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# CROSSING THE GOALLINE: IDENTIFYING THE SUCCESS OF BLACK FOOTBALL PLAYERS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

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# CROSSING THE GOALLINE: IDENTIFYING THE SUCCESS OF BLACK FOOTBALL PLAYERS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

By

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Division of Educational Leadership

Adult and Higher Education Program
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# COMMITTEE SIGNTURE PAGE

The members of the Committee appointed to examine
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## ABSTRACT

The presence of Black football players in predominantly white institutions in athletic programs often highlights the racial disparities in college athletics. It is important to understand the dynamic discrepancies in the resources, support, and opportunities provided to Black football players to obtain success. This research examines the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI located in the Midwest. Data was coded and analyzed into categories. There are six themes that emerged. 1. The attention to have academic focus. 2. The ability to maintain a connection and support from family and other important figures. 3. Constantly navigating microaggressions from peers. 4. Finding a sense of belonging. 5 Being true to themselves in obtaining a strong identity. 6. Finding resilience and integration. Results from this study provided evidence on lived experiences of Black football players, and how they make meaning of success on their campus. The findings revealed the university will need to implement several key factors to support, develop a sense of belonging, and integrate Black football players into the campus community. The recommended changes include the following, but are not limited to mentorships and building relationships, orientation, anti-racism training, and diverse hiring practices. Some examples are connecting with HBCUs to build relationships between their athletic programs for players to be successful. Second, create an advisory board of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds who can help guide recruitment efforts for Black football players into the university's athletics programs. If this path is followed, significant success will be upon these players.


Dissertation Advisor Karen Aldred Card
Karen Aldred Card (May 4, 2023 13:16 CDT)

Dr. Karen Card

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

This study investigated the lived experiences of collegiate Black football players recruited by a predominately White institution (PWI) located in the Midwest. Specifically, this qualitative study investigated how Black football players persisted in one PWI in the Midwest. As such, this study examined players' perceptions of institutional belonging and support systems to enhance their abilities to graduate from their institutions. I interviewed Black football players at one institution to identify what helped them maintain success at their institution and in preparation to walk across the stage at graduation.

According to Dougherty and Dougherty (2018), Black football players historically faced challenges in higher education resulting in empty promises by coaches, lack of support from their institutions, and academic achievement issues, all due to the societal pressures many endured. Hussain and Jones (2021) suggested that biased behaviors and stereotype threats created an environment of fear, disengagement, and isolation on campus, forecasting a less appealing campus climate for Black athletes at PWIs. According to Stryhorn (2012), Black male collegians' sense of belonging at PWIs hinged in part upon interacting positively with faculty members and peers, experiencing a welcoming, supportive campus racial climate, and engaging in educationally purposeful activities that fostered a sense of community within their institutions.

According to Ottley and Ellis (2014), Black males had more college access than ever before. Nearly 1.2 million Black men were enrolled in college and almost 50% attended PWIs compared to 11% who attended HBCUs Still, many were not graduating, and many students withdrew from their institutions. Although colleges and universities were relaxing their stringent enrollment guidelines to students with good intentions, many

schools failed to realize that the students walking through their doors might have had experiences caused by external factors like family responsibilities, financial hardships, lacking role models, and developmental disadvantages (social, economic, and cultural) that affected their abilities to navigate and succeed in college (Ottley & Ellis, 2014).

Ottley and Ellis (2014) further mentioned that a sense of belonging was a significant component for the student population and was a significant cause of retention issues. Ottley and Ellis (2014) stated that social factors including academic success, peer support groups, and other institutional support had to allow students to succeed. Further, students found that psychological factors, including self-esteem, self- confidence, and self-worth, helped them develop.

## Theoretical & Conceptual Frameworks

Black identity was theorized through a stage development model, highlighted by Nigrescence (Cross, 1971; 1991) and through a more fluid and flexible approach, as identified by prominent Black intellectuals like Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Stuart Hall. This phenomenological study herein was interdisciplinary in its approach to identity development for Black football players attending a PWI in the Midwest, with a focus on the socio-cultural approach to identity while also connecting it to Cross's optimal fifth stage of racial identity development: internalization- commitment. Cross's work is seminal, influential, and foundational to most contemporary work regarding Black racial identity.

### *Nigrescence*

In the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. William Cross theorized that an African American needed to go through a process of Nigrescence to develop a positive and healthy racial identity (Cross, 1971). He posited that due to United States of America's founding in

ideals of White racial superiority, African Americans first come to understand their racial identity through the hegemonic White lens, which occurred through schooling and other dominant racialized narratives. Cross asserted that Black people had to go through stages of development that eventually took them from identifying as Negros to a more desirable stage of identifying as Black. Cross's understanding of Black racial identity came from the field of psychology and used an Ericksonian perspective on identity, often premised on stages of development (Cross, 1991). There were five stages that were brought into attention that gave context for Black football players' racial identity development at a PWI in the Midwest. Racial identity was not the only factor that accommodated this study. It was also imperative to investigate the integration of student engagement and the investment students and institutions needed to produce a thriving campus climate and culture for all.

**Tinto's Integration Framework (1993)**

The theoretical framework that additionally aligned with this study was a student development theory that allowed student-athletes to learn how to identify themselves during their college years. Vincent Tinto (1993) identified three major sources of student departure: (a) academic difficulties; (b) the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals; and (c) their failures to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of institutions. Tinto's model of institutional departure stated that, to persist, students needed integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems. Tinto (1993) suggested that students were more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if

they became connected to the social and academic life of institutions. Students who became integrated into a college, by developing connections to individuals, participating in clubs, or engaging in academic activities, were more likely to persist than those who remained on the peripheries. Preventing this integration process might be *incongruence*, or a lack of institutional fit. Students who did not feel at home in an institution or did not believe that an institution could help them meet their goals were unlikely to persist. Likewise, students who were *isolated,* or who did not engage in social interactions within the college, were less likely to persist in the institution.

Both incongruence and isolation inhibited the integration process, thereby inhibiting persistence. According to Tinto (1993), student integration into an institution could occur in two dimensions, the academic and the social. Academic integration occurred when students became attached to the intellectual life of the college, while social integration occurred when students created relationships and connections outside of classrooms. These two concepts, though analytically distinct, interacted with and enhanced one another. And, while students had to be integrated into institutions along both dimensions to increase their likelihoods of persistence, they did not need to be equally integrated between the two. Likewise, Tinto (1993) noted that there were both formal and informal systems within institutions that could encourage integration and persistence.

**Research Question**

The research question that guided this qualitative study was: How do Black football players experience institutional belonging and support systems at a PWI?

**Significance of the Study**

The study attempted to help identify practices that aided in retaining Black football players. Black male collegians, like many other students of color on PWIs, were expected

to experience psychological stress and have tumultuous college adjustment experiences (Hinderlie & Kenny 2002; Smedley et al., 1993). Factors related to their perception of belonging and campus conditions or experiences inhibited or promoted Black football players' sense of belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2012). This qualitative study herein drew on the experiences of Black collegiate football players and how 10 of them persisted on their paths to graduation. The ability of PWI institutions to build protocols and processes for Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students to feel welcomed, supported, and influential could speak volumes to potential students. Most importantly, it could speak volumes to Black football players who choose to attend PWIs and might be unlikely to find supportive relationships outside their same-race peer groups at PWIs. Black men need support from other stakeholders that established proactive relationships to achieve prominent levels of satisfaction with their college experiences (Strayhorn, 2008a). Black football players were not monolithic. There existed a myriad of factors that needed to be considered for growth. Another important initiative that this study brought to light was focusing on what motivating personal factors were behind Black football players' successes at an institution and how they occurred within their journeys at a PWI.

**Definition of Terms**

***BIPOC*** – An acronym for Black, Indigenous, and people of color. BIPOC is a term specific to the United States, intended to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups and demonstrate solidarity between communities of color (Theune et al., 2020).

***Effectiveness*** – The degree to which something is successful in producing the desired result; success is a change that results from an action or other cause (Strayhorn, 2012).

***HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities)*** – An acronym for historically

Black colleges or universities, a college or university in the U.S. established before 1964; for African American students, the term *HBCU* was created as a federal designation during the 1986 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which expanded federal funding for colleges and universities (Thelin, 2019).

***PWI-*** Predominantly White institution, also referred to as historically White institution, was the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites accounted for 50%, or greater, of the student enrollment (SAGE Knowledge, 2009).

***Success –*** Perceptions of institutional belonging and retention efforts to enhance their abilities to graduate from their institutions (Harper, 2013).

***Institutional Belonging –*** Individuals' psychological sense of connection to or integration into their community (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

**Limitations**

There existed factors which might have limited this study. First was the use of purposeful selection. While thought to be the most appropriate to find the richest data, it might not provide the validity other sampling methods provide to articulate the true lived experience. Second, the participants were of different ages and classified with different years of college, which could affect their experiences at the institution. Third, I only studied Black football players who attended one PWI in the Midwest. I recognize the comparison between Black football players who did and did not attend a PWI or other institutions like an HBCU, could have brought forth intriguing findings in future research. I also recognize that there existed a difference in competition levels such as Division I, II, or III, which would draw out limitations due to institutional resources given to the players. Finally, the context of this study was limited to a rural, small, Midwestern, PWI. The

experiences of Black football players at this research site could be different from other institutional types. For example, private vs. public universities, R1 institutions and non-R1 or a two-year vs. a four-year institution might have different outcomes.

**Delimitations**

The study population was delimited to participants who did not meet the description of a Black male football player. Further, participants were required to attend a PWI. Additionally, the PWI was limited to the Midwest. The methodological approach in this study was delimited to qualitative phenomenology. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that narrative research and case studies could be considered to share the participants' stories and one single case in the study could have been appropriate. However, due to the totality of the research questions and purpose, defining the shared lived phenomenon was most appropriate, leaving phenomenology as the chosen approach to examine the essence of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2019).

