of securing the sample size of 5-25 participants recommended for phenomenological studies (Polkinghorne, 1989), doctoral students were also considered for inclusion in the study as well. Five students total were interviewed: one doctoral and four master's students were recruited, with one male

and four female students representing school counseling and clinical mental health concentrations. Additional participant demographic details will be provided in chapter four.

## **Data Collection and Instrument**

### **Survey**

Consistent with the phenomenological tradition of isolating pre-existing assumptions, biases and knowledge that could affect the purity of the data, I will engage in the practice of “bracketing” my assumptions prior to proceeding with the data collection and throughout the study (Hays & Wood, 2011). Bracketing serves as a strategy to ensure that the participants’ voices and stories are not overshadowed or misinterpreted in favor of by the researcher’s perspectives. Once the outreach process concluded, participants were identified through their engagement with the survey instrument provided in the recruitment email. The instrument included in the study was adapted from the 2016 University of Michigan “Campus Climate Survey on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” (UMich, 2016), which was generated in collaboration with an independent research design consulting firm called SoundRocket (<http://www.soundrocket.com>). The goal of the original survey was for university stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the campus climate, while also identifying specific areas of need related to diversity, equity and inclusion to address moving forward.

The Michigan survey was organized into two parts with the first section containing sixteen demographic questions, and the second section consisting of nineteen satisfaction items. These questions ranged from open-ended qualitative questions allowing students to write in detailed responses to close ended Likert scale questions, related to student experiences of discrimination in class and on campus, as well as more general feelings of satisfaction and safety within the context of their campus experiences. The version of the survey adapted for the current



study contains only one part focusing on participant demographics, however questions from the second portion are included in the semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix A and B). An overview of the rights of the participants to discontinue their engagement with the study at any point, along with the context and goals of the study will be provided in the informed consent documentation preceding the survey questions.

The survey was reduced to nine demographic questions with self-report options for gender identity and religious affiliation. The rationale for deconstructing and adapting the second part of the original survey was to allow a deeper conversation to ensue upon the students' participation in the in depth individual or dyadic semi-structured interview that would follow the administration of the screening tool. Once participants self-selected inclusion in the 60-minute interview, they would be randomly assigned to either an individual interview or dyad with one other participant. Dyadic interviews were planned to host two participants only, who would exchange experiences, confirming similarity or disconfirming through the collective dialogue. Contrariwise, individual interviews conducted presented an additional opportunity for understanding experiences without the influence of other participants.

## **Interviews**

Participants were given the choice of individual or dyadic interviews for the exploration of the topic. However, only one participant opted for the dyadic format, and therefore was interviewed individually as there were no counterparts interested in being paired for the discussion. Each participant was contacted via email and provided with a Calendly link (<https://www.calendly.com>), which is an internet application allowing them to self-select virtual meeting time slots. Given the continued health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the interview process was facilitated virtually using Zoom (<https://zoom.us>).

Informed consent protocols were reiterated including a request for permission to record the conversations for coding and analysis purposes. Students were asked for confirmation of their preferred pseudonyms for data de-identification purposes ensuring participant anonymity prior to the initiation of any interview data collection.

Throughout the interview, a mixture of concrete questions related to the research questions and media were presented while engaging with the participants. The media consisted of a clip from a pop culture television show, a segment of a documentary and a series of three tweets demonstrated with requests for participant comments regarding the issues of belonging and campus climate presented in each format. Participants were also asked a series of 5-7 open ended questions during the semi-structured interview as they related to their individual experiences with the phenomena explored. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the development of rapport and comfort between the researcher and the participants during the interview process, was critical.

My status as a licensed mental health practitioner trained in the art of alliance building as well as the establishment of a secure base for responses to be elicited from the participants, not only informed the design of the study, but the careful consideration of the needs of the community prior to engagement with the population as well. I considered the possibility that the subject matter might elicit challenging emotions or even an increased awareness of injustices experienced by the studied population. Therefore, I initiated check-ins during the interviews seeking feedback regarding their experiences in the moment. For example, questions like “how did you experience the study?” or “how was this interview process for you?” were asked for participant feedback on the research process. Finally, in alignment with the CRT inspired critical features infused in the study’s theoretical framework, this intervention extends the participant

role beyond being the subject of the research, but rather an influential contributor and stakeholder involved in the refinement of the research process for future studies and potential DEI efforts.

### **Data Analysis**

Each individual interview was transcribed and reviewed for significant statements and themes, then compared across interviews for composite similarities and themes that differed from one another, in a manner consistent with the Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. I was able to ascertain data saturation through this process. A complementary practice of reflexivity was also initiated, prior to the completion of the study design and within this process, I considered not only my own values and knowledge of the subject, but also reflected upon the potential impact of my proximity to the participants given my status as a Black woman, enrolled in a CACREP accredited program with a master's degree in counseling (Valandra, 2012). Through the lens of phenomenology, this reflective practice and bracketing would be necessary not only prior to the execution of the study, but it would occur throughout the process of transcendental analysis. As multiple readings and re-readings of the transcript were initiated, the isolation of the nonrepetitive statements of the participants lead to an understanding of the specific contexts they experienced (Hays & Wood, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the statements were organized and recorded on individual data tables created for each of the participants, where memos were written in the margins highlighting the themes generated, the textural descriptions of the data and the structural descriptions as interpreted from the significant statements (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

## **Data Coding Overview**

Grounding the interview process and subsequent data analysis, I employed the following research questions for participant consideration: First, how do Black counseling students define belonging and second how do they experience DEI interventions adopted within their programs? The responses were coded in congruence with the research questions, which facilitated the development of themes organizing the concepts shared by the participants through the lens of the CRT and CRC frameworks.

### **Process of Analysis**

The following section details the intricate steps taken in analyzing the interview data using an adapted version of the Moustakas (1994) “Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data” (p.122). The initial steps of the analytic method included were applied to each of the five participants individually, after interview transcription and was followed by a cross analysis of the data identifying composite themes and meanings shared across the individual cases. Steps were taken ensuring proper epoche (Moustakas, 1994, p.22), prior to initiating the chosen transcendental phenomenological reduction process modified by Moustakas. These steps will be explained briefly below with a thorough imaginative variation process detailed later in the chapter.

### **Epoche**

Among the hallmarks of phenomenological research are the exploration of participant experiences through a fresh and unbiased lens to assist in the centering of participant meanings attached to phenomena (Hays & Wood, 2011). The goal is to ensure that the previously held beliefs or the subjective experiences of the researcher are not driving the meaning making process (Moustakas,1994). Throughout the interview process, participant counternarratives were

reflected to them by the researcher with a request for clarification or correction, ensuring that any misinterpretation influenced by researcher bias or shared culture could be rectified. The use of bracketing as an application of epoche will be described in the following section.

### **Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction**

The following discussion provides an illustration of the transcendental phenomenological reduction process adopted in the study. The bracketing, horizontalization and clustering of meaningful data were conducted in adherence to methodologies described by Moustakas (1994) along with the infusion of critical research methodological strategies highlighted in the section.

#### ***Bracketing***

In the spirit of epoche, bracketing strategies were adopted with the intention of clearly delineating between the assumptions and experiences held by the researcher and the experiences detailed by each participant. The first strategy was the use of a reflexivity journal acknowledging positionality, cultural proximity to the sample population and the presence of biases currently held. The journaling process was initiated prior to the study and continued throughout the research process. Second, once biases had been identified and bracketed through journaling, they were shared with the participants by the researcher through verbal acknowledgment, while discussing informed consent and study protocol. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) researchers upholding critical research methodologies “enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them to the research site” (p.306). Thus, the transparent disclosure of researcher biases and preconceived notions was not only reflective of epoche, but it was also a choice made in support of critical methodology integration and was deemed necessary when working with groups historically disenfranchised or harmed by traditional research methods.

### ***Horizontalization***

The data analysis was initiated by first reviewing each individual transcript, then identifying significant statements and descriptions relevant to the research questions posed by annotating the document with highlights and comments on points of interest and importance. Multiple reviews of the interview data facilitated the identification of each unique, significant statement. The next step was capturing the textural meanings of each significant statement, by isolating specific quotes that provide explanations of how the participants experience the phenomenon (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). These quotes were placed in a table removed from all repetitive statements with brief textural descriptions developed summarizing the experiences. After the development of the textural meanings, the process of “imaginative variation” began with the formulation of ideas about the structural meanings of the participant experience in a separate column of the table (Moustakas, 1994, p.30).

### ***Clusters of Meaning***

Once the how and what of the participant experiences were considered through the horizontalization process, the significant statements were clustered and organized by initial categories. This was accomplished by placing the statements on a Google “jamboard” (<https://jamboard.google.com>) and then arranging them by preliminary themes generated for each individual interview. The steps described were repeated for each participant, with revisions made to categories and themes throughout the analysis. Common themes across participants were identified and along with subthemes that emerged through the imaginative variation.

### ***Excluded Data***

The exclusion of data unrelated to the research questions posed was initiated in the analysis phase of the study. Discussions on specific undergraduate experiences, hypothetical

content about the experience of attending an HBCU and reflections on the experiences of others, are examples of content omitted as these disclosures did not clarify the meaning attached to a sense of belonging, DEI interventions and campus climate directly experienced by the participants within their current graduate school context. Additionally, many of the participants offered reflections on the kinds of strategies that could be adopted by program faculty, university stakeholders and administrators in search of effective DEI strategies to support the Black graduate student population. While not included in this chapter they are discussed in depth in chapter five along with study recommendations, limitations and final reflections.

### **Trustworthiness**

The primary elements of trustworthiness in qualitative research practices include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). While also elements of the data analysis process, the use of the transcendental phenomenological paradigm and reflexivity are practices that enhance the credibility of the study given their prevalence in qualitative investigations. My positionality and familiarity with the population sampled given my status as a Black woman who has also participated in counseling program at the master's level, also enhances the credibility of the study (Shenton, 2004). After engaging in the cyclical process of text review, theme identification and clustering of data, I will compile a master list of prominent themes and enlist the assistance a group of consultants to review my analytic process.

The engagement of a team of peer-consultants, consisting of two Black female, counselor education doctoral candidates who did not participate in the data collection process, will promote credibility and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). They will review the master data list to ensure the proper assignment of thematic codes and offer any additional recommendations as needed to support the objectivity of the analysis (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Additionally, extending an

offer to participants to review the data and voice their opinions regarding the articulation of the study outcomes through optional member checking, may serve not only to increase trustworthiness, but it can be an empowerment tool as well (Candela, 2019). Requesting participation in member checking as opposed to mandating this activity, acknowledges the importance of their time, their voices, and their autonomy in the research process. It also serves as a strategy to prevent potential harm by prioritizing the sensitivities of the participants and working collaboratively with them to explore any concerns that they may have about the analysis and publication of the data, should they choose to before the process is finalized (Candela, 2019).

The collection of demographic information in the screening survey and a thorough description of the methodologies used to collect data and engage participants, will help to illustrate the context of the sampled population, and will promote transferability (Shenton, 2004). The administration of the same interview questions to all participants sampled will allow me to establish dependability within the study, particularly if similarity exists between the experiences disclosed by participants across settings (Shenton, 2004). Ultimately, conscious selection of a qualitative methodology prioritizing the stories of the population identified and the steps developed to engage participants through a critical lens to prevent harm, reduce bias, and to understand the genuine experiences of the population, are present at each phase of the research initiative. Given my proximity to the participants and knowledge of the past harms committed by researchers in search of data to confirm their hypotheses about the Black community and the Black experience broadly, it is important to consider the impact each procedure with the empowerment of the participants in mind. By demonstrating compassion, flexibility and a collaborative spirit when engaging this sensitive population, I hope to communicate a



commitment to representing the community accurately while also improving traditional research practices, in order to prevent history from repeating itself or creating future harm.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Participant Counternarratives

The following section provides a brief overview of the experiences shared by each of the five participants attending PWIs in the northeastern region of the United States (see Table 1 for demographic details). Consistent with the tenets of critical research methodologies highlighted by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), these counternarratives are presented as reflections of the experiential knowledge gained by the participants, challenging institutional norms and dominant culture in order to better understand the experiences of the Black graduate student population.