**Summary**

Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the literature that guided this study and revealed the experiences of Black football players often shaped by their racial identity and the racial dynamics of the sport. The literature review further indicates that these players often face racism, tokenism, and other forms of discrimination within the sport, which can lead to alienation and marginalization. In Chapter 3, the steps for data collection are provided and the methodology selected is further elaborated upon. Chapter 4 presents the major findings of this study. It discusses the researcher's role in collecting data and data analysis. Chapter 5 presents recommendations, implications, limitations, future research, and the conclusion.

# Chapter 2

## Review of Related Literature

Chapter two provides an overview of the literature connecting a variety of topics that helped drive the study herein. Namely, this study aimed to conduct qualitative research into the perceptions of engagement among Black football players at a PWI in the Midwest. After a review of the literature on student engagement, the following headings were included: (a) supports needed to retain students of color; (b) Black male perceptions of retention initiatives at PWIs; (c) Black identity development; (d) racism and discrimination at PWIs; (e) recruitment of Black football players; (f) reasons for disillusionment for Black football players; (g) retention of Black football players; (h) mental health of Black student-athletes; (i) coach- athlete relationships; and (j) student engagement and belonging for Black football players.

### Supports Needed for Retaining Students of Color

McClain and Perry (2017) suggested retention rates for students of color at PWIs referred to retaining disadvantaged populations and creating an integrated culture on campus. McClain and Perry (2017) examined factors that affected retention in five critical components: (a) a historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion; (b) compositional diversity; (c) the psychological climate; (d) the behavioral climate;(e) and structural diversity. McClain and Perry (2017) related to multiple facets of the study. They identified several initiatives that played an intricate part in retaining students for underrepresented populations and had a tremendous effect on the campus culture.

As McClain and Perry (2017) stated, institutions and students set initiatives to counteract campus-wide subjugation because of significant mechanisms. The mechanisms

that institutions and students can use to counteract campus-wide subjugation included the following: (a) creating educational programs and initiatives focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice; (b) establishing resource centers specifically dedicated to marginalized student populations; (c) developing curriculum that incorporates the perspectives of historically underrepresented groups; (d) implementing policies that promote access for all students regardless of their identity or background; (e) offering support services such as mental health counseling, career guidance, and academic advising; (f) formulating an inclusive campus environment through student organizations and clubs with a focus on cultural awareness; (g) ensuring representation in faculty hiring practices by actively recruiting candidates from diverse backgrounds; and (h) encouraging student-led initiatives to address systemic issues of oppression on campus. Intentional programming, cultural spaces, and hiring faculty and staff of color significantly impacted student retention and attrition. St. Leger (2012) found specific retention initiatives in higher education that were designed to increase Black undergraduate male collegiate retention and persistence through graduation for this historically underrepresented population. Those initiatives included providing peer mentors, creating an online or in-person student community to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness, offering academic advisement tailored specifically for Black male students, implementing faculty-student interaction programs, connecting Black male students with campus resources such as career services and counseling centers, and increasing access to financial aid opportunities. Although institutional leaders in higher education focused on creating more inclusive campuses, designing, and implementing programs to retain Black undergraduate men remained understudied (St. Leger, 2012).

Ottley and Ellis (2014) commented that developing sense of belonging was a significant component of the Black student experience and was a significant cause of students not being retained at PWIs. Ottley and Ellis (2014) stated that social factors, including academic success, peer support groups, and other institutional support, are needed to allow students to succeed. Students found that psychological factors, including self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth, helped them develop. Also, many "Black males enter college but eventually psychologically withdraw because of self-defeating attitudes and behavior partly due to few positive academic experiences" (Kezar, 2005, p. 87).

In Stewart's (2012) study, the uphill climb involved distinct measurables for administering institutional support for disadvantaged groups at PWIs. This research displayed vital elements of what was needed to recruit and retain faculty and staff of color and how the campus climate changed once these individuals were on site. Stewart (2012) highlighted how supporting Black students at PWIs could be accomplished by hiring faculty and staff of color, creating platforms for them to participate in mentoring other faculties, and by having a tenure process that was equitable and open to faculty of color. Stewart (2012) elaborated that those remedies included:

Acknowledgement of the greater burden on these faculty to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, and service commitments related to diversity issues that disproportionately fall on the few faculties of color. It is recommended that the acknowledgment of these functions be reflected in the reward structure, release time for teaching, and organized writing retreats for faculty of color. (p. 17)

In another study, there was a comprehensive approach to Black male perceptions of PWIs regarding retaining Black football players. Williams (2018) suggested that PWIs could find success in retaining students of color by mentoring underserved students at PWIs. The results of the study were based on a mixed methods study involving survey respondents and a focus group; they revealed that participants overwhelmingly agreed with past research that stated underserved populations were more likely to be retained on a college campus when they interacted with faculty members who invested in their college success. Williams (2018) proclaimed that PWIs would obtain success for students of color if institutions promoted their commitment to diversity and highlighted the support systems for underrepresented students. The study drew the notion of impactful relationship building to grow opportunities for students to develop skill sets for all students to adhere to. The next section discusses how Black males perceive their institution's retention initiatives to assist their progress of personal growth and obtaining success.

**Black Male Perceptions of Retention Initiatives at PWIs**

Sato et al. (2018) investigated and explained the relational mentorship experiences of Black student-athletes attending undergraduate programs at a PWIs. The research question that guided their study was, "What were Black Student-athletes academic experiences through mentoring while attending a PWI?" (Sato et al., 2018, p. 16). Sato et al.'s (2018) study identified the following themes: (a) mentoring study habits and routines; (b) mentoring academic schedule and time management; (c) personal development within an isolated environment; and (d) family members' support and encouragements (Sato et al., 2018). To better support Black student-athletes at PWIs, athletic department

administrators, coaches, faculty, and all students should be encouraged to respect, value, and embrace the racial identities and other aspects of diversity.

Harper (2012) suggested, in his study of Black male success, that Black men were disengaged and underrepresented among college students and degree earners, and summarized the problems and inequities that were typically amplified in public discourse, research journals, policy reports, and various forms of media. Notably, only 47% of Black male students graduated on time from U.S. high schools in 2008 as compared to 78% of White male students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). Black male students were often comparatively less prepared for the rigors of college-level academic work (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Loury, 2004; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer et al., 2009). Harper (2012) also identified an anti-deficit achievement framework that researchers and educators and administrators could use to understand Black male student success in colleges. According to Harper (2012), The anti-deficit achievement framework inverted questions that were commonly asked about educational disadvantages, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition. It included some questions that researchers could explore to better understand how Black undergraduate men successfully navigated their ways to and through higher education and onward to rewarding post-college options. The framework concepts focused on three major initiatives that Black male students would need to experience. They were: (a) pre-college socialization and readiness; (b) college achievement; and (c) post college-success. Although, the anti-deficit achievement framework was researched, studied, and implemented since 2010, Black football players found it difficult to obtain success in

their choices in certain colleges and universities. Furthermore, the subsequent studies help articulate how Black students develop their identity in college and how students and institutions can benefit from implementing initiatives when prioritized.

**Black Identity Development**

Chapman-Hilliard and Beasley's (2018) study focused on perceptions of how Black studies courses shaped the psychosocial experiences and identity development of Black students at PWIs. Focus groups were formed to identify several themes of Black student identity development. Chapman-Hilliard and Beasley (2018) found that students could gain new awareness of themselves as racial and cultural beings, offering a form of racial socialization for Black emerging adults at a critical time in their identity developmental trajectories. Racial socialization focused on exposure to specific cultural behaviors and practices, strategies for managing racial conflict, and academic, social, and behavioral techniques for excelling in a White-dominated society.

Steinfeldt et al.'s (2010) study examined racial and athletic identities among African American football players at HBCUs and PWIs. The author negotiated the dualism of racial and athletic identities as potentially problematic because both roles were subject to prejudice and discrimination, particularly for student-athletes in revenue-producing sports like football. Steinfeldt et al.'s (2010) results indicated that seniors at both institution types reported significantly lower levels of public regard, which further predicted higher levels of college adjustment. Black senior football players at both the PWIs and HBCUs showed various levels of racial and athletic identity, with PWIs' Black football players having a lower racial identity than Black players at HBCUs. For example, high levels of racial identity in Black senior football players at HBCUs might look like a

strong sense of pride and connection with their race, valuing their African American heritage and culture (Steinfeldt et al,'s 2010). They might be actively involved in African American student organizations on campus or other community activities that promote the advancement of Black people. In the same vein, low levels of racial identity among PWIs' Black football players could manifest as apathy towards issues related to race or disinterest in participating in activities focused on the African American experience. Steinfeldt et al.'s (2010) noted that Black football players might not feel a strong emotional connection to their race and instead prioritize other aspects such as academics, athletics, or socializing with peers who did not share similar backgrounds.

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) studied the use of educational spaces on college campuses to enhance Black identity development. The researchers examined the relationship between space/place as categorical variables alongside the continuous variable, Black racial identity attitude scale. According to Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021), the ability to explore the educational experiences of Black professionals to make sense of their journeys, as it related to their identity development, drew a key component of growth for students. Black professionals were utilized as it was common for them to have had college experiences which denoted the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. A characteristic of this developmental stage was extended identity exploration where youth explored themselves (Arnett, 2000; Syed & Mitchell, 2013). While Black identity helped the development of Black men as they transitioned onto college campuses, there was a huge discrepancy as to how institutions were handling racism and discrimination when it focused on Black males.

Another component of the development for Black males in the higher education

space was *Nigrescence.* It became especially relevant for African American football players at PWIs in the Midwest, as they might potentially be confronted with racism and discrimination on campus due to their race. Nigrescence can help these students understand how race affects their lives and experiences, as well as provide them with strategies for dealing with racism (Gill & Brown, 2021). Nigrescence focuses on self-awareness, understanding one's own experiences with racism and discrimination, connecting with other members of the African diaspora, and developing a sense of pride in one's culture. Being able to identify and understand where one stood within this complex social construct could help Black male student-athletes better navigate through college life while also attaining academic success (Gill & Brown, 2021). There were five stages brought into attention that gave context for Black football players' racial identity development at PWIs in the Midwest.