Table 1

#### *Participant Demographic Data*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Degree
Rainbow-P1	23	F	New York	Masters
Blanca-P2	28	F	Pennsylvania	PhD
Tasha-P3	34	F	New Hampshire	Masters
James-P4	31	M	D.C.	Masters
Angel-P5	23	F	D.C.	Masters

#### **Rainbow**

Rainbow is a female master's level counseling program student in New York. According to Rainbow, belonging is a situational, and often flatly inaccessible experience at her current institution. Along with the other four participants, she clarified that belonging was not a priority for her as she considered graduate programs, however she offered subjective meanings of belonging and what the experience of belonging would consist of if secured. Her descriptions of negotiating her identity as a "child of immigrants" within the social, cultural and environmental domains present on her predominately white campus and within her program, emerged as themes that influenced her perceptions of belonging. Also heavily coded within the interview were

themes regarding the experience of diversity, equity and inclusion within the context of her program specifically. Recommendations for faculty and university stakeholders were offered in this initial interview and will be discussed in the subsequent chapter along with the insights offered by her fellow participants.

### **Blanca**

The interview with Blanca, who is a female PhD student studying Counselor Education at a PWI in Pennsylvania, was unique as it represented a reflection on her master's program experiences juxtaposed with her doctoral work at the same institution. Couched in the social, cultural and environmental contexts similarly identified by Rainbow in New York, Blanca's disclosures were heavily coded for themes of belonging defined through the lens of her cultural identity, her surroundings in a remote region of the state and the experience of attending a PWI after having attended an Historically Black College (HBCU) for her undergraduate studies. Unlike most of the participants, she reported experiencing a great deal of comfort, enrichment and a sense of belonging within her school counseling program. However, at both the master's and doctoral levels she found it difficult navigating the campus and adjacent community climates during the recent politically and socially incendiary period in this country. Themes of race and discrimination emerged and were coded accordingly as did the experience of diversity, equity and inclusion in spaces that she reflected were never established with Black or other marginalized communities in mind.

### **Tasha**

Tasha is a female international student whose experiences echo others shared by the participants regarding the importance of first considering whether her pragmatic needs will be met by her chosen institution, as opposed to prioritizing a sense of belonging. Unlike the other

participants however, not even the program could offer space where the experience of belonging as she defined it, would be accessible to her. Thus, instead of the discussion focusing on the cultural, environmental, or social contexts of belonging, the most heavily coded themes consisted of her subjective experience of belonging, the program climate and a discourse on race and discrimination as they related to the PWI experience in New Hampshire. Additionally, Tasha's narratives amplified the international student perspective and the distinctions to be made between access to belonging as a domestic student versus the hurdles present for students without a local community readily available to them as they navigate the challenges associated with relocating to a foreign country to pursue higher education.

### **James**

James was the only male participant engaged in the study. He is a master's student at a PWI in Washington, D.C. and his framing of the experience of belonging is distinct from the other participants in the following ways. First, he shared an initial desire for a sense of belonging to be associated with his chosen master's program, which was not a priority expressed by the other participants. He eventually considered that belonging specifically within the cultural context of the Black community may be more accessible through spaces outside of the university and relinquished the need for these experiences to be located explicitly within the program. Factors such as age and racial identity development were also discussed contributing to the textural descriptions of the social choices that he has made when engaging with faculty and peers in the program. Additional themes prominently coded within James' interview were program climate and DEI experiences that further illustrated his perspectives on the factors undermining access to a sense of belonging and true diversity, equity and inclusion. As he grapples with whether to perform in ways to facilitate connections with peers who have little in common with

him, James also considers whether the extra effort in this pursuit will lead to the desired positive connections or expose him to conflict.

### **Angel**

The final interview was held with Angel, a school counseling master's student also attending a program in Washington, D.C. Given her embedded sense of belonging with the local community housing her master's program, belonging within the context of the program was not a priority. Therefore, Angel's focus prior to enrolling in the program was on identifying a school facilitating her access to the counseling specialty of her choice so that she would be able to use those skills in service to her community. Presenting a perspective of the PWI experience, that neither centered belonging nor campus climate, she instead offered an exploration of the different iterations of racism and discrimination that have been displayed through peer and faculty interactions in her graduate school experience thus far. This counternarrative produced themes highlighting her program climate, issues of race and discrimination, along with her textural and structural descriptions of phenomenon that enhance and undermine the program experience.

### **Clusters of Meaning Units**

Following the initial analysis and repeated cross analyses of all participant interviews, the data was organized into the following 7 themes, coded from A to G. The analysis also uncovered the presence of 14 subthemes which will be highlighted in the section detailing the textural descriptions offered by each individual participant. Tables 2 and 3 provide a snapshot of the themes and subthemes to be discussed and contextualized in depth through the CRM and CRC theoretical frameworks adopted in the study.

Table 2

Code	Main Themes	Number of References	Participant Sources	Research Question
A	Understanding Belonging	36	5	Q1
B	Cultural Context of Belonging	20	5	Q1
C	Social Context of Belonging	12	4	Q2(b)
D	Environmental Context of Belonging	18	4	Q2(b)
E	Experience of PWI Attendance	34	5	Q1(b)
F	Program Climate	68	5	Q2
G	Experiences of Racism/Discrimination	19	5	

### **Textural Descriptions**

The following section highlights the experiential knowledge shared by each participant in relation to the themes and subthemes identified. This list of counternarratives represent the layered lived experiences of the participants, providing access to the phenomena and circumstances that shape their perceptions of belonging along with other insights that they identify as being central to the research questions.

Table 3

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Understanding Belonging	The Search for Belonging Barriers to Belonging The Reality of Belonging
Experience of PWI Attendance	Pragmatics Benefits of PWI Attendance Costs of PWI Attendance Campus Climate
Social Context of Belonging	
Cultural Context of Belonging	Access to Culture Specific Resources
Environmental Context of Belonging	
Program Climate	Role of Faculty Role of Peers The Burden of Speaking Up DEI Experiences
Experiences of Racism/Discrimination	

**Understanding Belonging.** Based upon the initial prompt and follow-up questions posed to start the interview, the participants began the exploration of the research topic by offering their own understanding of belonging and descriptions defining their subjective experience of the phenomenon. This discussion pinpointed issues related to the search for belonging, barriers to belonging and the reality of belonging, which were later designated as subthemes. Rainbow explained her relationship with belonging by stating “I genuinely didn't think of belonging, because I figured I wouldn't necessarily fit in or belong automatically, regardless of where I went.” Additionally, she defined the experience as the impression that “...you can walk into a place and not feel awkward in a sense, or it's like, some of the needs that you need to have met, or some of the things that you would prefer aren't seen as, like, weird or unnatural in a way...” In terms of the need for belonging Blanca reinforced the idea that belonging was not a priority by saying “No. Actively? No. Mm mm. That wasn't number one on my list.” However, she

described a sense of belonging as "...moments where... I can pinpoint like, some source of like, happiness or positivity going on" and "I have people, or a support system, I'm aware of that support system there". When Angel responded to the question about her definition and prioritization of belonging, she answered "...I didn't really necessarily consider how I would fit into my program. If, in terms of that sense of belonging, because I don't know, I was just like, I'm going to school." Tasha echoed Angel's sentiments with her statement "...I just see it as a school."

***The Search for Belonging.*** While 4 out of the 5 participants contended that belonging was not an experience that they were seeking or prioritizing in their search for a suitable counseling graduate program, they each framed the concept of belonging through a process of identifying specific behaviors and experiences leading to a confirmation of either belonging or rejection.

Blanca shared her perspective stating:

I can say from in the undergrad and a master's context, belonging would be something that I would check after I already started. And so, if I didn't feel like I was supposed to be there then, and even now, I have no problem saying that I want to go somewhere else, even if the semester started. So, when I was choosing the master's program at that time, that wasn't on my list, but when I got it...I had to see do I feel like this feels like a good choice, which is connected to belonging at that time.

Tasha framed the search for belonging as:

You know, just having like, an environment where you can actually reach out and umm, you know, like, you might be having, like, the worst experience ever, but you would feel like, oh, man I just spoke with... I just spoke with my family again, like, this is I mean, like, the school one, you know, and they made me feel good. I feel like I belong, I'm one of them, more or less.

James unlike the other participants initially hoped for a sense of belonging to be attached to the graduate school experience. However, he eventually considered the following as an alternative:

You don't have to get that from your school or your cohort or whatever, like you'll be in DC and like you're an adult so it's like, I can go move around and get another community, whether that's church or the gym or whatever I can like try and find Black community elsewhere.



**Barriers to Belonging.** While detailing the elements of belonging relevant to their program and campus affiliations, the participants were also able to identify impediments to belonging. James reported age as “another layer of kind of like, otherness for me”, given the volume of younger students within his program. Tasha describes her graduate school experience stating “...I don’t have a bond with anybody. I don’t have any attachment. I’ve not had any of those.” She relates her disconnection in part, to her status as an international student, but also considers “...maybe I’m seeing all of this you know, my experience is because of COVID.”

Similarly, Rainbow constructs barriers to belonging declaring:

All of a sudden, you realize people sort of nitpick, and then there's clicking, and then people sort of branch out into their own things. And it's like, well, I don't necessarily feel really close to these people. I don't belong here. It's like, I belong here, but they won't accept me so then, like, Where the heck do I go

Finally, Blanca’s perceptions were rooted in an understanding of the historical precedents for Black student nonbelonging at PWIs:

Ways that people, policies and practices and procedures and systems tell you like, you know, you umm... we're not going to set it up so you can thrive. And so, when you feel as though you're not really thriving, it's just like, where do I belong?

**The Reality of Belonging.** As the participants delved more deeply into their experiences of belonging, many of them described a distinction between the sense of belonging anticipated and the actual phenomenon that they encountered while attending their respective PWIs.

Rainbow questioned whether belonging would be extended to her stating:

And then it's like, you enter this new environment where you just think you'll belong regardless. And it's kind of like, that's not how the world works, you don't necessarily just fit in everywhere you go. And half the time, it's people going out of their way to ensure that you don't feel like you belong, while preaching the message that everyone belongs.

Tasha explained that the prospect of belonging that she felt during the application and recruitment process was temporary:

When I started making inquiries...with my school, currently, they felt, I felt so good talking to them. They made me feel so good. And then like, it was at some point, I felt like, oh, wow, this is a place I really want to go to. And umm... after my admission, then I went to school, didn't hear from them anymore.

**Experience of PWI Attendance.** The participants provided many insights regarding their unique experiences while attending a PWI as well as the impact of choosing a PWI for their graduate studies. Additional layers of the theme will be contextualized later as there is a considerable amount of overlap between the remaining themes and PWI attendance. However, the following section focuses on the subthemes highlighting the pragmatic choices made by the participants attending PWIs, the costs and benefits of PWI attendance and finally their experience of the campus climate.

**Pragmatics.** One of the reasons why belonging was not prioritized by the participants, was their focus on the more rational or pragmatic needs that they had, related to their graduate school attendance. Blanca emphasized this point stating "I was looking for a master's program. Like I said, it umm needed to be closer to home, CACREP accredited. Then it was really important that it was like a higher-ranking program." While discussing her reasons for attending the program, Rainbow stated "I think it was a matter of mostly, like financial, location and things like that". Angel expressed her program preference by stating "I'd rather study what I want to study than attend-just attend a school just for- then that would be just for its name and like legacy and that's not the purpose of education for me."

**Benefits of PWI Attendance.** In conjunction with the pragmatic drivers of PWI attendance, the participants highlighted the specific benefits of attendance that they have perceived. Among them were prospects for personal enrichment, which Blanca affirmed stating:

There are things that are like positive or joyful, or happy that can keep me going to feel as though okay, I'm supposed to be here. And not just for the degree, but like, you know, this was a right step in in my development and my growth.

Rainbow introduced the idea of the PWI not being ideal, but offering a valuable experience in the following statement:

I've made this decision because it's like, yeah, there's all these negatives, but then there's this one really good positive that's drawn me towards it and I can't necessarily get it anywhere else.

James emphasized the importance of school reputation which was also alluded to by Blanca when discussing pragmatics:

I didn't know it was a good school...umm...so then, you know how that thing goes, like you see somebody's you know, email or LinkedIn, or like, oh, they went here...So it's like, do you want to go to like one of those? Or do you want to feel like you have a very enriching experience? Or do you want like the clout? So like, after I got into [current school], I didn't finish my other applications...