- The pre-encounter stage was when a person held an attitude that ranged from low salience to race neutrality to anti-Black (Cross, 1991). They would have little emphasis given to race in this stage, focusing on other aspects of their lives including occupation, lifestyle, and religion as more salient. According to Ritchey (2014), people did not acknowledge race as something that affected their lives thus far.
- The encounter stage, people must work around, slip through, or even shatter the relevance of their ideologies and worldviews. However, at the same time, others must provide some hint of direction in which to point that person has to be re- socialized or transformed (Cross, 1991). Ritchey (2014) suggested that in this stage, people encompassed a two-step process to encounter and personalize an

event that happened, and how it shaped their views on race.

- Next is the immersion-emersion stage where Nigrescence addressed the most sensational aspect of Black identity development, for it represented the vortex of psychological Nigrescence (Cross, 1991). It is in this stage that a Black person began to shed their old worldview and constructed a new frame of reference with the information that they now had about race (Ritchey, 2014). Another example of the immersion-emersion stage was when a person has an environmental change with the opportunity to educate themselves of their identity, a transition would occur and a commitment to the change would occur (Ritchey, 2014).
- Fourth was the internalization stage, which encompassed a transition period where one worked through the challenges and problems of a new identity (Cross, 1991). This time was critical due to the person moving away from how others viewed them to how they viewed themselves. According to Ritchey (2014), Black people began to think granularly about their newfound racial identities and how it shaped or would shape their lives.
- Finally, there was the internalizations-commitment stage which focused on the long-term interest of Black affairs over an extended amount of time (Cross, 1991). In this stage, the Black student-athletes would be able to begin shedding a poor self-worth thought of themselves and embraced a positive Black self-definition, having a transformation that achieved a healthy racial identity to forge success to persist in college. In order for Black student-athletes at PWIs to be successful, universities must work towards creating a supportive environment that is free from racism and discrimination.

**Racism and Discrimination at PWIs**

Assari (2017) found experiences of racial discrimination among young Black males were predictive of increased anxiety and depression later in adulthood. Further,

Black males experienced disproportionate racism throughout education, criminal justice, and health care systems, and were less likely than other races to seek help (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). Hoggard et al. (2015) suggested racial identity was a factor impacting discrimination. Black males faced racial discrimination and racism when transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Further, Dewis-McCoy (2018) noted Black males living in suburban and rural areas might experience issues differently. Experiences of racial discrimination were common between adolescence and adulthood (Benner & Graham, 2013). Hoggard et al. (2015) noted there were a variety of stress levels and reactions to racism.

Another study conducted by Hussain and Jones (2021) discussed the negative effects of discrimination and bias on sense of belonging for students of color attending PWIs. Their study revealed that students from different racial groups experienced their campus environments and sense of belonging to the campus in divergent ways, and a growing body of scholarship demonstrated several factors that undermined students' senses of belonging in college. Those factors included creating an isolated environment, not recruiting faculty of color or students, discriminatory behavior, and no specific programs/initiatives for students of color (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Levin et al., 2006; Locks et al., 2008; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Nuñez, 2009; Schussler & Fierros, 2008). As mentioned in the literature, racism and discriminatory practices would take its toll on any human being; however, Black male student-athletes dealt with the effects of twice of the amount of the pressure in terms of performing on fields and on campuses (Harper, 2009). With the pressure of racial tension on campus, there were also the effects of mental health and how

hard it was to balance all the factors listed above.

**Recruitment of Black Football Player**

According to Kayoko (2016), market analysis of race-conscious university admissions for students of color focused on the enrollment process and the role affirmative action played in race-conscious and race-neutral institutions. Kayoko (2016) discussed the rigor, preparation, and climate that neutral race institutions proclaimed students of color did not possess and would not be successful, hence their lack of support in admitting them. Kayoko (2016)

related to the problem in this study significantly by the stigma underrepresented populations faced. Students of color experienced racial isolation, stereotype threats, racial microaggressions, identity performance, and racial labor in educational settings. Admittedly, students of color would face these issues at any PWI (Kayoko, 2016).

Another study reviewed some major concepts of Christian colleges' recruitment of football players. According to Dougherty and Dougherty (2018), there was an increasing number of Christian colleges adding football programs to boost enrollment among men and ethnically underserved groups. Many schools were changing policies and initiatives to recruit Black players to become competitive (Dougherty & Dougherty, 2018; Theune et al., 2020). Students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds were a recruitment priority at many colleges and universities. Despite impressive gains in the numbers of Black students and Hispanic students entering college, ethnically underserved groups remained underrepresented in American higher education (Dougherty & Dougherty, 2018).

Harper's (2013) study of race and equity in education indicated young Black men

accounted for 2.8% of undergraduate students on campuses but were 57.1% of players on football teams and 64.3% of players on men's basketball teams. This research supported young Black men's presence on campus being primarily for athletics, not for education. Brown (2011) reported athletes at Division I football subdivision colleges spent 43.3 hours a week on sports activities, and Black women's and men's basketball players missed 2.4 and 2.5 classes per week. On the contrary, Division II and III student athletes typically spent less time in sports activities than Division I football subdivision college students, averaging between 35–40 hours per week (Maguire & Anderson, 2015). In addition, Black women's and men's basketball players at these lower divisions were reported to miss fewer classes each week than their counterparts at the Division I level. For example, a study by Wright et al. (2017) found that female basketball players missed an average of 1.1 classes per week while male basketball players missed 1.2 classes per week at Division II schools. Private or liberal arts school students also generally spent less time on sports activities compared to those in more competitive athletic programs. A study by Jones et al. (2020) found that student athletes at private or liberal arts schools averaged between 30–35 hours of sports activities per week. Furthermore, Black basketball players were reported to miss an average of 1.0 classes per week for women and 0.9 classes per week for men (Jones et al., 2020).

Orenstein (1996) provided insight on the academic experiences of Black male Division I-A football student-athletes in two diverse ways: (a) contextualizing the relationship to an institution of higher education and athletic department, and (b) presenting examples of personal and institution practices that influence their educational opportunities. African American students and African American student-athletes were

usually at risk because of their unique challenges (Carodine et al., 2001). The unique challenges faced by African American students and student-athletes included, but were not limited to: (a) inadequate academic preparation; (b) lack of resources and support services; (c) a hostile environment on campus that could lead to feelings of alienation; (d) racial stereotypes affecting the perception of their athletic ability and academic potential; (e) a sense of invisibility due to low representation in faculty, staff, and administrative roles at many universities; and (f) cultural differences between home life and college culture (Orenstein, 1996). Additionally, African American student-athletes might experience a lack of understanding when it came to their dual identities as both athletes and students. This could lead to feelings of guilt or conflict about their commitment to the athletic team versus academic pursuits (Orenstein, 1996). Parham (1993) reported student-athletes faced developmental issues like non-athletes; however, student-athletes faced other challenges that included: (a) balancing academic and athletic issues; (b) dealing with social isolation; (c) athletic success management; (d) managing injuries and rehabilitation; (e) managing relationships with coaches, family, parents, community, and teammates; and (f) adjusting to life after athletics.

*The Recruit* investigated the college enrollment process for Black male students, counter-storytelling the experiences of student-athletes involved in the admission process of getting recruited to a college and how similar it was to an athletic recruitment strategy (Thompson, 2020). This story drew from the critical race theory framework that exposed society and the civil rights legislation and how Whites would support social justice when it benefitted them (Thompson, 2020). Thompson (2020) suggested that the pursuit for a talented and academically inclined student-athletes had only one chance to represent his

family and the small community of color at a particular university that only had the interests of their football program, not the total student in mind. Black football players could enhance their opportunities to develop as players and be prepared for on-the-field initiatives. Thompson (2020) further depicted the deception of recruiting student-athletes, especially Black football players, as what they experienced during the process and how the institution support systems differed from other students.

Patterson (2018) viewed perceptions of African American football players' roles and how they were socialized into being students or athletes. Patterson (2018) formulated three questions. First, how do football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as students and athletes? Next, how do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity? Also, how do football players' perceptions of the role of NCAA policies, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete and non-athlete peers' affect their identities as football players and students? And lastly, how do football players' perceptions of interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identities?

Importantly, college athletics were popular and had a high recruitment threshold for men of color, particularly Black males pursuing football (Theune et al., 2020). However, gaining admission to a four-year university was increasingly difficult due to the growth of student applicant pools and the high demand for college recruitment (Bound et al., 2009). PWIs were no different as they relied heavily on Black male football recruits to increase their diverse population numbers and the institutions' chances of winning athletic competitions (Theune et al., 2020). Research found that Black male student-athletes' senses of belonging at PWIs hinged, in large part, upon interacting

with peers from different racial/ethnic groups (Strayhorn, 2008b). Thus, it was imperative for PWIs to identify the resources at their prospective universities to enable success for students that attended their institutions.

The representation of Black men in higher education could be viewed in a few ways. First, enrollment data indicated a significance in gender disparities among Black collegians. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), approximately 3.5 million students (about twice the population of Nebraska), both part-time and full-time, were enrolled across more than 4,300 colleges and universities. Of those, approximately 2 million were Black, and Black women outnumbered men by two to one—one of the most significant gender gaps among all racial or ethnic groups. It was different for Black men to be recruited, supported, and retained, not only at colleges and universities in urban areas, but specifically PWIs in rural areas in the Midwest (Theune et al., 2020). Black football players had high chances of being recruited to PWIs just by the pure athleticism and intention of the institutions trying to diversify their populations.

However, challenges occurred significantly when institutions were not ready to welcome Black football players to their campuses. Theune et al. (2020) noted that when U.S. colleges and universities aggressively recruited elite Black male high school students for sports programs, without making similar efforts to attract Black male high school students for academic programs, genuine commitments to diversity and equity became questionable. Research also indicated that recruitment of Black men to PWIs might be driven less by promoting equity and social justice to improve the status of Black football players but more by advancing the interests of the White-controlled college sports industry (Theune & Braddock, 2016).

**Reasons for Disillusionment for Black Football Players**

Hilton and Bonner (2017) stated that finding higher education institutions was challenging for college students and could be more difficult for students of color. Their situations were predicated on external circumstances rather than their choices and were foreign to Black students or other students of color (Hilton & Bonner, 2017). While many students could navigate the transition of being on campus and receiving support, students of color had to attend a college or university that intentionally deployed programs and initiatives that would be supportive and nurturing. Hilton and Bonner (2017) expressed that Black males would find opportunities to attend colleges and universities depending on the relationship development with coaches, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. There was a similar concept with the thought process of the student-athletes and their opportunity to maximize their success. Many students searched for comprehensive support systems within their institutions to develop a sense of belonging for ultimate success.

A study conducted by Harper (2018), who was the University of Southern California's diversity expert and who led the Center on Race and Equity, found Black athletes' graduation rates lagged at U.S. universities with top sports teams. According to Harper (2018), 65 leading universities across the U.S. still had Black male athletes continue to graduate at lower rates than other student-athletes, Black non-athletes, and undergraduates. The study conceptualized the Power Five conferences that received millions of dollars to produce exceptional sport teams that were the most dominant and competitive teams in the country. Mostly formed by Black athletes, many schools experienced gaps in successfully graduating their student-athletes.

Harper (2018) reported that Black men made up 2.4% of the undergraduate population at Power Five schools but comprised 55% of their football teams and 56% of their men's basketball teams. Harper (2018) also noted that just over 55% of Black male student-athletes graduated within six years, compared with 60% of all Black undergraduate men, 69.3% of all student-athletes and 76.3% of all undergraduate students. Harper (2018) concluded that the NCAA needed to act on the deficit of Black athletes' graduation rates by collaborating with university officials to establish strategic plans around racial equity and to improve the holistic development of the student-athletes. With the notion of development, how did Black students benefit from their culture? Did understanding the essence of being a Black college athlete on a PWIs campus to help improve their successes and their identities?

**Retention of Black Football Players**

Retention initiatives are imperative for colleges and universities to implement for students to generate a sense of belonging. St. Leger's (2012) study of retention initiatives at two state institutions explored the development of retention initiatives, how initiatives were structured within an institution's overall diversity plan, and what the overall impact was on the participants and the institutional environment. St. Leger (2012) held focus groups with student participants, interviews of the institutional leadership involved in implementing the retention initiatives, and a document analysis of cases, which were used to answer how Black male retention initiatives affected campus diversity initiatives and advanced student development and success. Both cases focused on retention through student engagement, accountability, and leadership development; each case used separate foundational principles to carry out the same mission to retain Black males.

Another study conducted by Harper and Newman, (2016) discussed the understanding of Black male students' academic transition experiences in their first college year, with a particular emphasis on how they resolved academic challenges. The authors surveyed Black male students from different colleges and universities to focus on outcomes and experiences of Black male's academic engagement. The research revealed that Black undergraduate men had an alarming rate of college completion.

Harper and Harris (2012) stated that only one-third of Black undergraduate men who started college graduated within six years, which was the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education. The study identified significant themes that drew parallels with underprepared students. To achieve a seamless transition to college and strong academic preparation, prior experiences in demographically comparable educational environments, participation in summer bridge and college transition programs, and academically profitable relationships they cultivated in student organizations were needed (Harper & Newman, 2016). Although college transitions were streamlined to build rapport and establish familiarity for students for academic, campus involvement, and proactive educational environments.

**Mental Health for Black Student-Athletes**

Chapman and Beasley (2018) examined Black students' experiences in culture-centered courses that focused on the historical and contemporary experiences of Blacks in America and across the African diaspora. Using a qualitative approach, the authors investigated the perceptions of how Black studies courses shaped the psychosocial experiences and identity development of Black students at a PWI. Black students developed certain themes within the research which depicted a true psychoanalysis of their

identities. Themes included psychological empowerment, self-determination, counter-spaces, and community perpetuity. Chapman and Beasley (2018) suggested that students experienced four areas of development when engaging in Black studies at their colleges and universities. Those four were counter-spaces, miseducation, identity development, and critical cultural consciousness. Counter-spaces referred to the safe spaces that students created in their Black studies courses, where they could explore and discuss topics related to race without fear of judgement. Miseducation referred to how many students were misinformed about African American history and culture due to a lack of accurate representation in mainstream education. Identity development comprised the process by which students gain an understanding of themselves as members of a racial group and developed pride in their cultural heritage. Finally, critical cultural consciousness occurred when students became aware of how systemic racism affected them personally, learning ways to combat it through activism. These areas of a student experience were enhanced through Black studies courses. In fact, Black students who participated in Black studies courses experienced a Black studies effect—that is, the students experienced social, academic, or psychological benefits because of participating in Black studies courses (Adams, 2014; Chapman & Beasley, 2018).

Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) showed the presence of mental health support systems for student-athletes could be undermined by athletics coaching and support staff. A series of semi-structured interviews conducted with NCAA Division I athletes showed men's football and men's basketball student-athletes expressed that mental health support and resources were not available to them due to influence from coaching staff and teammate perception (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Fogaca (2021) found that athletes

who battled facets of mental health issues could be combated by creating an intervention strategy that taught coping skills. These interventions were found to have a positive impact on student- athletes' mental health (Fogaca, 2021).

In a Canadian study, Slingerland and colleagues (2019) concluded that student-athletes were best served by a dedicated mental health support system uniquely designed to support student-athletes. These types of programs were tailored to the specific needs of student-athletes and considered their schedules and other factors related to student-athlete life. The study also showed that these types of programs were better integrated into a comprehensive approach to student-athlete wellbeing (Slingerland et al., 2019). Additionally, Breslin et al. (2021) found that even short programs designed to raise awareness regarding mental health could increase student-athletes' intentions to self-manage their mental health.

Mental health was an important topic in the lives of college student-athletes and was especially relevant to Black student-athletes (Breslin et al. 2021). The experiences of racism and discrimination that many Black individuals faced could have profound effects on their mental health (Raftery et al., 2020). Additionally, there were fewer resources available to help these students manage their mental health due to cultural stigmas surrounding mental illness in some communities (Cobb & Cunningham, 2019). In a study authored by Dixon et al. (2017), the authors explored the prevalence of mental health issues among Black student athletes as well as common risk factors and interventions. Studies suggested that Black student-athletes experienced higher levels of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders than White student-athletes (Dixon et al., 2017; Raftery et al., 2020).

In a study of NCAA Division, I athletes, Dixon et al. (2017) found that Black student-athletes reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than their White counterparts. Other research suggested that racial discrimination and microaggressions were associated with increased mental health issues among these students (Cobb & Cunningham, 2019; Raftery et al., 2020). Additionally, some studies indicated that Black student-athletes might be more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol or using drugs to cope with stress and depression (Owens & Smith-Campbell, 2018). In addition to the prevalence of mental health issues among Black college student-athletes, there were several risk factors that could increase the likelihood of mental health issues. These included a lack of support from peers and coaches, financial difficulties, academic pressure, and racial discrimination (Cobb & Cunningham, 2019; Dixon et al., 2017).

Additionally, some studies suggested that Black student-athletes were more likely to internalize feelings of stress and depression due to cultural stigmas surrounding mental illness in their communities (Owens & Smith-Campbell, 2018). There were several interventions that could be used to help Black college student- athletes manage their mental health. These included counseling services on campus and online resources such as websites or smartphone apps designed for student athletes- athletes (Raftery et al., 2020). Other interventions focused on creating a supportive environment through peer mentoring programs and team building activities (Cobb & Cunningham, 2019).

Some research suggested that providing education about mental health and reducing stigmas could help Black student-athletes feel more comfortable seeking help

when needed (Owens & Smith-Campbell, 2018). Overall, there was a need for more research on the prevalence of mental health issues among Black college student athletes and effective interventions to address these issues (Owens & Smith-Campbell, 2018). Notably, racism and discrimination were associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety among these students. (Cobb & Cunningham, 2019). Furthermore, a lack of support from peers and coaches and financial difficulties could increase mental health problems. Interventions such as counseling services on campus or peer mentoring programs might be effective in helping Black student athletes manage their mental health (Owens & Smith-Campbell, 2018).

A 2020 study outlined NCAA Division I student-athletes perceived stress as impacting their daily lives (Dwyer & Cutler, 2020). Dwyer and Cutler (2020) found that student-athletes struggled to manage their stress and that the stress had a negative impact on their lives. Student-athletes were more likely to take advantage of a sports-specific mental health program as long as the program remained confidential (Dwyer & Cutler, 2020).

**Coach and Athlete Relationship**

Previous research defined the coach-athlete relationship as "the situation in which coaches and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are mutually and causally inter-connected" (Jowett, 2004, p. 250). Lyle (1999) stated that coaches who failed to acknowledge the importance of the coach-athlete relationship might risk not developing their athletes.

Jowett (2005) supported this viewpoint, stating the coach-athlete relationship was the main foundation of coaching.

Furthermore, a proactive coach-athlete relationship could produce personal outcomes for player development and can inspire players personal goals and aspirations. For instance, Jowett (2004) found that athletes' perceptions of their time with their coaches directly correlated with team chemistry and cohesion. Furthermore, Lorimer (2009) concluded that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship played a major part in the coach's and athletes' levels of empathy. This finding related to the coach and athlete understanding their relationship and described the coach's and athlete's emotions. In addition, this research highlighted some aspects of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

Dynamics between the coach and athlete could differ depending on whether they participated in a team sport or an individual sport (Bloom, 1998). Individual sports focused on developing each athlete individually while team sports usually focused on team chemistry. Team and individual sports, however, could contribute to the significance of the coach- athlete relationship (Martin, 2002). Coaches and other stakeholders within the institution had to find common ground for student-athletes to grow relationships with teammates in their sport, but, furthermore, develop engagement initiatives on campus and beyond. The question researchers had to ask was what do those relationship strategies and positive transitions entail when student-athletes looked to build continuity with their perspective coaches?