***Costs of PWI Attendance.*** Not everyone identified explicit costs associated with PWI attendance, however two of the participants whose statements stood out provided a few revelations. Angel for example, considered what belonging as a Black student would entail generally, so she categorized the experience of not always feeling like a minority, as a potential marker of belonging. However, she very clearly emphasized the fact that “if you're at a PWI, like, that's never going to happen”, meaning that minority status was inherent in the PWI experience for Black students.

Blanca described the psychological costs associated with PWI attendance:

In the master's program...nobody outright did anything to me. But being there, living there, hearing other people's experiences, reading things, you know, looking around and being annoyed that I was there in the first place, even though I was there on a mission... It does something to my spiritual well-being and to my psyche, that is really harmful. And just talking about it, I can feel myself, you know, feeling different emotions. And I'm upset that part of my career development and my growth as a black woman who doesn't come from wealth and has different layers of identities that are constantly oppressed...This is one of the routes I have to take to, to be successful and to have economic advantage...

The psychological cost that she describes comes with professional benefits which creates frustration and other resultant emotional responses.

***Campus Climate.*** Given the application of the Hurtado (1992) Campus Racial Climate framework to construct research questions and contextualize the participant disclosures, specific questions regarding the impact of the campus climate were incorporated in the interview. Most of the participants focused their remarks primarily on the climate within their respective counseling programs as opposed to focusing on the impact of the external campus dynamics. The program climate details will be presented in a later section, however two participants provided important reflections on what their experiences on campus were like versus within their programs.

Rainbow reported a troubling interactional pattern with fellow students when navigating spaces on campus:

I've noticed that sometimes when I'm like, umm when my friends and I are like walking somewhere, there are certain groups of people that will interact with us, and then there are certain people who will go out of their way to sort of avoid us at the same time.

Blanca also had a sense that the campus and community dynamics were less welcoming than the counseling program:

I never feel like I'm supposed to be at [my current school]. But I feel like I'm supposed to be connected to my department... And so, I never feel like it was a mistake to be a part of my department. I have felt like, why am I here at [the current school] and why am I here at [the college town].

While not representative of the entire sample, the disclosures offered by Blanca and Rainbow are compelling and worthy of closer inspection.

**Social Context of Belonging.** Given the participants' complex experiences and descriptions of their relationships with belonging on campus and within their programs, it feels prudent to further organize the disclosures in terms of the locations or contexts within which their sense of

belonging develops or fails to materialize. Therefore, beginning with the social context of belonging, each of the participants explains the impact of peer interactions in the establishment of comfort, community building and belonging while attending the PWI school.

Blanca explains:

In the master's program umm, having a, a close group of friends who all happen umm...to be Black or Dominican umm, from urban areas too-because I'm from the Bronx, New York City. So if you hear like noise outside, like, you know, sorry, but everybody was from a city ummm in the US like some big like, urban spot. So umm being friends together helped with the program.

James and Tasha on the other hand experience some deficits in peer interactions at times within the social context of belonging. James states:

“I'm either like, I can feel kind of like alone and like, guard my peace and my energy. Or I can like try to like force myself to like...perform, I guess, in an effort to like, maybe feel more comfortable in the future. But I'm like ahh (sigh) like, I don't really need to be friends with these people.”

Tasha expresses disappointment in the peer interactions stating “I just feel like the students are just... I don't feel any, anything.” While James and Tasha describe difficulties in establishing meaningful peer connections within the program, Rainbow and Angel had access to peer connections by virtue of the fact that they had external friends or contacts who chose to attend the program with them. Rainbow confirmed this contribution to her sense of belonging within the program stating, “I also went with one of my really close friends, so I think that helped a little bit.” Angel's statement was similar as she offered the following reflection: “I came into grad school and my roommate also is in the same program as me, so I already had a person.”

**Cultural Context of Belonging.** The impact of culture on the choice to attend a PWI and on belonging more generally, was heavily considered by many of the participants. While closely connected and at times intertwined with the social context of belonging previously described, the participants provided distinguishable differences in their experience of culture, the importance of

their own cultural affiliations and access to culture specific resources during their graduate school journeys. The emotional connection between the presence of culturally congruent experiences, peers and faculty members was also prevalent in the disclosures highlighted below.

*Access to Culture Specific Resources.* Despite each participant embodying their cultural identity and experiences in vastly different ways, their disclosures highlighted the ways in which Black representation or lack thereof within their graduate school experiences impact their sense of belonging.

Rainbow presented the following issue as an example of her isolation given the limited number of Black students in the program:

I think after there was one incident during our like cultural and diversity class, where um we were talking about the African American and black population, and several of the students kept asking me what I think about it, [as] the only black person in that class. And after a while, I was like, you know, I've had it like, I can't speak for all black people, I'm not the only black person in the world, I do not near\_ I do not at all represent half of what black people look like around the world, and you just expect me to have this answer. And it's ridiculous.

Angel described the benefits of cultural match and access to supportive Black

faculty as distinguished from the gender match, she's accustomed to in counseling faculty:

I immediately started to look to see, like, if I was going to have like, all white professors, like, I knew I was gonna have mostly female professors that's like, going into counseling as expected, but like, I was really curious, like, k, am I gonna get a black professor. And like, I my group super- my first group supervision, um ...my group supervisor was Black. And he's my supervisor now and that is like, such a big, reassuring moment, because I like know, like, when there's a major incident, like, there's always there's that person who also is going to feel like the heat of that event and its entire- entirety and say something.

One source of support and cultural belonging for Blanca was experienced through membership in the Black Graduate Students Association (BGSA): “BGSA, we call each other like family members” she asserts while also establishing the importance of access to peers with shared

cultural identity. “I really had to, like lean into folks who work umm from my communities or similar communities, and like our bond helped me to transition through.”

**Environmental Context of Belonging.** The final of the three contextual themes illuminated by the participants was the environmental context within which their schools are situated. This discussion amplified the ways in which external factors have filtered into their respective campuses and programs and either support their access to belonging, undermine it or have no positive effect. When asked if belonging factored into her choice of program, Angel reveals the relationship between belonging and the environment surrounding her school, as well as its impact on her future goals as a school counselor:

I think slightly because my program is located in the area where I grew up. So I knew that like in terms of when I'm going into schools and counseling them that my clients will all be neces- like pretty much from where I grew up.

Blanca experienced the presence of social and political tension in the region housing her campus which filtered into her graduate school experience triggering the sense of isolation and distress described below:

So it's just like this crazy man's in the office, oh, my God, all these bad things are happening. But they've been happening, you know. And so when there was a rise in hate crimes and reports and people sharing what's going on, it was just like, oh my gosh, and like, I'm in the middle of nowhere, you know. And so I remember the last semester was hard emotionally.

**Program Climate.** The most heavily coded theme in the study concerned dynamics within the programs as described by each of the participants. Examples of the role of faculty and peers in establishing the program climate were explained in depth, along with participant impressions of programmatic responses to DEI issues and needs. A few of the participants also emphasized the difficulty in deciding whether to bear the burden of speaking up when they have identified DEI issues or whether to conserve their energy by remaining silent.

**Role of Faculty.** Each of the participants commented on the role that faculty plays in their graduate school experience. The feedback was split between enjoyable and supportive experiences with faculty and problematic interactions with a few faculty members.

James described feelings of disappointment related to faculty engagement:

It doesn't really seem like...they are um, intentional about like really...kind of like changing hearts and minds and creating a... environment and a community, like in the program, at least in my program, umm but I'm sure as a school as a whole of umm, of like, cultivating an environment that like it changes from like, kind of like the inside out in people...

Angel and James attend the same PWI, and she expressed her frustrations with the faculty stating:

It's not necessarily the students, it's the professors who just are older, and have been around a long time. And it's like, it's that type of industry where you don't really ever leave. You like, retire and you write, and you teach. So that's the type of thing now dealing with like people just having mentalities that are just not accurate. Or like, so coming from the mentality that you don't even necessarily have to have ever counseled for real.

Blanca's experience with faculty was overwhelmingly positive as evidenced in the statement below:

I'm really thankful that umm...you know, my advisor was and is still the same person, Black, a Black woman- who is from...Barbados. And her being really umm just really excellent at what she does, and like umm, supportive of me, and all the things I need...

Rainbow feels that there is a connection between faculty and student sense of belonging:

I think the maybe like the faculty are the ones who are working to make everyone feel like they're belong are doing more of the work than the general population, like the students."

Tasha however has had mixed experiences with faculty. She shared that some interactions have been nice while others have been reflective of the following:

I did reach out to somebody on campus, you know, to say, you know, I feel like I'm lacking... I'm very overwhelmed you know. And the response I got was, oh, maybe you're aiming for perfection... And I was like, what? And this person is an academic



staff. And I'm like, what? Would you have said that if I was White? I didn't say anything to him.

***Role of Peers.*** While the impressions of faculty contributions to the program climate yielded a few positive responses, the participants recounted many challenging interactions with peers that undermine the program climate. As previously discussed, Tasha explained that she hasn't felt connected to peers or the institution, and Rainbow shared frustrations regarding the assumptions about her cultural identity made by peers in a specific classroom interaction. However, Rainbow did mention that following the classroom incident, "most of the classmates have been considerate and watchful of like, the language that they use and stuff like that." In contrast however with the other two young women, Blanca expressed her appreciation for cohort members stating "...if I didn't have a great cohort, again, the people I'm around, it just wouldn't work out." The final two participants, express frustration with their peers through specific examples below and it is also important to re-iterate that these participants both attend the same program.

James shared that increased input and participation from peers would be helpful in the following ways:

I'm like putting myself in situations, doing projects on things and groups that like, have traditionally made me uncomfortable in effort to like have more of that cultural humility. But it doesn't seem like other people take the initiative...it'd be cool if you know one of those 22-year-old white kids would be like, "Yo, [James], like you said this in class, or like I heard you mentioned this one time. I'd love to know more about that and know more about like your experience".

Angel however explained ways in which peer input and participation have been off-putting to her. Particularly when White peers have initiated outreach to her after inappropriate interactions with others in class:

This is the first time I've really witnessed like, White savior-ing, like in witnessing racism like that extremely. Like it's not your burden to bear. Like your apology's, not really going to do anything. Like I, I understand you're making- you want it known to me that

you're not racist. Thank you for attempting to prove that, but I don't- I didn't ask for you to prove that to me.

***The Burden of Speaking Up.*** Directly linked to the presence of peer and faculty interactions that have contributed to the program climate experienced by participants, is the resultant burden of speaking up that has followed the described interactions. This burden was not articulated by all the participants, however the content offered by the following three participants enhanced the understanding of their experiences of belonging, isolation and are connected to the final theme presented later in the chapter.

Rainbow stated that she has hesitated when faced with the decision to speak up when she has felt something was wrong:

There's this fear of being like, everything, or what you're working towards having seen and heard, can be like twisted and made you look...like this person who is just going on and on about something, and you're the one who has a problem with this, so then you should deal with it on your own kind of thing.

James described a time where instead of speaking up about a negative peer interaction he prioritized conserving his energy:

I had a couple of like, incidents or whatever, with this one uhh white woman in my program, where like, she doesn't know that she did anything, but it impacted me. But I don't really feel like I have the uhh... I, I don't feel comfortable...speaking up or whatever, just feels like it's gonna be you know, more draining.

***DEI Experiences.*** The next subtheme reflects responses to the question posed regarding the participants' impressions of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) broadly at their respective PWIs. Their stories highlight dynamics, standards and initiatives that they have witnessed within their programs and the general campus related to DEI. Their voices on the subject, particularly regarding the impact of DEI related events and experiences on their sense of belonging, opinions of their schools and the work of stakeholders involved in the promotion of DEI at the institution,

will be amplified in this section. Recommendations offered by the participants, on effective DEI strategies to meet the needs of the Black graduate student population are available in chapter five.

Rainbow and Blanca had very clear stances on the veracity and substance of the DEI statements and initiatives offered by their respective institutions. Rainbow candidly explained: "...with the diversity part of the things, I'm honestly like, I feel I should be exempt from all discussions, diversity related, it's ridiculous. And it's, it's kind of like, okay, we're having these because of situations that's happened." Blanca also provided an honest appraisal of diversity at her current PWI stating, "I found it really interesting that at that time, I think [school] got like a Diversity Award. And I'm just like, where's this coming from...On like, how diverse the student population was, and I was like, that's a lie."