**Student Engagement and Belonging for Black Football Players**

In a study that specifically addressed the complex situations Black American male undergraduates from low socioeconomic status backgrounds faced at PWIs, Patterson, (2020) found that Black men attending PWIs encountered social and cultural

stigmas based on their appearances. These had to be balanced with their desires for continued growth and development within these White environments. Researchers and administrators also knew, through large-scale surveys and data analyses, that leisure and campus engagement had positive influences for most college students (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Patterson 2020).

Student engagement and belonging for Black football players could involve social integration on fields and throughout campuses. Any student's social integration was important when learning to navigate the college experience. According to Patterson (2020), social integration was learning and adjusting to a campus community's social culture, values, and processes. College retention researchers argued that quantitative measures of social integration (i.e., how many hours spent on certain activities, or the number of events attended) failed to identify the social and cultural complexities of underrepresented students on college and university campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Another aspect of student engagement theory began with the work of Astin (1984). The importance of student engagement was valuable in research. Students involved in campus organizations benefitted from such involvement as it contributed to their success and development (Harper, 2012). According to Terenzini (1996), most of the research in the 1990s focused on psychosocial development outcomes and student experiences. The results showed no differences existed between male athletes and other students regarding academics, self-learning, challenges, and being open to diversity issues.

Kuh's (2001) theory of engagement explored two concepts. First, engagement began with the student being driven to invest time and energy into their academics and getting involved in purposeful activities on campus. Second, the college and university

drove engagement. Accordingly, Upcraft (2005) stated colleges and universities needed to provide purposeful activities and help maximize opportunities for engagement among their students.

Student engagement research started in the 1970s. Over the last 15–20 years, this has advanced by using more sophisticated data collection methods. This included surveys and interviews that measured factors such as student motivation, classroom participation, extracurricular activities, and faculty interaction (Astin 1996). Astin (1984) defined student engagement as: "The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 2). Skinner (1993), instead, described student engagement as students being involved in activities reflecting a tone of positive emotions. Skinner (1993) characterized student engagement as being motivated and students showing behavioral involvement in learning and being emotional. Next, Fletcher (2015), then, defined student engagement as sustaining learning and connecting the learner to all aspects of learning. Finally, Brakley (2010) described student engagement as being excited and passionate. Within student engagement research, there were scholars who identified initiatives that would help colleges and universities enable protocols to increase student learning and belonging success. One of these scholars was Tinto.

As such, Tinto (1993) recommended the following:

1. Institutions should provide resources for program development and incentives for program participation that reach faculty and staff.
2. Institutions should commit themselves to a long-term process of program development.
3. Institutions should place ownership for institutional change in the hands of those across the campus who must implement that change.

4. Institutional actions should be coordinated jointly to ensure a systematic, campus-wide approach to student retention.

5. Institutions should act to ensure that faculty and staff possess the skills needed to assist and educate their students.
6. Institutions should frontload their efforts on behalf of student retention.
7. Institutions and programs should continually assess their actions with an eye toward improvement. This final notion was a significant factor in the sense of institutional belonging, enhanced success, and retention efforts to graduate Black football players.

In recent years, the issue of student engagement and belonging for Black football players became increasingly salient due to several factors (Chin et al. 2016). The NCAA was one organization that took steps to address creating an equity and inclusion programs in 2016. However, there remained much work to be done to ensure that Black football players were provided with the same opportunities as their White peers.

Accordingly, the study herein sought to identify research on student engagement and belonging for Black football players at the college level. Specifically, it discussed how institutional policies could foster greater engagement and a sense of belonging among these students. Institutional Policies Research (2017) suggested that institutional policies could significantly impact student engagement and belonging for Black football players. For example, one study found that NCAA schools with higher graduation rates for African American athletes had more equitable academic support services (Chin et al., 2017). Chin et al. (2017) also noted that schools with more diverse faculty and staff were better equipped to support Black students. These results suggested that institutions should consider implementing policies related to diversity and inclusion to create more

supportive environments for Black football players.

### Best Practices for Coaches and Faculty Members

In addition to institutional policies, coaches and faculty members played critical roles in fostering student engagement and belonging for Black football players. One study found that coaches perceived as "caring" by their athletes had higher levels of team cohesion (Snyder & Schutte, 2015). Snyder and Schutte (2015) suggested that this type of behavior could help create an environment where all students felt supported. Other research showed that having faculty mentors with similar backgrounds as the students could also have positive impacts on engagement and belonging (Ridley et al., 2012). These findings suggested campuses should consider implementing mentorship programs to provide additional support to these students.

Engel & Stinson (2012) provided a comprehensive view of best practices for coaches and faculty members in their efforts to build strong relationships with Black football players. Engel and Stinson (2012) conducted an extensive search of peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1995 and 2011 that focused on developing effective coaching techniques as well as strategies for improving communication between coaches and athletes from minority backgrounds, particularly African American student-athletes participating in college football programs. After reviewing this body of research, Engel and Stinson identified several common themes related to successful coaching strategies, including collaborative decision-making, clear communication, open dialogue, and positive reinforcement. Furthermore, Engel & Stinson (2012) discussed how building relationships with athletes required coaches to consider their student-athletes' individual backgrounds and experiences to create

welcoming environments for Black football players. Additionally, recommendations for how faculty members could support the efforts of coaches in creating effective relationships with these student-athletes comprised providing academic guidance and mentorship (Engel & Stinson, 2012).

**Summary**

This literature review framed the Black male football student-athletes within the context of their experience as student-athletes. A historical context of Black male football student-athletes at the college level in the United States was provided. As part of the literature review, Black male football student-athletes and their experiences of engagement, racism, and discrimination were examined. Student engagement theory and Astin's involvement theory were reviewed and relevant to Black male football student-athletes. This literature review of related literature confirmed the need to conduct research to enhance the college experiences of Black male football student-athletes. Umbach (2006) stated that student engagement should focus on the quality relationship between faculty, student-athletes, and the institution. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI in the Midwest, uncovering how their racial identity influenced their sense of belonging and agency in this environment. Chapter 3 identifies the steps for data collection and the methodology.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

Chapter three presents the research methods and procedures used in this phenomenological study. The study explored the lived experiences in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the perception of engagement of Black football players at PWIs in the Midwest. This study aimed to fill the research gap on how do Black football players experience institutional belonging and support systems at a PWI? Accordingly, this chapter outlines the method and research design, researcher's role, researcher's statement, context, participants, data collection and procedures, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, ethical considerations, and summary.

## Method and Research Design

Phenomenology evolved from a 20th Century school of philosophy to a human sciences research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology involved lived experiences and focused on how experiences were translated into consciousness (van Manen, 2014). At the beginning of the creation of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl denied modern science's mundane approach to explain experiences in abstract laws (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vagle, 2018). van Manen (2014) suggested that phenomenology was a meaning-giving inquiry and explained how the subject's consciousness interpreted experiences, not in an objective scientific sense. van Manen (2014) further referred to phenomenology as more of a method of questioning than answering. In phenomenology, insights came to us in that mode of musings, reflective questioning, and influenced with sources and meanings of lived experiences (van Manen, 2014).

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified several factors of phenomenological research. The first factor, the purposeful selection of participants, was imperative for the phenomenon to be explored. van Manen (2014) referred to phenomena as how we found ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living (p. 48). Creswell and Poth (2018) also identified a feature of phenomenology typically done with a single, heterogenous group varying in size from three to 15 individuals. While there was a range in the number of participants in phenomenology, Vagle (2018) called for letting the phenomenon direct the study. Vagle (2018) expressed that the researcher's focus should be directed by the phenomenon being studied. This meant that, instead of imposing preconceived ideas about a particular topic onto the study, researchers should allow their observations and interpretations to guide their inquiry.

The researcher should strive to understand how participants experienced and made sense of the phenomenon by exploring its context, meaning-making processes, and implications for practice (Vagle 2018). In doing so, they could gain deeper insight into how participants interacted with each other or the lived experiences they were elaborating on with specific contexts that uncovered new perspectives on relevant topics. Furthermore, the number of participants and time spent with them would be relative to the studied phenomenon.

Phenomenology further blended the subjective and objective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology examined the intentionality of lived experiences, both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences shared within the group. Blending the subjective and objective was a core challenge for the phenomenological researcher (Peoples, 2021). In some forms of phenomenology, bracketing was utilized.

Vagle (2018) explained that bracketing referred to the researcher putting aside past experiences with the phenomenon not to influence the interpretation of the subject's experiences. Some early phenomenology scholars argued that one could not bracket their experiences from the world (Peoples, 2021). Instead, the hermeneutic circle was introduced. Peoples (2021) explained that the hermeneutic circle referred to the data analysis process of meaning-making of parts and reflecting overall. There was constant movement between the phenomenon being understood and the researcher's interpretations.

Data collection and analysis in phenomenology became systematic and structured (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection was most often in the form of phenomenological interviews and follow-up interviews through field notes, observations, and focus groups (Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2014). The semi-structured interview was recommended in phenomenology, though structured interviews might occur (Peoples, 2021). The goal of the phenomenological interview was to find out about the phenomenon as it was currently presented (Vagle, 2021). As expected, questions might change depending on the participants, and keeping a semi-structured format allowed for this method (Peoples, 2021). Furthermore, Peoples (2021) depicted those questions in the phenomenological interview were directed to experiences as lived and not thoughts and feelings. Peoples (2021) argued that phenomenological data analysis differed from other methods. While analysis suggests breaking data down into sections, phenomenology aimed to illuminate the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). However, the hermeneutic circle data was constantly reflected in parts of the method of the research and this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) described data analysis as systematic in phenomenology and provided a

straightforward method for analyzing data. First, the research would describe subjective experiences with the phenomenon to set aside firsthand experiences. Peoples (2021) recommended journaling throughout the process to achieve the analysis. Next, a list of significant statements would be developed. These statements would be about how the participants were experiencing the phenomenon. The statements from the participants would become grouped into broader information units called themes. A verbal description of what the participants experienced would then be created and examples would be recorded. The description would then be created, which could be called a structural description. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon would be developed, blending the textural and structural descriptions to keep the integrity of the data collected.