James described what he considered insufficient DEI efforts in the following statement:

It almost seems more to me at least in my program where it's like, maybe they don't have the extra time, resources or wherewithal to like... kind of like start from like foundation umm, and they're kind of doing like like, you know, throwing the band aids like you know, you know, advocacy project for, you know, oppressed populations- that you know, the one class or convocation where they made everybody read, umm what's it called? Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together cafeteria and then had like a big like group discussion about it. So it's like shit like that, where it's like, we're doing something but like, we're missing a lot of...stuff.

Angel shared a specific situation in which issues of diversity emerged in conversation and devolved when a fellow Black student offered critical insights about the tone of the discussion around a Black faculty member:

There was a town hall that got really uncomfortable because one of the black students said, I'd just like to put it out there that she is a black woman in this field and some of her emotional, like, boundaries might be in place because of how she thinks she might be perceived. And it got shut down completely by the other students in our department, like, they were like, my interactions with her have nothing to do with her race.

**Experiences of Racism/Discrimination.** The fifth most heavily coded theme present in the interview discussions revolved around experiences of racism or discrimination described by the participants. While some of the participants used a variety of words and expressions in their descriptions of racism or discrimination experienced, they were categorized under this specific theme as informed by the critical race theoretical framework, which emphasizes the importance of honoring experiential knowledge from populations often marginalized or invalidated by mainstream knowledge or dominant culture perspectives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Blanca shared her experiences of vicarious trauma and distress while navigating the uptick in racial violence compounded by the presidential election and sociopolitical climate surrounding her current PWI:

I remember on multiple occasions, having to text my people, the crew I told you about- and just, tell them like, Oh, I can't get out of bed or oh, I'm really sad about this or, oh I'm distressed about that. And it's like, real personal things are happening, but then you got to think about like, you're experiencing these things. And then a lot of our stuff happens because we're from you know, identities that are oppressed. And then on top of that, you have all these you know, bad things happening, forms of violence happening to folks you do and don't know.

Rainbow highlighted a microaggression that she has experienced during an interaction with a faculty member:

One of the first, because I moved up here, and I was like, I don't know anything about [college town]. And it's like, well, I don't know where to live or where the safer parts of the area to live in like, I'm by myself and I don't necessarily want to like be in a place where I'm always have, I always have to like, watch my back. And she goes: "Oh, you should try the rustic village. Like a lot of your people can be found there and I think you'll fit in just fine". I was like, "yeah, my people" and she was like "yeah, you know, you'll feel, you'll feel okay there. They will remind you of like maybe home and stuff". And I was like, "thanks" and I walked away and I was, it's little things like that...

James described the racial climate and the support of a White ally after he spoke up about an issue within the program:

There was actually a White woman um, in there that defended me and was like, it's not like, you know, our place as White women to decide like what's racist and what's not umm. So I linked up with her after like, we're like- we've been chatting now. But she mentioned a term that I think this describes the environment very well, which is white comfort. And I was like, I think that's like, perfect, because it's like the environment in the classroom and like that meeting...

Angel also commented on the racial climate within her institution stating:

I wasn't prepared for, like, racism, but it's like very interesting what brand of racism, you see, in like that area of academia like small liberal arts schools...in graduate school, it's like, been harder, because it's not necessarily like the...like, the obvious things like, like, I don't even know, like saying thing. I don't, like saying slurs or something like that. But it's like, turning to certain students for certain answers to certain questions, things like that, that you see more, that I've seen more.

### **Imaginative Variation**

With the “what” or textural descriptions of the experiences established through themes generated by significant statements made by the participants, the next step in the transcendental phenomenological approach was the development of the imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences, emerged through the imaginative variation process and the incorporation of various sources of information which clarified how the phenomena have occurred (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The following section reflects a deeper explanation of the social, cultural and environmental contexts and remaining prominent themes identified in the previous sections of with focus on the institutional contexts of the CRC framework developed by Hurtado (1992).

### **Textural-Structural Descriptions**

The forthcoming descriptions reflect a consolidation of the final steps of phenomenological analysis, which are the development of structural descriptions and the

synthesis of all textural and structural meanings developed through the CRC lens, leading to the essence of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

**The Cultural Context of Belonging.** All five participants provided responses to the research questions citing the specific contexts within which they either struggled with belonging or felt that a sense belonging was available to them.

*Compositional Dimension.* The sparse numerical representation of Black students and faculty, serves as the primary context within which the participants situated themselves, as they prepared for the graduate student journey ahead of them. For example, Rainbow shared: "When I applied to these schools, I had this idea that regardless of where I go, majority of the people in that program will not be of color, like and that's just how it is in all graduate programs." Blanca and Angel discussed their participation or plans to engage in culture specific group settings outside of the counseling program, specifically for the Black community as a strategy to offset feelings of isolation, tokenism and to increase access to meaningful culturally relevant experiences and enriching community spaces. Blanca affirmed her commitment to building community among Black students stating:

I still am in the Black Graduate Student Association...it was just like integral to our like values and our mission and how we operated, to make sure that we were like doing things for and connected with the undergrad students. So you know, for mentorship to programming and stuff like that. So I saw that as really important for black, all black people to be aware of each other in some way, no matter what age.

Angel described the benefits of inclusion in an external group developed for Black counseling students to network with other Black counselors in the field:

I definitely appreciated when I was added to the Black counselors' group, because like we met once, but it was like- I got a job from it. I just felt like immediately, I have a very helpful tool... these are people who are also black that have also gone through this.

With regards to the more isolating experiences connected with the low numerical diversity within his program, James reported the following:

Like the fact that I do feel, kind of like othered makes- like puts me a weird spot. Like, I'm a very social person, I can make friends very easily... I grew up around all White people. So I uhhh, am very good at making White people like me, but I'm like, over that shit.

Rainbow also provides her perspectives on the issue of numerical diversity and how it is addressed within her institution:

I think it's this idea that if we have enough people who look different than the majority of the population on campus, then we've done our part, and you just end it there... and then there's all these other aspects that are not taken into consideration like, okay, you brought these different people here together, and then you're just like, mix, be happy, have fun. That's not the reality of how the world works in general.

***Historical Dimension.*** Blanca reflected on the difficulty of establishing a sense of belonging where institutional practices have historically been structured for the dominant culture as opposed to the marginalized groups occupying predominately White spaces:

When I think about schools, schools are... a system a microcosm of this world, right. And so when we see what goes on in schools and why Black students don't feel like they belong, it's because the, in the US context, it doesn't make you feel like you belong. Umm...especially in places that are, were created for White people, White men anyway you know? (Blanca)

With the historical context of the institution and its impact on belonging, campus climate and ultimately the climate within the counseling program in mind, the next section focuses on the residual effects of the relevant structural and historical elements present in the institution that play out in the social and behavioral interactions experienced by the participants.

## **The Social Context of Belonging**

Examples of fruitful social interactions were also discussed during the interviews, reflecting the complex social dynamics within the institution, which combined experiences of community and belonging with rejection and isolation for the participants. The specifics of these opposing phenomena will be framed through the lens of the participants' experiential knowledge as well as through the lens of the CRC framework's behavioral dimensions of the racial climate at their PWIs.

### ***Behavioral Dimension.***

Couched within the behavioral dimension of the counseling program climates, participants accessed peer interactions often through self-directed efforts made in facilitating group interactions or community with peers from similar backgrounds. Blanca stated that she needed to "lean into folks" attending the program, from urban communities with similar experiences to "transition through" the program. Angel echoed Blanca's sentiments stating:

"It just, it is valuable to befriend the other students of color in your class, your cohort, whatever, however, your program's structured. Because even if they're not necessarily going to be your best friend, it's... likely something's going to happen. And they're, at least you'd like know that they are there. And even if they don't experience it in the same way, like, you can still reach out to them."

In contrast to the statements made by Angel and Blanca, Rainbow shared her experience searching for culture specific belonging: "It's like, I belong here, but they won't accept me so then, like, where the heck do I go?". Angel also experienced support from non-Black peers in addressing problematic behaviors demonstrated by a professor. However, her experience was complicated by the nature of the support and the dubious intentions of students she believed were engaging in allyship because they "want it known" to her that they aren't racist. The following section explores the psychological dimension of these behaviors and experiences within the



context of the environment housing the programs attended by the participants, particularly during these challenging sociopolitical times.

### **The Environmental Context of Belonging**

Three of the five participants provided examples of the external environments and the spaces outside of their immediate programs, that are available for them to experience belonging, either due to existing or identifiable connections with the communities surrounding their PWI or partnerships that they have forged with these external resources. For example, the potential for locating belonging via “church or the gym”, along with spaces with increased access to the Black community, was cited by James as a substitution for the lack of connection or belonging that he might experience in his program. Angel discussed the school’s proximity to her hometown as an element that offered an imbedded sense of connection with the community surrounding the institution and the future client population that she desired to serve. Blanca described the importance of her affiliation with BGSA which served as a community or home base away from her hometown. The following represents an in-depth description of the environmental contexts as they relate to the psychological experiences of the participants.

***Psychological Dimension.*** “Spiritual warfare”, “not a safe place”, and descriptions of covert racism experienced by the participants, categorize many of their reactions to the environments in which they are situated while pursuing their counseling degrees. As Black students navigating predominately White spaces at a time when social and political tensions were heavily impacting Black and POC communities broadly in extremely visible ways, the institutional, peer and faculty responses to the presence of Black students in PWI spaces varied from overly reactive demonstrations of support to hostility and rejection.

In the following quote, Angel describes the experience of receiving support in this climate, while also questioning the intentions and mindsets of students offering apologies and extending belonging under the circumstances:

It is very interesting to see how quick most people at least in this environment, like jump to make sure you feel like you belong after something happens. Like, were like quick to come to your defense or like, text you one on one and apologize on behalf of a professor-like that type of thing. And it's very interesting to me because like, because in grad school is when I like most directly make... like experienced incidents like that. It's just so- it always like makes... it I don't know, I shouldn't laugh because they're trying to be nice. But it's just like, I don't understand really why you think your apology in any way, like makes up for the fact that that person just said that.

Blanca also provides poignant details about the environmental impact on her PWI experience specifically during her master's program, housing the PhD program that she currently attends:

When I think about myself, as a student, it's a sacrifice being out there, especially if I'm not from, you know, down the street or around the corner. Umm...I think that in the master's program...uhh...when you don't feel like you belong somewhere, it starts to manifest in different ways.

All of these complex and at times contradictory experiences ultimately hearken back to the recurring and most prominent theme throughout the study, which was that the institution was not a place where belonging could be accessed and maintained easily, nor was it the primary objective of the participants to do so given their awareness of the complicated social, cultural and environmental landscapes that they would by default be navigating in the context of their graduate school experiences at PWIs.

### **Program and PWI Critiques**

When presented with the scenario of a friend approaching them for advice about enrollment in their current counseling programs, participant responses ranged from “It’s ok if you’re a citizen”, to hesitation to recommend the program depending on the culture, identity and values of the friend inquiring about it. Out of all five participants, only one interviewee delivered

a firm “I would recommend my school’s counseling program”. These preliminary critiques of the programs were later followed by more global DEI and belonging issues at the participants’

PWIs. For example, Rainbow shared the following insights on DEI at her school:

I honestly, most of the times feel like it's for show. We have such and such populations, and everyone here belongs but then it's like, when you look at it, it's only for this one specific group of people that you're targeting... I think it's this idea that if we have enough people who look different than the majority of the population on campus, then we've done our part, and you just end it there...And then there's all these other aspects that are not taken into consideration like, okay, you brought these different people here together, and then you're just like, mix, be happy, have fun. That's not the reality of how the world works in general."

Some of the literature on DEI has emphasized similar points, by highlighting the error in PWIs dedicating most of their efforts to compositional diversity and the development of mission statements articulating DEI goals without demonstrating clear progress towards the stated goals (Garcia et al., 2021). Scholars on this issue stress the fact that visible statements focusing solely on diversity “focus on representation, position diverse individuals as outsiders...and appease the need to address diversity while remaining nonperformative.” (Iverson, 2012; Taylor et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2021). These issues are validated even further by the remarks offered by Blanca about compositional diversity struggles at her school and the potential for remediating gaps in belonging by requiring more conscientious and labor-intensive institutional work:

I wouldn't feel like I'd belong...just because someone's like, okay, we need to hire another black woman, and then the both of them should be okay. Umm...But I would feel like I'm more belonged in this setting, if, you know, the mindset and the foundation of things, you know, mirrored what I needed to thrive... So, I think it's really hard to think you're going to put together a task force for the next academic year, and then belonging will just shoot through the roof. Because that's not getting to the core, of the foundation.

Tasha cited the fact that there were “not enough Black people” at her institution, another factor rendering the school less appealing aside from its lack of financial resources available for international students. James lamented the silence of faculty members when faced with racially

situations resulting in the silencing of Black student voices and the maintenance of “White comfort” in the program as previously described. Finally, Angel emphasized the need for mindset shifts in professors “who are having difficulty transitioning to the new way the school is aiming to do things.”

### **DEI Recommendations for Program Administrators and University Stakeholders**

During the data collection phase of the study, participants were asked about their lived experiences of DEI measures at their PWIs broadly. They were also asked whether they would recommend their programs to others who may be interested in pursuing careers in counseling. These questions produced responses across participants, detailing their recommendations for their institutions, their experiences with DEI and critiques of the program related to belonging and DEI. The following discussion encompasses perspectives from participants on the failures of DEI and belonging initiatives along with their recommendations for improvement, supported by literature on the subject.

#### **Rainbow**

Rainbow described DEI concerns within the context of the campus and program environments, highlighting the fact that certain types of diversity are embraced or prioritized while others are not. For example, she emphasized the point that “diversity does not just mean people of color, there's people with disabilities, there's people who like all these different types of populations that are not being included and you just think, if this looks a little colorful for a little bit, then they'll back off and then we'll be fine.” Aside from racial diversity exclusively being an insufficient demonstration of true compositional diversity and DEI goal achievement, she argued that institutional words and outcomes must be congruent as a measure of successful belonging and diversity measures: “Maybe just put more actions behind the words that they're

putting out there. Additionally, in the spirit of evaluating institutional progress and measuring DEI success, Rainbow recommended the administration of a survey clarifying the belonging needs of the graduate student population, as opposed to developing DEI objectives arbitrarily or without student input.

If you really want us all to belong, and feel here, then put out a survey or ask people, ‘What is it that you need? What is it that you would like to see to make you feel like you belong here? Is there anything we could do; is there any, like how can [we] truly support you?’.

### **Blanca**

While her experience within the counseling program has holistically been framed positively based upon her recollections and current accounting, her experience of the campus and PWI and surrounding regional climate have left much to be desired. During the interview, Blanca highlighted the stark contrasts between actual diversity and the optics of diversity which have been lauded and by outside observers and institutions. As a result, she offered the following recommendations for more tangible and sustainable DEI and belonging implementation. In terms of establishing a more diverse study body, Blanca suggested HBCUs as a site for partnerships where Black students with an interest in a counseling career could be engaged and recruited. She also encouraged the recruitment of a more diverse pool of faculty that “represent more of like umm, what our US context is looking like, you know? And not so much context of the school.”

Blanca also presented a cohesive and layered recommendation for the institutional adoption of sustainable and tangible DEI changes. For example, she suggested that the “deep introspection of faculty members who are in a position of privilege” should become a consistent professional development strategy encouraging reflexivity, anti-racism, the intersectional awareness of Blackness in all its diversity, and a student-centered approach to DEI. She also recommended creating spaces and experiences centering Blackness outside of a “hangout spot”

for Black students to congregate. Within these spaces she asserted that the institution should be supportive of culture specific interests held by Black students allowing them to “feel safe to, to share that, perhaps their research and the communities they want to support are all underserved communities”. Finally with regards to the issue of compositional diversity and cultural encapsulation that remains in counseling programs and the field of holistically, she offers the following scenario for consideration in the name of true diversity, equity, and inclusion:

For umm decades, we've had just white students, and so that has put a gap on who's in the field and who's in the profession. So, it's okay, if the whole cohort is not white. I think that's scary to think, but if the whole cohort is white, and the doc program all white, nobody thinks much, or maybe just one token, person of color. And if the whole cohort in the master's program, is white with just two people of color, people don't think much. But if it was all black, all of color, people would be all uncomfortable, and they would have to wonder why they're uncomfortable. You know?

### **James**

With program climate serving as the central context for James’ counternarratives, he offered insights regarding the potential role of faculty in the enactment of DEI initiatives as well as his expectations for stakeholders. One faculty driven activity enumerated was the stimulation of cultural exchange honoring diversity:

It would be cool if uhh, like faculty in the program facilitated umm, I don't know whether that's the way we do assignments or breakout groups in like class or whatever but being intentional about it... like... pick somebody you don't know or pick somebody that's different from you and learn about them.

The next DEI strategy stressed the importance of authenticity and genuine investment in changing the racial climate of the program:

I feel like what I need from not just like faculty, but like, everyone is just like, transparency and authenticity. Umm, especially when it's something like as fragile as you know, like, racial issues, it's like... I would prefer it for everyone to just be like, upfront, like, if you're-and I feel like that starts with, like, you doing the own work in yourself.

This standard identified by James not only underscored the importance of sincere efforts by faculty, peers and stakeholders in addressing issues of race and DEI, but he also echoed the instructions laid out by Blanca as they related to introspection and self-directed, individual change. Finally, in another instance of alignment with other participant experiences, James detailed the impact of institutional standards and narratives not delivering the necessary levels of psychological or emotional safety and commitment to executing DEI initiatives thoroughly:

Don't...kind of like lead me on and like, give me hope and try to make me feel safe when you know, you don't have like, the capacity to follow through... Just like be like, very, very upfront [instead of] like... 'you know, we at this university are all about like, or this business diversity inclusion', and this, that and then, you know, drop the ball, it like hurts more...

In summary, the composite meanings attached to the DEI critiques and recommendations offered candid reflections on needs and strengths of their PWIs, including efforts in recognizing the differences present within the Black graduate student population.

### **Essence**

The findings of the study reveal the resounding message from each of the participants, that belonging was not only an ancillary goal of theirs, but an experience that was often undermined by social, institutional, and environmental factors present within the campus and program settings. With their subjective definitions of belonging offered, the aspirational tone with which they described belonging further emphasized the fact that they were not actively experiencing belonging within the context of the campus or their institutions broadly. It was clear that program climate as opposed to campus climate was most impactful in their accounts of their experiences at their PWIs, which could be in part because of the differences in the needs of graduate students in comparison to undergraduates and the time spent in residence on campus at the undergraduate level versus the more independent lifestyle of graduate students living off-

campus. Nonetheless, the program climate provided the primary context within which the participants described their PWI experience, the social and cultural contexts of belonging along with their experiences of racism and DEI initiatives.

The participants all identified their personal reasons for choosing the programs that they are currently attending. Regardless of whether the decision was based upon school ranking, location or financial considerations, the common and primary factor between them all was the prospect of accessing institutional benefits or resources that would enrich them professionally in the future or create opportunities for professional growth that would benefit their communities or chosen populations. The potential for cultural matching via peers and faculty members were not anticipated given the prominent cultural encapsulation of PWIs and the field of counseling, but the match was welcomed when available and was a proven source of comfort and belonging, particularly in spaces where the region housing the university was lacking in cultural diversity. Creating and seizing opportunities for belonging facilitated through partnerships with like-minded individuals, or faculty members and peers also served participants well in their counseling program journeys.

While racially charged instances of animus were not a part of their direct individual experiences, they were aware of the presence of racism in their environments along with their marginality in predominately white spaces. The participants expressed varying degrees of comfort negotiating their identities and engaging in self-advocacy when faced with microaggressions and conflicts within the context of their program climates. However, the most frequently cited source of support at the PWI was faculty not peers and when faculty wasn't supportive identifiable peers emerged as allies for many of the participants. Ultimately, the answer to the question whether belonging is enough for Black counseling students at PWIs, is



complex and lies in the definition of belonging, and what institutions are willing to do in order to meet the articulated needs of Black and POC students. If belonging entails the acknowledgement of institutional shortcomings in addressing DEI needs, along with the extension of genuine effort to create spaces that feel socially, culturally and physically accessible to Black students, then belonging as opposed to pragmatics may become a priority worth striving for in the eyes of the Black graduate students pursuing counseling degrees.

### **Reflexive Self-Analysis**

Traditional scientific research protocols emphasize the invisibility of the researcher as a standard practice in demonstrating objectivity (Smith, 2006). However, given the sensitive nature of data collection with participants from communities of color, transparency and reflexivity are strategies that I believe that researchers should avail themselves of while designing research initiatives, in advance of study design completion and throughout study execution. Valandra (2012) proposes a reflexive process of engagement in the research studies that focuses on the investigator's exploration of the self in relation to the study and its participants. This exercise in critical self-reflection is intended to deepen the researcher's understanding of their personal and professional experiences and worldviews, which then informs the selection of specific theoretical frameworks and methodologies to ground the work (Daley, 2010).

The concepts that emerge in this reflexive process, may also factor into the research questions, design and interactions with participants as well. Beyond implementing standard ethical practices to establish trust with the population engaged in the study, reflexivity allows investigators to anticipate and attend to any potential risks for participants or other procedural issues (Valandra, 2012). This process includes the accounting of potential power imbalances, as well as the impact that the research outcomes may yield for the community engaged in the

project (Daley, 2010). Additionally, areas of consideration that are often overlooked when researchers operate exclusively through a traditional scientific lens, are illuminated through the acknowledgement of the self in relation to the research exercise (Smith, 2006).

As previously stated, engaging in the study using the Critical Research Methodology proposed by Solorzano & Yosso (2002) reinforced the need for self-examination and reflexivity. Ensuring that I had an accounting of the personal views, stories, and experiential knowledge adjacent to the experiences of the participants, served as a vehicle for distinguishing between their narratives and my own (Kincheloe, J.L. & McLaren, P. (2005). This was accomplished by maintaining a reflexive journal capturing the memories and experiences that emerged throughout the recruitment, data collection and analysis phases of the study. Gathering these reflexive reports heightened my awareness of the biases I held as well as my proximity to the research participants, therefore enhancing the execution of my research methods and protocols as a result of the clarity gained through the journaling process.

### **Trustworthiness & Verification Methods**

In addition to the reflexivity process outlined in the previous section, steps enumerated by Shenton (2004) were adopted for the purpose of demonstrating credibility therefore establishing the trustworthiness of the study. The specific credibility strategies employed included triangulation, external auditing and member checks, which are described in the subsections below.

#### **Triangulation**

The first strategy adopted in the spirit of trustworthiness, was the triangulation of qualitative data through the administration of the initial quantitative screening tool. While primarily deployed as a recruitment tool, the survey questions elicited responses from

participants which provided a snapshot of the responses that could be expanded upon and clarified through the qualitative interviews. The data was also compared between respondents ascertaining the most appropriate participants for study inclusion and possible follow-up questions for the interview process as well.

### **External Auditing**

In observance of trustworthiness strategies offered by Shenton (2004), I enlisted the support of two external auditors, one Counselor Educator and one Counselor Education PhD candidate, who reviewed the transcripts of the data collected, along with the corresponding data tables which presented the significant statements, textural descriptions and themes identified by the researcher. Frequent debriefing meetings were conducted based upon the availability of one or the other auditor during the data collection and analysis phases of the study. The discussions revolved around the application of additional transcendental phenomenological reduction strategies and the legitimacy of emergent themes highlighted in the tables.

### **Member Checks**

Participants of the study were included in the establishment of credibility by engaging in member checks. This process entailed the dissemination of the interview transcripts to the participants for review and correction as needed. Each of the five participants were emailed copies of the transcript and I received two responses confirming the accuracy of the data.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND STUDY IMPLICATIONS**

Understanding the lived experiences of a sample of the Black graduate student population enrolled in counseling degree programs was the primary goal of the study. However, what emerged in conjunction with the counternarratives shared was pointed information regarding the strengths and needs of PWIs, the specific experiences that disrupted DEI and the individuals involved in either generating or undermining access to belonging. The following discussion makes meaning of the study findings, highlights study limitations, implications for the field of counseling broadly and recommendations for future research concluding the discussion.

### **Findings Through the Lens of CRC**

A thorough analysis of the experiences shared by each of the participants, led to an in-depth understanding of what their experiences of belonging and campus climate consisted of and how they were constructed. The analysis also affirmed the ways in which the CRC framework applied to the counseling program spaces and experiences for the participants. Contrasted with the participant reported social, environmental, and cultural contexts of belonging, incorporating the CRC framework further contextualized the significant themes and textural descriptions of the phenomena. The applicable campus climate dimensions applied are four out of the five elements defined in the CRC theoretical framework by Hurtado et al. (1998). These include the historical, compositional, psychological, and behavioral dimensions of CRC.