**Researcher's Role**

My role in this design was to be the primary listener who prepared questions and facilitated interactions that would allow the participants to reflect on positive or negative experiences. I also utilized a reflective approach, called bridling, within the study. Dahlberg (2005) presented the idea of bridling as an ongoing practice counselors used to acknowledge preconceived notions of the phenomenon under the study (Peoples, 2020; Vagle, 2018). Bridling allowed me to maintain a grip on assumptions as opposed to allowing assumptions to grip the self or the phenomenon (Stutey et al., 2020, p. 147). Bridling encourages the researcher to maintain openness when conducting research, actively reflecting on why the research from the study was important to the researcher.

I interviewed myself first and used reflexive journaling. As Lincoln & Guba (1985) noted, a reflexive journal was a type of self-assessment tool used in qualitative

research to document the researcher's thoughts and reactions throughout the study. It helped me understand my own biases and assumptions that could interfere with the accuracy of data collection or interpretation by providing an opportunity for critical reflection on the participants experiences before I analyzed them further. It allowed me to reflect on how I engaged with participants and other aspects of the research process to remain objective and ensure that findings were not influenced by my personal biases or assumptions (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

**Researcher's Statement**

In phenomenological research, a researcher must disclose their understanding about biases, values, and experiences that one brought to a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My interest in studying Black football player's lived experience at a PWI in the Midwest stemmed from being a student-athlete who attended a PWI and embarked on eye opening situations that shaped my future. Recognizing that my experience as a member of the target population may impact the understanding of the phenomenon. Accordingly, reflexive journaling and the hermeneutic circle were utilized to reflect on my perceptions of participants and the data collected. Peoples (2021) suggested that to understand any individual part, one had to first consider its relation to the whole work. This involved interpreting larger parts and then using those interpretations as a basis for interpreting smaller parts, thus forming an iterative cycle between interpretation and understanding.

The setting for the study was a small institution in the Midwest where I was an administrator in student affairs. While there was no attempt to use this to my advantage, the knowledge of the research setting might have affected the understanding of the

participants' lived experiences in the research setting. Furthermore, due to my professional role and the transformational experience of being a student-athlete, a rich depiction of the central phenomenon was enhanced, and I enriched the study with contributions to the perceived researched solution from a lived experience from other peer debriefers. It was important to disclose that phenomenological studies should always end with a discovery to be credible (Peoples, 2018).

**Context**

A small Midwestern university in a growing metropolitan area served as the setting for this study. The institution had a faith-based campus mission. The schools' enrollment ranged from 1,000 to over 3,000 students with over 50 undergraduate programs and state-of-the-art facilities.

**Participants**

Lodico et al. (2010) suggested that typically a small number of participants with similar experiences be selected. I used a purposeful sampling procedure. The criteria for selecting participants were they had to be Black football players, age range 19–24, with sophomore through senior status enrolled at a university in the Midwest. The study's purpose determined the size of the sample and specific cases. Twelve Black football players that met the criteria were invited by recruitment through a personal email (Appendix A). Ten players agreed to be interviewed.

**Data Collection and Procedures**

IRB approval was obtained before beginning the study. Consent forms were given to the participants and reviewed (Appendix B). Further, data collection in a phenomenological study involved conducting interviews with participants, and using the information

gathered to determine themes or patterns related to their experience (Creswell, 2014). The Black football players who agreed to participate in this study were asked to take part in in-depth semi structured interviews. During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions that allow respondents to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). A copy of the interview questions is in Appendix C. Probes or follow- up questions were used if needed to clarify responses.

I conducted the study via Zoom, giving the athletes the opportunity to participate in confidential and safe spaces to help prompt the participants to be more open since they were permitted to choose their settings. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. All interactions with participants were stored in an encoded secure location on a password protected computer to which I am the only one who has access. Each interview session was labeled to identify each participant interview's date, time, and pseudonym. People's (2021) step-by-step flow chart was used as a guide for the data analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Shenton (2004) shared that trustworthiness was akin to validity and reliability addressed in quantitative studies. Qualitative studies are needed to establish trustworthiness in four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

In a qualitative study, the researcher must maintain credibility. In qualitative research, validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing specific procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher stays true to the validity procedures and utilizes one of many strategies to incorporate validity.

Strategies used to produce validity and reliability in this study consisted of multiple methods.

One of these was peer debriefing, which entailed meeting with a neutral colleague who would ask questions about the methods and results of the study as well as any other emerging conclusions to create accountability and honesty. The dissertation advisor also served as a second coder. She and I separately coded interviews and then compared and agreed upon codes and themes. The advisor and I agreed that the emerging themes were efficient and represented the participant's responses. There was deliberation on a seventh theme and how many sub-themes were needed for the study. The advisor and I reviewed the data again to measure and determine the accuracy of the findings. Both the advisor and I disagreed on the need for a seventh theme. However, we agreed to combine a few sub-themes to articulate the participants' experiences effectively.

Second was the explanation of researcher bias. I revealed personal biases in interviewing myself and kept a reflexive journal. The third strategy was member checking. As mentioned above, I offered an opportunity for all participants to review the interpretations of their experience and agreed that the conclusions were credible. Five out of the 10 participants responded and then reviewed their transcripts. All five confirmed no changes were necessary.

The fourth technique to maintain credibility was thick description. Geertz (1973) suggested that these descriptions involved the detailed observation and interpretation of social events, rituals, symbols, artifacts, or any other phenomenon that can be interpreted to gain an understanding of cultural meaning. This strategy aimed to uncover the underlying meanings and motivations behind human behavior to create an accurate

portrait of culture and society. I provided a detailed account of the participants' experience where patterns and themes were put into context.

Peoples (2021) concurred that context was key in descriptions, showing the complexity of the lived world of participants. Creswell (2018) suggested in a phenomenological study, the researcher needed to clarify the bias the researcher brought to the study. Self-reflection created an open, honest narrative that resonated with the participants. I had to retain comments about how interpretations of the findings were shaped by researchers' backgrounds, such as gender, culture, history, and socio-economic origin (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Transferability**

In a phenomenological study, a small number of participants relate to certain environments and specific factors. This raised concerns about transferability (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) also suggested that transferability was also important that sufficiently thick description of the phenomenon under investigation be provided to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it, thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they saw emerge in their situations. Discussion points were made that I needed to provide enough detail to allow the reader to determine the degree of transferability to other environments (Bassey, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, thick, rich descriptions were provided to assess and support transferability.

**Dependability**

To enhance the dependability of this study, I engaged different reviewers to offer their perspectives on the data. Peoples (2021) noted that having a researcher not involved in the

research process enhanced the data analysis procedure and findings by determining if the findings accurately represented the data. Shenton (2004) argued that to address the dependability issue more directly, the processes within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results. I established a protype model for others to follow, as many might embark on the study's path.

**Confirmability**

Shenton (2004) argued that the concept of confirmability is the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity. Here, steps needed to be taken to help ensure the work's findings were the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher. In this study, I employed steps to ensure shortcomings and recognized these with the participants. Shenton (2004) also suggested that the role of triangulation in promoting such confirmability must again be emphasized in this context to reduce the effect of investigator bias. The form of triangulation I used was investigator, in which I identified a peer debriefer and a second coder to assist in the process. I also utilized Member checks with some participants and kept a reflective journal form for this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Some ethical considerations arose concerning the Black male football student-athletes involved in the study at the university located in the Midwest. I conducted interviews of Black male football student-athletes regarding their perceptions and opinions. Because participants offered their perceptions and opinions, concerns about confidentiality might rise. Creswell & Poth, (2018) argued that ethical issues could arise at

any point in the study and needed to be considered by the researcher so that measures are taken to ensure they were addressed. Therefore, I collected the data as confidentially as possible. Participants provided oral consent in line with IRB requirements and acknowledged their participation in the research study at their own discretion. However, they could exit the study at any time or choose to not answer any question(s).

The consent form highlighted potential risks, including possible reputation harm and emotional distress. A discussion was held with participants addressing how the data would be used and shared with participants during data collection. All audio-video recordings were destroyed once the study was concluded. When reporting the findings, the protection of the participants was upheld so that they could not be identified. Participants indirectly benefited from this study by contributing to higher education literature. A benefit of this study included its contribution to the university in the Midwest and its athletic department regarding the perception of engagement for its Black male football student-athletes.

**Summary**

This chapter described the methodology for this hermeneutical phenomenological study on Black football players experiences at a PWI in the Midwest. Topics addressed included the qualitative research design and rationale with the inclusion of defining methods and requirements to accomplish the study. Specifics related to phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology were provided and connected to this study's theoretical and conceptual orientations on Black identity and student engagement while seeking a sense of belonging on campus. Information on my role and my statement were also detailed. In addition, details associated with the study population, data collection,

measures, data analysis, and ethical considerations were provided. Finally, elements of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were addressed, and connected to this study. The next chapter outlines the findings.

# Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter identifies the findings that surfaced from this phenomenological study examining the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI in the Midwest. The central research question was how do Black football players experience institutional belonging and support systems at a PWI? The semi structured interview questions allowed participants to express their lived experiences as told through the voices and stories of those directly involved. By exploring their perspectives, this chapter sheds light on how participants felt, thought, and acted in response to identifying as Black football players at a PWI.

The beginning of this chapter describes the research site, participant's demographics, and then moves to an inductive analysis of emerging themes and subthemes. The findings were then analyzed deductively using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of Black identity theorized through a stage development model, highlighted by Nigrescence (Cross, 1971; 1991) and Tinto's integration development theory (1993). Both significantly related to Black football players' experiences at a Midwest PWI.

## Research Site

The research site was a small, private, liberal arts university located in the upper Midwest region of the United States. The university offered over 50 majors, minors, and pre-professional programs such as law, medicine, dentistry, veterinary science, and pharmacy. The enrollment was 1,500–2,500 students from approximately 30 states and approximately 25 countries. About 94% of undergraduates at the institution lived on campus, while 6% commuted daily to classes.

The university competed in the NCAA Division II ranks and had considerable success recently. The institution noted several conference titles and appearances in NCAA Division II national tournaments. The university sponsored 19 varsity sports teams, including men's baseball, basketball, cross country, football, golf, track and field, women's basketball, cross country, golf, softball, co-ed cheerleading and dance, and men's ice hockey.