Of the three contexts described by the participants, the cultural context of belonging was a significant element of their disclosures. The interviews revealed many nuances and complexities of the described cultural experiences. This included the navigation of immigrant and international student identities, the benefits of Black and POC specific group affiliation and networks, along with the resultant anger experienced due to the “tokenizing” of Black students.

The compositional, historical, behavioral, and psychological dimensions of CRC are reflections of institutional issues facilitating the complicated belonging experiences described and are utilized in the following sections explaining the systems and challenges that the students are navigating at PWIs.

The compositional dimension of CRC is evident in the participant narratives of knowing that they “won’t fit in”, “diversity is an issue in the field of counseling,” “there aren’t enough Black people” in counseling programs and that they will “always be the minority at a PWI”. This by default renders the search for belonging and perhaps the desire for it, an experience to pursue with trepidation, if all. As emphasized by Hurtado et al. (1998) the reality of limited Black and other POC student representation in higher education has resulted in the tokenization and alienation of underrepresented group members attending PWIs (p. 287). The participants further validate the literature in their accounts of the efforts made to create their own communities and derive experiences of belonging outside of their respective programs and even outside of the university given their awareness of the lack of Black representation within the institution.

In consideration of the historical dimensions of CRC, it is important to note that each of the PWIs attended by the study participants, were established prior to the desegregation of schools and public spaces in the U.S. In fact, two of the participant schools were established during slavery (1619-1865), with the other two schools sampled, established during reconstruction (up to 1898) and Jim Crow (from the early 1900’s through 1955) (Shaw & Adolphe, 2019). According to Hurtado et al. (1998), the institutional roots of inclusion and exclusion can play a role in the present-day dynamics and climate of the PWI. It is not surprising that given the history of school segregation in the U.S., and the value attached to higher education, specifically PWIs, that cultural encapsulation persists and filters into individual

programs and institutions impacting the climate in ways that are not congruent with the cultural needs of the few Black graduate students in attendance.

The behavioral dimension of campus climate identified by the CRC framework, asserts that intergroup dynamics are influential in the formation and maintenance of campus climate. The participants affirmed this theory in their descriptions of the behaviors they have encountered in interactions with peers and faculty members and the impact on their sense of belonging. One of the participants specifically cited an experience of hostility felt while on campus, while other participants emphasized the notable differences between the climate within their counseling programs versus the climate on campus. Details about “feeling connected to the program versus the campus” and feeling great in the context of the smaller program environment but noticing that “something’s not really right here” when examining the larger campus, provided introductions to the social context and behaviors that they would encounter shaping some of their perspectives on the program and campus climates.

With the participants’ awareness of their persistent minority status, the importance of developing relationships with Black and POC students that they were able to connect with, was stressed as a vehicle for support in predominately white spaces. While some participants identified individuals with shared culture, history or experience as the first line of defense in environments where “White Savior” complexes and the maintenance of racism through “White comfort” abounded, other participants detailed difficulties in connecting with peers across cultures. At times the disconnect was due to a lack of attachment to the peer group given cultural differences, along with little reciprocation or work on the part of peers to join with them in building community. The experiences shared by Tasha, James and Rainbow highlighted the prevalence of isolation and even non-belonging that they have felt from peers in their programs

given various features of their identities such as differences in age, cultural group affiliation and international student status. Additionally, multiple participants indicated a lack of unity even amongst the small number of Black students at times, rendering the search for a place to belong even more complicated.

The psychological dimension of CRC serves as a vehicle for exploring the presence of “institutional responses to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, and attitudes toward those from other racial/ethnic backgrounds than one’s own” in contrast with the perceptions of individuals exposed to these elements (Hurtado et al., 1998). The external environment housing the participants’ schools and the impact of the environment on their perceptions of belonging was described during their interviews along with details of stressors and psychological factors that were created by the institutional climate, making belonging in the broader campus or community context untenable. As the participants shared reflections on the structural and behavioral dynamics present in their program environments, the psychological impact of their interactions with peers and faculty, along with the external influences shaping the climate within and surrounding their universities are evident in their descriptions of emotional responses and frustrations related to these experiences.

The “spiritual warfare” manifestations that Blanca referred to were related to her process of negotiating the isolation of living in a remote region outside of her urban comfort zone, in a program that also felt grounding and enriching. Meanwhile, social elements of her environmental surroundings, including the public voting record of the area during the 2016 presidential election, indicated a troubling regional alignment with a political movement undermining the safety of her community members, specifically Black and Brown people who did not “come from wealth” and who embodied multiple oppressed identities. All of these complex and at times contradictory

experiences ultimately hearken back to the recurring and most prominent theme throughout the study, which was that the institution was not a place where belonging could be accessed and maintained easily, nor was it the primary objective of the participants to do so given their awareness of the complicated social, cultural and environmental landscapes that they would by default be navigating in the context of their graduate school experiences at PWIs.

### **Study Limitations**

The Black community is an amalgamation of many distinct ethnic and cultural identities and expressions. As underscored by the participants, it is not a monolithic culture, nor can it be reduced to a single experience of way of being. As a result of the design of the study and the need to establish an operational definition of Blackness for recruitment purposes, it was difficult to capture all of the diversity and all intersections of the Black community with such a small sample. For example, questions were confined to the experience of belonging as a Black counseling student attending a PWI, without delving into the impact of religion, gender identity, sexual orientation and class on the phenomenon.

One participant provided feedback regarding the recruitment experience and use of the climate survey as a screen tool. She remarked that the Black international student experience was an element not accounted for in the design of the study, but ought to be included. Not only did I agree, but I would argue that an entire study could be dedicated exclusively to the international student community, given the features of their ethnic and cultural experiences that are distinct from the those of domestic students who may have been born in the U.S. Her comments also reflect another layer of the intricate tapestry that forms the Black experience in America.

Finally, in acknowledgment of the work regularly done by Black students, specifically as it relates to DEI, belonging, oppression and racialized experiences in this tense sociopolitical



moment, it was my desire to avoid participant exhaustion or the experience of additional labor through study engagement. This was attempted by reducing the interview times from two hours each, to one hour with a stipulation that ninety-minute sessions would be the maximum amount of time requested for the interview. Additionally, participants were not asked for follow-up interviews nor were they engaged in member checking activities other than transcript review. This consisted of outreach to each of the participants requesting any substantive changes or additions to the transcribed data. This yielded the responses from two out of the five participants and no additions or clarifications about the content of the interviews.

While additional contacts may have been beneficial, the feedback from the preliminary recruitment process revealed that many students were already feeling overwhelmed with course requirements and unable to commit to multiple or lengthy contacts. It was extremely challenging to secure five participants and one of the five provided retrospective responses to questions about her master's program while offering current perspectives as a Counselor Education doctoral student. It is unclear whether focus groups or additional data collection strategies would have produced more rich descriptions of the phenomena, but future funded studies could explore this possibility by offering greater monetary incentives and expanding the recruitment region securing a larger sample size.

### **Implications for the Counseling Field**

The issues presented in the study due to the open and honest disclosures of the participants, provided a snapshot of many challenges facing the graduate population of Black students pursuing degrees in counseling. Whether there are difficulties in connecting with faculty members and peers due to cultural differences, the lack of diversity in the field, or other systemic issues intentionally or unintentionally restricting access to professional resources for minoritized

students, the presence of these barriers can impact recruitment and retention efforts for counseling programs, along with Black and POC clinician representation in the field holistically. For example, students may choose other fields within the helping professions or if enrolled in counseling programs, they may not matriculate if their needs are not properly met, and stakeholders seem ill-equipped to address them. If this failure to attract and support students of color in the field does in fact effect retention, this will also negatively impact the increased client demands for practitioners of color for client matching purposes (Griner & Smith, 2006). Therefore, clients who feel more comfortable working with a professional with shared heritage or identity, may choose not to engage in services due to the lack of culturally congruent or POC practitioners available in the field.

Another revelation offered by the students was the idea that the many current initiatives centering institutional definitions of belonging and DEI were missing the mark. The majority of the participants reported that belonging was not the first thing on their minds when deciding which programs to attend and more pragmatic, professional concerns were more prominent in their decision-making processes. Therefore, it may be necessary for schools to consider a shift in their approaches to meeting the needs of the Black student population as opposed to doing what they believe is most pressing or relevant despite student counternarratives to the contrary. If a sense of belonging is not developed through social events, town hall meetings and other popular DEI initiatives, then understanding what is important to students should be the primary goal.

The importance of student-centered approaches to institutional reform is not a new concept, however the idea that engaging Black students in this process of change may be exhausting or taxing to them, deserves greater attention. Many of the participants described varying levels of self-care and protection required when engaging in DEI conversations or when

presented with racially charged situations. They also discussed the discomfort experienced when they have been tokenized or labelled the representatives of their cultures or race. The context of these stressors may be the classroom or experienced in individual interactions with faculty, staff or peers, but regardless of the location they occur within the institutional setting despite declarations of respect for the diversity represented on campus.

In the same way that counselors must dedicate themselves to exploring and understanding the cultures of their diverse client populations that they serve, counseling program faculty, stakeholders and institutional leaders, ought to mirror this culturally responsive standard. Engaging in work to create psychological safe and welcoming environments for students, should not further disenfranchise the Black or POC student population. They should not be the only stewards of change, nor should they single-handedly be responsible for the success or failure of DEI and belonging initiatives. Properly evaluating the efficacy of initiatives targeting sense of belonging amongst Black counseling students would help move DEI strategies beyond conversations to concrete steps forward.

Tools such as the survey adapted for this study would support the collection of data around the program climate needs and strengths, while also illuminating whether or not programming and strategies previously executed had been successful in promoting psychological safety and belonging for students historically disenfranchised. This would also move the bulk of the work away from Black students and other underrepresented groups to the stakeholders analyzing and making meaning of the data accrued from the surveys. As more resources are being developed and additional strategies for supporting Black graduate students are established, understanding the professional goals and needs of the population would help refine the implementation of student-centered programming. One example would be matching Black

graduate students to faculty members for research opportunities and mentorship at the same rate of their White counterparts. This would communicate that faculty are not only invested in the development of their students across cultures, but believe in the scholarly abilities of Black students, who may have been overlooked in academic spaces due to stereotypes about their intellectual skills. Finally, faculty showing up at conferences and other events where their Black students are showcasing their work would also communicate care for the students, interest in their projects and promote a sense of institutional belonging as faculty members serve as representatives of the university.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The execution of this study and the feedback shared by the students participating in it, offered many lessons which have informed the following recommendations. The most important takeaway for me as a researcher was the importance of compensation. Black students and Black people broadly have expended an incalculable amount of time, effort and energy towards the dismantling of oppressive systems, the improvement of race relations and the transformation of society as we know it. Asking for their continued contributions, input and labor must accompany benefits and tangible gains honoring their sacrifices. Therefore, research participants representing communities of color and other marginalized groups must be paid for their time and appropriately credited for the roles that they play in moving science, society and culture forward.

With respect to the replication of the study, it would be incredibly valuable to gain access to the stories of other groups impacted by DEI and belonging initiatives. How are different intersections of the Black community reflected in the process of educational policy development with inclusion in mind? How are the stories of less visible marginalized groups accounted for and what do they prioritize in their counseling program experiences when compared with their

White or other group counterparts? Being able to increase the sample size by including different graduate programs in multiple regions of the country and even the international community would significantly enhance an area of the literature that is not well represented.

Finally expanding the research questions to examine the curricular needs of students from underrepresented groups attending PWIs, would also be a fruitful study. While only one of the participants in the current study discussed the need for educational resources centering the Black experience, the importance of access to multi-cultural counseling theories, interventions and tools cannot be overstated. Particularly given the overrepresentation of Black and Brown communities in documented health disparities across the nation (Durrah et al., 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The prevailing narrative that issues of race, diversity, equity and inclusion are moot for Black people in modern society, particularly outside of the American south is inaccurate. Issues of diversity, equity and inclusion have persisted and are not confined to specific regions of the country. They are sprinkled throughout the U.S. with the south consistently serving as the barometer of progress and change given its history of violent systemic racism, segregation and injustice. Furthermore, as evidenced by the narratives offered by the Black graduate student participants attending programs in the northeastern region of the U.S., areas credited with more liberal stances and populations are afflicted with the remnants of social injustice rooted in a history of oppression that has yet to be reconciled (Brondolo et al. 2012; Matthews & McGovern, 2015).

Given the literature amplifying the experiences of isolation, nonbelonging, and rejection endured by students of color and Black students specifically at PWIs, institutions of higher learning have work to do to reverse these trends (Moore & Bell, 2017). However, the work ahead

for university stakeholders eager to implement effective DEI strategies, is not linear nor is it without complexity. The definition of belonging varies substantively from participant to participant, but compositely the need for the acknowledgment of diversity, access to opportunities for professional and personal growth, community ties and culturally relevant experiences are the hallmarks of their experiences and needs within the context of the counseling program. In a literature review of twelve studies conducted by Barnett (2020), among the key findings were the pivotal roles that faculty members and university stakeholders can play in administration of effective DEI reform in their institutions. Curriculum changes, a commitment to the disruption of hostile or microaggressive educational climates by modeling inclusive behavior are among the strategies prescribed for the purpose of “doing more than paying lip service” to DEI needs (p.29).

Many of the participants of the current study were also equipped with recommended solutions specific to DEI and belonging shortcomings present at their PWIs and counseling programs. They may not all have experienced feelings of inclusion, understanding and comfort in every space that they have navigated on campus and within their programs, however they all agreed that there are some opportunities available through their PWIs that have eclipsed the need for a sense of belonging. Effective DEI approaches require a consortium of efforts and student-centered strategies as opposed to initiatives that are most convenient for the majority, faculty, and institutional partners. A one size fits all approach to meeting the needs of Black and POC populations is not only insufficient, but harmful.

Introspection, the deconstruction of organizational norms and values that center dominant groups and are rooted in problematic historical practices of exclusion, are among the prescribed remedies for complacency and continued DEI failure. University stakeholders dedicated to

institutional change, may find the stories shared and recommendations made by the students daunting, but hopefully they will find themselves equally inspired by the courage and vulnerability displayed by the student participants of the study. Ideally, access to belonging could be prioritized and accessible for all students across cultures, genders, and identities. Whether or not this idealistic pursuit becomes an actual element of the PWI experience offered to students across cultures remains the work of the institutions of higher learning proclaiming their commitment to this reality. The courageous participants of this study and many others have generously offered not only a road map, but a light for university stakeholders and policy makers who are treading the often-obscure waters of educational reform and social change. Their hope is that the advice offered will be heeded and that the stories will be honored in the process, benefiting future students who will embark on journeys in similar spaces.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

Erin Durrah

Counselor Education and Supervision, University of Arkansas

Department of Rehabilitation, Human Resources and Communication Disorders, University of  
Arkansas

#### Recruitment Email

My name is Erin Durrah, I am a Black female, PhD Candidate in Counselor Education at the University of Arkansas recruiting participants for an upcoming study. I would like to explore the ways in which African-American/Black master's level graduate students relate to the concept of belonging within their respective counseling programs and how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures implemented at their institutions impact their graduate experiences. Understanding whether belonging is enough and prioritizing student perspectives on the meaning of belonging, the utility of DEI initiatives and their impact, will help clarify the needs of the population as well as inform the development of more effective student focused practices within counseling departments.

#### **In order to qualify for the study students must:**

1. Identify as African American or Black.
2. Currently attend a CACREP accredited master's level counseling degree program.
3. Be enrolled in a counseling program in one of the following states: Delaware, D.C., N.Y. or Pennsylvania.

#### **Participation:**

If you meet these criteria, please consider taking the following online survey 15–20-minute survey and you will be entered in a drawing to receive a \$15 Amazon gift card even if you do not participate in the full study. I will send a follow-up email to schedule virtual interviews with participants who qualify for the full study. You may choose to participate via Zoom in either an individual interview or focus group where you will be asked to share your perspectives on themes of belonging and the Black graduate experience at a predominately white institution. Those who participate in interviews will be entered into an additional drawing, to receive a \$75 Amazon gift card.

Students have the right to withdraw their participation at any point during the study for any reason. Anyone with follow-up questions or concerns about the study may contact me at [edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu) or consult with my faculty advisor Dr. Kristin Higgins, PhD, LPC-S [kkhigi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhigi@uark.edu). The study has been approved by the University of Arkansas, IRB

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Erin Durrah, LMFT

## Appendix B

### Study Informed Consent (First Round)

Investigator: Erin Durrah, LMFT

University of Arkansas

[edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Kristin Higgins, PhD, LPC-S

University of Arkansas

[kkhigi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhigi@uark.edu)

**Study Description:** The purpose of the study is to amplify the experiences of African American/Black graduate students obtaining degrees in counseling at a time when communities of color and other marginalized groups are facing a considerable amount of racial violence and intolerance. Inviting and empowering students to share experiences regarding the impact of race related social dynamics at their predominately white campuses and within the counseling program is the primary goal of the study, along with clarifying the ways in which these dynamics can impact both belonging and the implementation of DEI programming.

**Study Details:** Prior to engaging in the full study, you will be asked to participate in a 15–20-minute demographic survey, containing questions about identity and your current experiences while attending your program. You will be entered in a drawing for a receive a \$15 gift card via email after completing the survey. If you have been selected for participation in the full study, it is because you have expressed an interest in discussing your experiences in greater depth, and you have qualified based upon your identification as a Black or African American counseling graduate student attending a CACREP accredited master’s program in one of the following states (D.C., DE, NY, PA).

In advance of the interview, you will be asked to decide whether you would like to participate in either an individual semi-structured interview, or a dyadic interview format. Both options will be facilitated online via Zoom by the principal investigator and will take 90-120 minutes. The research process has been designed using various forms of media to allow you to explore your experiences related to belonging, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures on campus and within your counseling program. Once all qualitative data collected during the interview has been transcribed, you will receive an email from the investigator with an accounting of the themes and narratives for your review and feedback, should you choose to offer any additional insights or corrections.

**Confidentiality & Rights:** The study is being conducted exclusively through the University of Arkansas and participant anonymity is of utmost importance. No harm to any participant is anticipated due to engagement in the study, however you have the right to discontinue your participation in the study at any time for any reason. All data collected for the study will be de-identified, then stored securely using Box. The interview will be recorded via Zoom, with the audio and visual data destroyed after three years. Individually identifiable data will not be disseminated or reported to any of the participating counseling programs. Additionally, pseudonyms will be provided for you to choose from to identify yourself throughout the study.

Those who participate in interviews will be entered into a drawing, to receive a \$75 Amazon gift card at the end of the interview. If you have read the details of the study fully and agree to all of the terms, please print your name and sign (e-signature is acceptable), then place an “x” next the statement either confirming or declining your participation. Please feel free to contact Ms. Durrah at your convenience if you have any questions or concerns about the study at any time and thank you in advance for your interest and participation in the study!

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the study and understand that I have the right to discontinue my participation at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_ I decline participation in the study at this time.



## Appendix C

### Study Informed Consent (Second Round)

Investigator: Erin Durrah, LMFT

University of Arkansas

[edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Kristin Higgins, PhD, LPC-S

University of Arkansas

[kkhigi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhigi@uark.edu)

**Study Description:** The purpose of the study is to amplify the experiences of African American/Black graduate students obtaining degrees in counseling at a time when communities of color and other marginalized groups are facing a considerable amount of racial violence and intolerance. Inviting students to share experiences regarding the impact of race related social dynamics at their predominately white campuses and within the counseling program is the primary goal of the study, along with clarifying the ways in which these dynamics can impact both belonging and the implementation of DEI programming.

**Study Details:** Prior to engaging in the full study, you will be asked to participate in a 15–20-minute demographic survey, containing questions about identity and your current experiences while attending your program. You will be entered in a drawing for a receive a \$15 gift card via email after completing the survey. If you have been selected for participation in the full study, it is because you have expressed an interest in discussing your experiences in greater depth and based upon your identification as a Black or African American counseling graduate student attending a CACREP accredited master’s program in one of the following states (D.C., DE, NY, PA).

In advance of the interview, you will be asked to decide whether you would like to participate in either an individual semi-structured interview, or a dyadic interview format. Both options will be facilitated online via Zoom by the principal investigator and will take 60-90 minutes. The research process has been designed using various forms of media to allow you to explore your experiences related to belonging, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures on campus and within your counseling program. Once all qualitative data collected during the interview has been transcribed, you will receive an email from the investigator with an

accounting of the themes and narratives for your review and feedback, should you choose to offer any additional insights or corrections.

**Confidentiality & Rights:** The study is being conducted exclusively through the University of Arkansas and participant anonymity is of utmost importance. No harm to any participant is anticipated due to engagement in the study, however you have the right to discontinue your participation in the study at any time for any reason. All data collected for the study will be de-identified, then stored securely using Box. The interview will be recorded via Zoom, with the audio and visual data destroyed after transcription. Individually identifiable data will not be disseminated or reported to any of the participating counseling programs. Additionally, pseudonyms will be provided for you to choose from to identify yourself throughout the study.

Those who participate in interviews will be entered into a drawing, to receive a \$75 Amazon gift card at the end of the interview. If you have reviewed the details of the study fully and agree to all of the terms, please provide verbal consent or denial, confirming or declining your participation. Please feel free to contact Ms. Durrah or her faculty advisor Dr. Kristin Higgins ([kkhiggi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhiggi@uark.edu)) at your convenience if you have any questions about the study at any time. You may also contact Ro Windwalker, the University of Arkansas, IRB Compliance Coordinator, at 479-575-2208 or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu) if you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant. Thank you in advance for your interest and participation in the study!

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Flyer (Round One)

**Study Participants Needed for Interview!!!**

**Is Belonging the Answer?**

Seeking Black counseling student perspectives on belonging and their experiences at PWIs.

How do diversity initiatives at your school impact your sense of belonging?

**Qualifying Students:**

- Identify as Black/African American
- Attend a CACREP accredited master's counseling program in CT, DC, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI

**Details:**

**Step #1**  
Complete a 15-20 min survey

**Step #2**  
Complete a 60-90 min follow-up interview

You will be entered in a drawing for a chance to win a \$75 Amazon Card after you complete the interview

**[CLICK HERE TO TAKE THE SURVEY](#)**

Questions? Contact: Erin Durrah, Principal Investigator (edurrah@uark.edu)

STUDY APPROVED BY  
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS IRB

## Appendix E

### Recruitment Flyer (Round Two)

**Paid Study Participants Needed for Interview!!!**

**Is Belonging the Answer?**

**Seeking Black counseling student perspectives on belonging and their experiences at PWIs.**

**How do diversity initiatives at your school impact your sense of belonging?**

**Qualifying Students:**

- Identify as Black/African American
- Attend a master's counseling program in CT, DC, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI

**Details:**

**Step #1**  
Complete a 15-20 min survey


**Step #2**  
Complete a 60-90 min follow-up interview

You receive a \$50 Amazon Card after you complete the interview

**[CLICK HERE TO TAKE THE SURVEY](#)**

Questions? Contact: Erin Durrah, Principal Investigator (edurrah@uark.edu)

STUDY APPROVED BY  
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS IRB



## Appendix F

### Study Informed Consent (Third Round)

Investigator: Erin Durrah, LMFT

University of Arkansas

[edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Kristin Higgins, PhD, LPC-S

University of Arkansas

[kkhigi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhigi@uark.edu)

**Study Description:** The purpose of the study is to amplify the experiences of African American/Black graduate students obtaining degrees in counseling at a time when communities of color and other marginalized groups are facing a considerable amount of racial violence and intolerance. Inviting students to share experiences regarding the impact of race related social dynamics at their predominately white campuses and within the counseling program is the primary goal of the study, along with clarifying the ways in which these dynamics can impact both belonging and the implementation of DEI programming.

**Study Details:** Prior to engaging in the full study, you will be asked to participate in a 15–20-minute demographic survey, containing questions about identity and your current experiences while attending your program. If you have been selected for participation in the full study, it is because you have expressed an interest in discussing your experiences in greater depth and based upon your identification as a Black or African American counseling graduate student attending a CACREP accredited master’s program in one of the following states (D.C., DE, NY, PA).

In advance of the interview, you will be asked to decide whether you would like to participate in either an individual semi-structured interview, or a dyadic interview format. Both options will be facilitated online via Zoom by the principal investigator and will take 60-90 minutes. The research process has been designed using various forms of media to allow you to explore your experiences related to belonging, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures on campus and within your counseling program. Once all qualitative data collected during the interview has been transcribed, you will receive an email from the investigator with an accounting of the themes and narratives for your review and feedback, should you choose to offer any additional insights or corrections.