**Participants Demographics**

Ten self-identified Black football players from a Midwest institution in the US were interviewed. The player's class ranks and ages ranged from sophomores to seniors and 19–24 years of age. All participants were active players on the football team during the last semester of the current academic year. Each participant had to have been recruited by the institution and were either starting, seen significant playing time or have red-shirted. The participants were all recruited from populated areas of the country and attended excellent high school football programs. Each Black football player was assigned a pseudonym to protect participant confidentiality. Table 1 provides a brief background of all the participants, including their ages, class ranks, majors, and where they moved from.

*Table 1 Participant Demographic Data:*

| Name | Age | Class Rank | Major | State Originally From |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| James | 22 | Junior | Biology/Sociology | Wisconsin |
| Tim | 19 | Sophomore | Business Administration | Wisconsin |
| Damal | 23 | Senior | Marketing | California |
| Marquise | 22 | Junior | Psychology | Minnesota |
| Alvin | 18 | Freshman | Marketing | Arizona |
| Lamont | 20 | Sophomore | Computer Science | Indiana |
| Max | 23 | Senior | Business Administration | Illinois |
| Kenny | 22 | Senior | Sport Management | Nevada |
| Doug | 23 | Senior/Grad | Business Administration | Texas |
| Dontrell | 18 | Freshman | Psychology | Maryland |

James was a junior who was outgoing and had an upbeat personality. James found the university through a coach who happened to be a friend of his family. His father was also a football coach back in his hometown and still spoke to the coach that recruited James, although the coach was no longer coaching at the university under study. James was also very active around campus and currently worked for the university student housing department as a RA and served on two student organizations, which were student government and an affinity organization.

Tim was a redshirt freshman who experienced his first fall semester at the university. Tim enjoys spending time with his family and friends back home. He was a

high school phenomenon, participating in three sports: football, basketball, and hockey. Tim's father was a football coach in his hometown and had experience coaching at a PWI. Tim was delighted he chose the university due to his relationships with the coaching staff. Tim was a business administration major and hoped to succeed at the university.

Damal was a senior and intended to pursue graduate school in the Fall 2023. He was quiet and tended to keep to himself. Damal saw significant playing time during his career and was a popular player to relate to in the locker room. Damal liked to talk to people when spoken to, and during their conversation, he would do what he could to inspire or influence the other person. He stated, "I try to make other people's day when I can talk with them." Damal wanted to graduate and move back to his hometown.

Marquise was a junior who was the youngest of four siblings who were also athletes. His sister played basketball at a Division II mid-size university in the Midwest. Marquise had two brothers who played football at Division I schools in the Midwest. They both had successful careers at their respective institutions. Marquise's father was a high school football coach back in his hometown, and Marquise communicated with his father once a month. Marquise was motivated to be a student-athlete and says his sport oriented family influences him.

Alvin was a freshman that liked to be the center of attention. Alvin's mother grew up in the Midwest and played basketball at a local university. Alvin's mother strongly encouraged him to attend the institution she wanted to attend but never had an opportunity to because she moved to the west coast with Alvin's father before he was born. Alvin was recruited by a coach who played in the same city he was from—unfortunately, the coach with whom Alvin had a relationship left for another job.

Lamont was a freshman working to engage with students outside the football program. He had difficulty adjusting to the university and looked up to some upper-level students for general support. Lamont's nickname was Lefty, and he wanted peers and others university personnel to call him by his nickname due to many mistaking him for another black football player on the team. Lamont received the nickname Lefty back in high school due to his playing quarterback and how he threw the ball.

Max was a senior set to graduate Spring 2023 and would then pursue a graduate degree at the university under study. Max was tall and aware of his physical presence as he navigated through campus. He transferred from a larger institution due to a significant change and wanted to develop his athletic ability and maturity. Max enjoyed visiting the university being studied, especially building a connection with the head coach and his position coach while in the transfer portal. Max said that was the moment for him to take a "leap of faith and try it out." Max relied on his relationships with his football peers to get him through tough days but was willing to work to get the help he needed.

Kenny was a senior academically but had two years of eligibility left for football and came from a diverse household. Growing up in a strict environment, Kenny's father was in the military and set rules for Kenny and his siblings. His parents strongly emphasized values and a hard work ethic, which would lead to granting you the gift you would receive. Kenny also strongly respected different cultures and credited his parents for teaching him to honor differences. He enjoyed being an athlete and felt that being on a sports team would expose people to different races and cultures and force everyone to

work together for a common goal. Kenny also embraced the dual role of an athlete and a student because of the grit individuals needed to be successful in both roles at the university.

Doug was a super senior due to a few injuries and was affiliated with the university for the past eight years. Doug recently graduated in the Spring 2022, but due to Covid, he played football in the Fall 2022. He still lived in the surrounding area and was working. Doug worked for a company he interned with when he attended the university. He grew up playing many sports back home: basketball, football, soccer, whatever was in season at a particular time, Doug was involved. He enjoyed being active and found that football was the sport that gave him the most joy. Doug missed his family and was currently making plans to go back home.

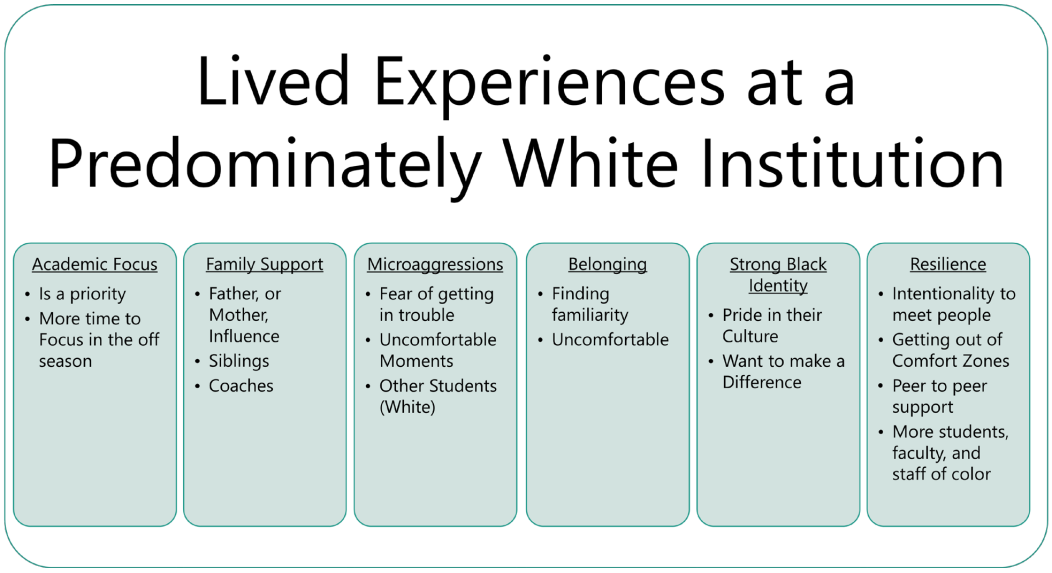
Finally, there was Dontrell, a freshman who was inspired to attend the university for academics rather than football. Dontrell was captivated when he was in the recruiting process when the coaches presented the university's reputation regarding academics. Dontrell grew up with a mother who prioritized receiving good grades and obtaining a college degree to get an excellent job for his future. Dontrell was focused on something other than joining the National Football League. He was focused on graduating with a college degree. While recruiting, Dontrell focused on the university's graduation rates and saw that most students who graduated from this university had a high percentage of finding jobs in their study areas. Dontrell loved football but had other plans for his future and was ready to take full advantage of the opportunities.

**Findings**

The analysis of this qualitative data generated themes that provided a detailed description of the phenomenon, which involved a detailed rendering of the information about the participant's place or events in the current setting. After reviewing the transcripts and coding, I found six major themes and subthemes, which a second coder validated. Member checks and peer debriefing were utilized to examine the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

The six themes were, first, the concentrated attention to have an academic focus. Two, the ability to maintain a connection and support from family and other influential figures. Three, constantly navigating microaggressions from peers. Four, attempting to find a sense of belonging. Five, being true to themselves in obtaining a strong Black identity. Six, finding resilience. Figure 1 showcases the relationship between the six themes and the central phenomenon.

*Figure 1 Themes of Black Football Players Lived Experiences*



### *Theme 1: Academic Focus*

All 10 participants had a keen sense of shifting their priorities from football to academics and understanding how essential academics were in their college careers. The findings revealed that academics were important to each participant. Participants identified critical characteristics of grit and determination to succeed, receive their degrees, and set the foundation for their career and lives after football.

Each Black football player shared a different reason why academics were the cornerstone of their attendance at the university. Damal, Max, and Doug talked about how they fought through the uncomfortableness at the university due to their strong motivation to finish their degrees. Due to Covid and the extra year of eligibility, Damal and Max would stay at the university and pursue MBAs. Doug utilized the connections he made at the university, promoting the importance of being a student-first athlete. He landed an internship that offered him a full-time job as he would live in the city. Doug found the benefits of focusing on his academics and relationships with his professors.

Doug stated:

> So, there are times that you can just be a student. But I will say the professors know you, or they are a fan of the athletes, like Dr. Williams was a fan of athletes, you know, just being around players and discussing student ethics. So, we do not have special treatment, I will say, but you know he enjoys talking to those people and getting to know them more than I guess where the professor would go out of their way to get to know you, just because he knows the type of stuff that you go through. Furthermore, they want to ensure you are doing okay in class. I can even say he was

the one that got me my internship throughout the school to end up finding me the job I am doing right now.

This quote affirmed the importance of academics for Black football players and showed how they could be disadvantaged by focusing too much on athletics to the detriment of their studies. This quote also aligned with past research that argued support and resources to help student-athletes balance athletics and academics was necessary for these students to achieve academic success (Harper, 2018).