**Confidentiality & Rights:** The study is being conducted exclusively through the University of Arkansas and participant anonymity is of utmost importance. No harm to any participant is anticipated due to engagement in the study, however you have the right to discontinue your participation in the study at any time for any reason. All data collected for the study will be de-identified, then stored securely using Box. The interview will be recorded via Zoom, with the audio and visual data destroyed after transcription. Individually identifiable data will not be

disseminated or reported to any of the participating counseling programs. Additionally, pseudonyms will be provided for you to choose from to identify yourself throughout the study.

Those who participate in interviews will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card at the end of the interview. If you have reviewed the details of the study fully and agree to all of the terms, please provide verbal consent or denial, confirming or declining your participation. Please feel free to contact Ms. Durrah or her faculty advisor Dr. Kristin Higgins ([kkhiggi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhiggi@uark.edu)) at your convenience if you have any questions about the study at any time. You may also contact Ro Windwalker, the University of Arkansas, IRB Compliance Coordinator, at 479-575-2208 or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu) if you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant. Thank you in advance for your interest and participation in the study!

## Appendix G

Project Name	Grad Student Belonging in Counseling Programs
Survey Version	Black/African American Student
Project Number	F2021
Study Dates	November 2021-April 2022

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### Notes:

- Please complete all required sections of the online survey. All other questions are optional.
- Participation in the survey may be discontinued at any time.
- Participant data collected will be stored without any identifying information.

---

### Invitation to Participate in Study

As a Black female doctoral student in Counselor Education at the University of Arkansas and licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, the principal investigator of the study seeks to amplify the experiences of African American/Black graduate students obtaining degrees in counseling at a time when communities of color and other marginalized groups are facing a considerable amount of racial violence and intolerance. The following survey is designed to invite participation in an in-depth individual interview or a dyad to collect qualitative data regarding student experiences related to belonging and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures on campus and within their respective counseling programs. Understanding whether belonging is enough and prioritizing student perspectives on the meaning of belonging, the utility of DEI initiatives and their impact will help clarify the needs of the population as well as inform the development of more effective student focused practices within counseling departments. Inviting and empowering students to share experiences regarding the impact of race related social dynamics at their predominately white campuses and within the counseling classroom is the primary goal of the study along with clarifying the ways in which these dynamics can impact both belonging and the implementation of DEI programming.

The study is being conducted exclusively through the University of Arkansas and participant anonymity is of utmost importance. Students may choose to discontinue their participation in the study at any time for any reason. All data collected for the study will be de-identified, then stored securely using encryption. Individually identifiable data will not be disseminated or reported to any of the participating counseling programs. The questionnaire should take approximately 15-

20 minutes to complete and has been adapted from the University of Michigan/Sound Rocket “Campus Climate Survey”.

After survey completion, you will be entered in a drawing for a \$15 gift card and may receive an email from the Principal Investigator of the study Erin Durrah, ([edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu)) for a follow-up interview. If you are interested in sharing your experiences further a \$25 gift card will be provided at the end of the interview. If you have any questions, please contact Ms. Durrah at your convenience.

Thank you in advance for your interest and participation in the study!

Please click “Next” to begin the screening process.

## **Consent to Participate**

### **Grad Student Belonging in Counseling Programs Survey Information**

- Participation in the survey is completely voluntary and you may revoke consent at any time.
- You will be asked demographic questions as well as questions about your current experiences while attending your program.
- The information that you provide may be helpful in strengthening interventions and programming intended to support Black students and members of other ethnic and cultural groups in the future.
- The survey takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.
- You will be entered in a drawing for a receive a \$15 gift card via email after completing the survey. Please allow 5-10 business days for the gift card to be sent and be sure to check junk and spam folders.
- The project is funded by the University of Arkansas.
- The data collected will be available through de-identified reports and summaries for various organizations and stakeholders to view. The data may also appear in publications; however, your information will not be linked to the data in ways that will identify you.
- If at any point you have questions about the research process, data analysis or use of data please don’t hesitate to contact the Erin Durrah ([edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu)), Principal Investigator.
- If at any point during the study, you have questions about resources to address civil rights grievances or difficult experiences related to the topic please contact your Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion campus representative to discuss matters further including reporting resources.
- For appointments to discuss other personal matters in a confidential space, please contact your campus based Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office.

If you agree with the details provided, please click “Next” to continue with the survey.



BELONGING SURVEY: PART I

Demographic Information

1. Please indicate your age

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2. Please indicate your preferred gender identity

---

3. Please indicate your race/ethnicity preference (include all that apply)

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- African American/Black
- Asian American/Asian
- Hispanic/Latino/a/x
- Middle Eastern/North African
- Native American/Alaskan Native
- Native Hawaiian
- White
- Other

4. Do you have a disability?

---

- Yes, (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- No

5. What is your country of origin?

---

6. Are you a first-generation college graduate?

---

- Yes
- No

7. Do you identify with any religion? If so, please indicate below

---

8. Are you currently enrolled in a master's level counseling program?

---

9. Please indicate your current year in the program

---

- 1<sup>st</sup> year
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year

Belonging Survey: Part 2

1. Which of the following schools do you attend?

---

- School X
- School Y
- School Z
- School Q

2. Have you attended any classes on campus in the last 12 months?

---

- Yes
- No

3. How would you rate your overall level of satisfaction with the campus climate/environment within the last 12 months?

---

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied

4. Have you attended any online classes in the last 12 months?

---

- Yes
- No

5. How would you rate your overall level of satisfaction with the virtual classroom climate within the last 12 months?

---

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied

6. Please select any of the following adjectives that you believe represents your current academic institution

---

- HostileFriendly
- RacistAntiracist
- HomogenousDiverse
- WelcomingUnwelcoming
- ElitistNon-Elitist
- ExclusiveInclusive
- BiasedNon-Biased
- UnsupportiveSupportive
- AgeistNon-Ageist
- AbleistNon-Ableist

7. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, based on your personal experiences in the last 12 months as a Black graduate student.

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither Agree nor Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
<b>I am still looking for community here</b>					
<b>I feel that I belong here</b>					
<b>I feel connected to the campus community</b>					
<b>I feel connected to my program peers</b>					
<b>I regret my decision in coming to this school</b>					
<b>I am treated with respect</b>					
<b>There is a strong commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion</b>					
<b>I do not feel that I belong here</b>					
<b>I have felt isolated here</b>					
<b>My opinions are not valued here</b>					
<b>My culture is well represented here</b>					

8. In general, do you feel that you are treated in the same way as your peers in and outside of the classroom setting?

---

• Yes

• No, please explain \_\_\_\_\_

9. Have you experienced any perceived racial discrimination in your program in the past 12 months?

---

• Yes

• No

10. Would you be interested in discussing the experiences that you have shared, further one-on-one in a confidential virtual space facilitated by a Black Counselor Education doctoral student?

---

• Yes

• No

**Thank you for your participation! We greatly appreciate your time.**

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Please provide the best email address for you to receive the \$15 gift certificate, if you are selected in the drawing. (Please allow 5-10 business days for the gift card to be sent and be sure to check junk and spam folders.)

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the study, please contact Erin Durrah, Principal Investigator, [edurrah@uark.edu](mailto:edurrah@uark.edu).

## Appendix H

### Study Protocol-Media Presentation for Study Engagement

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey portion of the study and agreeing to participate in the interview. The goal in inviting you to share your experiences on the impact of race related social dynamics at your PWI and within your counseling program is to try to highlight unique elements of the experience specific to Black graduate students in the Northeastern region of the U.S. By discussing ways in which these dynamics emerge, we can deepen our understanding of the impact of campus racial climate on both belonging and the implementation of DEI programming within counseling programs.

Our interview process will consist of the following: a presentation of two brief video clips along with a compilation of tweets focusing on today's topic for you to review and contrast with your individual experiences within your program. I may incorporate more specific questions as we explore the topic to ensure that I have accurately understood your perspective and I invite you to ask questions at any point during our time together. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your participation at any point during the study. To acknowledge your agreement and desire to continue with the study, please provide your verbal consent by saying "yes I choose to continue with the study".

Video 1: The first of minute and 45 seconds of "Taking Up Space" will be played for participants. The video clip is from a Yale University student's documentary highlighting her experiences as a black woman at the ivy league, predominately white institution.

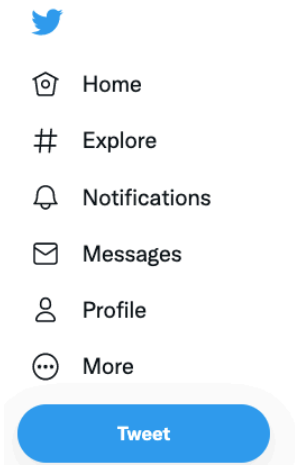
#### Taking Up Space, Yale University, Netflix








Video 2: Next, a two minute and 8 second clip from a sitcom called "A Different World" will be shown. This brief clip consists of a conversation between two main characters on the show, who exchange insights about the experience of belonging and academics at predominately white institutions versus historically black colleges and universities.

#### A Different World Clip

Twitter Images: The following images will be displayed for participants to view and discuss.

Tweet 1:



- 
-  Home
-  Explore
-  Notifications
-  Messages
-  Profile
-  More

**Tweet**

**Tweet**



**C3**  
@Ccashthe3rd

...

**#Blackatwiu** Having to sit in a mandatory “Diversity training” presented by a small town Caucasian woman that referred Africa as a country....A COUNTRY!! Yea real educational. These are the leaders WIU employees.

12:45 PM · Dec 3, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

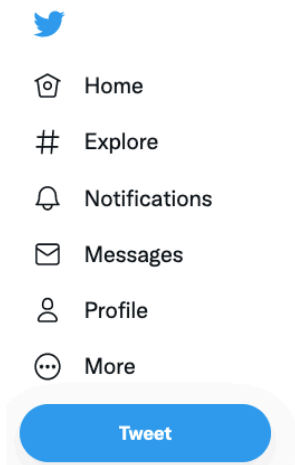
---








12 Retweets   1 Quote Tweet   17 Likes







Tweet 2:



- 
-  Home
-  Explore
-  Notifications
-  Messages
-  Profile
-  More

**Tweet**

**Tweet**







**Deborah**  
@DeborahAlemu


...

Even in a campus with 12% AA pop, the micro-aggressions linger and keep me from owning my campus. **#BlackAtUT**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=uAMTSP...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAMTSP...)

4:20 PM · Mar 3, 2014 from Austin, TX · Twitter for Android

---

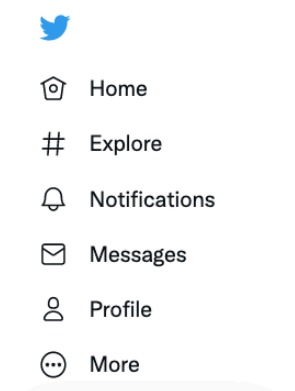














Tweet your reply

Reply

Tweet 3:



- 
-  Home
-  Explore
-  Notifications
-  Messages
-  Profile
-  More

**Tweet**



**Skye** ✨  
@\_skyyyee

...

**#BlackAtUark** is being told by a group of white boys getting off an elevator that I better “watch myself around here” the day after 45 was elected.

12:12 PM · Jun 15, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

---

239 Retweets   7 Quote Tweets   890 Likes






## Appendix I

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. If a friend of yours came to you and said they'd like to pursue a career in counseling and considered applying to your school, how would you respond?
2. How would you define "belonging"?
3. What have you heard about the racial climate of your school?
4. How did "a sense of belonging" factor into your decision to pursue a master's degree in counseling?
5. What do you think that Black graduate students are looking for when they enroll in counseling master's programs?
6. What part of the Black graduate student experience would you like for administrators to factor into their decisions about diversity, equity and inclusion programming?

## Appendix J

### IRB Protocol Approval Letter

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**To:** Erin Durrah  
BELL 4188

**From:** Douglas J Adams, Justin R Chimka, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review

**Date:** 03/01/2022

**Action:** **Exemption Granted**

**Action Date:** 03/01/2022

**Protocol #:** 2112376860

**Study Title:** Is Belonging Enough?: Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging in Black Counseling Students at Predominately White Institutions in the North Atlantic Region

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

cc: Kristin K Higgins, Investigator