Tim mentioned that he felt good being in college, and, although young, was prepared to be a student and put in the work in the classroom. When asked how Tim handled his schedule and blended the academic aspect of college athletics. Tim said,

Obviously, academics are always first. However, you still have got to have that in the back of your mind; you got to know your stuff for football because you're here for a reason, you got to get work done. I just do homework. Sometimes it is right after class, we do homework. Go to dinner and go right back to homework.

During Dontrell's recruiting visit, he specifically inquired about the graduation rates as he and his mother had lengthy conversations on the importance of college athletes focusing on academics. Black football players who chose Division II athletics might be less likely to pursue careers in professional football as they faced fewer educational opportunities and less access to higher education resources (Harper, 2018).

However, Dontrell explicitly praised the football team for their collective 3.0 GPA, which enticed Dontrell to attend the university and be a part of the football team. His passion and focus on academics proved to be inspiring to his family as he drew motivation to be the

first in his family to have the opportunity to graduate. Dontrell recalled the moment he decided to pursue the journey:

> Nobody in my family. I have my immediate family, like my mother, brother, and sister, but none of them. My father went to school and may have gone to college for a semester but still need to graduate. So, that was a big thing for me. I was the one going there, but not only for football. Academics are the key.

**More time to focus on academics in the off-season**. For five of the 10 players, managing time in the off-season was paramount for their success at the university. James indicated that during the offseason, he had more time to focus on academics, knowing that he committed to the coach that recruited him to an academically renowned institution. James strategizes on how to accomplish day to day tasks in the spring semester. James shared that he used a whiteboard to write down all his courses and what was due in each class to help him execute his goals. James remembered what the coach that recruited him said before leaving for another job:

> Coach Malone told me that my academics are the keys to my success, coming to this university is a 45-year decision, not a 4-to-5-year decision… Because I do believe that. Still, however, when I am like, how can I focus on academics and football. I need to find time, and the off-season is the only time I have for academics and building on my engagement with [a student organization] and student government.

The participants made significant statements about navigating different pressures and nuances of identifying as athletes and students. Students found university services to assist them during the off-season, such as tutors, student success center, library study rooms and the writing center. However, when more time was available, participants

tended to use it to focus on more challenging courses instead of being ordinary students. Marquise affirmed the structure he used to shift his priorities:

> In the off-season, I tend to take harder classes, you know—last spring. I had taken neuroscience statistics and ASL 4 all in, like… my off-season. I knew I needed to get all those done in my last season because I would not be able to focus like I needed to during the season. I tend to make fun or interesting classes in the fall, but in the spring, I take classes for my major so I can graduate.

Alvin stated,

> In the fall, I did not have too much time for anything but football, class, homework, and sleep, but it is vital to schedule free time during the off-season. James is a wizard at managing his schedule. He does not have any wasted minutes. I will learn from him.

All the participants noted that the university did a decent job offering resources so they could put their academics first. Services like tutoring, the writing center, or using a study table in the library to focus on their academics during the offseason were offered. It was critical for institutions to provide academic support services tailored to student-athletes' needs and goals or to create a culture of academic excellence within athletics programs and implement policies that promote academic success. With such support, students would progress significantly toward degree completion (Robinson & Armstrong, 2017).

***Theme 2: Family Support***

All 10 participants shared who their support system was and where went to receive encouragement and support when issues arose. Either the situation was a primary concern or a subtle issue that caused the Black football player to seek advice or mentorship. Each

participant mentioned a particular instance that they needed to reflect on searching for instruction on navigating how someone talked to them or how to handle a classroom interaction.

Hill and Smith-Jackson (2009) noted that Black football players needed an environment of support and guidance to succeed in PWI environments that were often unfamiliar or hostile towards students of color due to systemic racism embedded within the curriculum and culture of higher education institutions historically dominated by Whites and other privileged groups. Family members, coaches, faculty, and administrators played notable roles in supporting students of color, especially Black football players who attend the PWI.

Family members played important roles such as providing emotional support and offering advice on academic performance. Family also helped with financial aid applications or housing arrangements when necessary. This help permitted students to remain focused on their studies without having to worry about basic needs being met inside and outside the classroom setting (Hill & Smith-Jackson, 2009).

**Father, Mother, and Sibling Influence.** Kenny explained he received news that one of his closest friends back home was killed in a gang-related incident, the other committed suicide, and the last one dealt with homelessness. Kenny felt that no one at the university was familiar with those situations that could help him navigate them
as Kenny contemplated leaving the institution. He immediately turned to his father for advice. He stated,

> I wanted to go to their funeral, and I could not attend. I was crying like a baby. Black men do not cry! However, my dad, being in the military, comforted me and told me

> what he experienced while in the service. He told me to talk to my position coach, as he is another Black man. He understands.

Another participant looked for consistency in his support systems with his family. Tim, whose father is a football coach at his high school, called him for advice once a month. This allowed Tim to gain positive insight and encouragement when the environment at the university was detrimental for him.

Not all the participants had fathers or male influences in their families to reach out to when they needed a positive figure to help them assess their situations. Dontrell and Alvin relied on their mothers' phone calls to help them get through the hard days, especially when they felt isolated or backed into a corner. Dontrell affirmed this by mentioning that his mother was his most significant supporter. He stated,

> Mom kind of noticed I wasn't myself, and she came up the next weekend. She flew out, came up that week, and she took me out just to get away from campus for a little bit, just to talk about what's making me feel this type of way… And of course, she is like my biggest supporter... When I talked about transferring, because of the way I was feeling here at school, she was like, okay, like, if that's going to be a part of the plan. She talked about the benefits that I would have here, what I would be giving up if I was to transfer. She gives me the support I need…. She is all the support I need. She wasn't telling me like, suck it up and stuff like that, because she knew that, I don't normally act like that. I'm not the one that's like that in our family. So, she knew it was serious.

Alvin also affirmed that his mother was his support system, and whenever he needed her, she was there. Family support was critical when students studied away from home (Hill &

Smith-Jackson, 2009). Furthermore, there were times students needed support to get through the pressures when their families were hundreds of miles away. Doug could find support from his teammates' parents when isolation and loneliness occurred during the academic year. When expressing his opinion about support systems, Doug shared:

It's a long distance for me, so I cannot have that face-to-face connection, and you cannot get that anytime you want to, so I rely heavily on and most grateful for my teammates' parents. They look out for me also.

Seven of the participants also relied on their coaches when they were in need. Position coaches were utilized as father figures for many football players. When the students did not know of a place to go, their coaches rose to the occasion and kept the Black football player grounded. Doug said that when he experiences turmoil in class or on campus, he would go to his position coach to give him advice on how to handle the situation that occurred.

**Siblings.** Participants mentioned on several occasions that motivation for attending college and persevering came from their deep love and appreciation for the family in terms of brothers and sisters with the hope to inspire them to follow in their footsteps. Hill and Smith-Jackson (2009) revealed that, for many Black football players, having a supportive sibling relationship was beneficial in helping them manage emotions associated with being a student-athlete at a PWI. Siblings could also offer practical advice related to navigating college life such as financial aid resources available to athletes.

James spoke profoundly about this relationship with his twin sister and how talking to her twice a month was helpful for him and her. James said:

> I have a twin sister, and I miss her, so that is my best friend. Built-in best friend, truly. I remember it. She was struggling with her mental health and depression, and anxiety. She said something very alarming to me. You know, I wanted to come home then, but she told me that I am the only reason she is still here. And when I heard that that was like, 'Wow!' That was like that, that's still the most touching, and is probably the hardest thing I've heard in my life ever. That is what keeps me going. I must finish for my twin.

Marquise also mentioned that his brothers and sisters all attended college. They either experienced the same thing he is or had seen it. Therefore, Marquise, being the youngest, got inspiration from his siblings and a small amount of competition as to who would also finish college.

***Theme 3: Microaggressions***

All 10 participants cited that they experienced a series of microaggressions at the university. Some were intentional, and some were small, subtle insults that would "eventually make someone crack" as Max recalled. Sue (2010) noted that microaggressions were subtle forms of discrimination that occurred through verbal or nonverbal communication towards individuals from a minority group, such as people of color at PWIs.

Participants shared that whether inside or outside the classroom, microaggressions impacted their lives and interfered with their sense of belonging to the university. These microaggressions could be intentional or unintentional. These microaggressions could involve comments or behavior that denigrated someone's identity based on one's racial background. This could include making assumptions about an individual's abilities based

on their race, using derogatory terms to refer to the individual, or treating the person differently than other students due to the color of the student's skin. The cumulative effect of these microaggressions often led to feelings of alienation for people of color at PWIs, which could negatively impact academic performance and discourage participation in campus activities (Sue, 2010).

All the Black football players recounted the number of times constituents on campus stared at them while standing in line at the commons to receive food or asked inappropriate questions that led to awkward silence and changing the subjects. Damal expressed that when he was walking through a parking lot on his way to class, he saw a White classmate sitting in her car. When he walked by the car, the classmate locked the car as Damal continued walking to class. While in class, Damal saw the student and asked her about the incident. She replied, "What are you talking about? Aren't you a football player?" When recalling that situation, Damal intentionally responded in a certain way. He stated. "That threw me off because you do not know who I am. How do you know I play on the football team? Every time I go to class I just say, 'Hi, I'm Damal," and I tell them about my hobbies and whatnot. But I try to stay away from football because that just labels you, as you know you're the dumb football player, those stereotypes."

Alvin walked into class and had another student ask permission to touch his hair. Alvin also added, several times, he was mistaken for another football player when there was no resemblance to his teammate. Alvin cited, "I get tired of them mistaking me for Lefty or James, and we do not even look alike."

Doug recalled a joke about being the only Black person in his classes. Doug felt that he always had to answer for the entire Black culture in his classroom. Doug was usually the only student of color in his general education courses. However, because he was a computer science major, and when wat is time for those upper-level classes, he felt good to have international students with him, so Doug did not have to answer questions alone. He said, "Sometimes I enjoy getting to know international students in my classes. Professors expected certain types of people to know the material, you know. However, luckily for me, I had a lot of the international students that either helped or deflected the target off me."

**Fear of Getting in Trouble.** Many participants shared that in a few situations when microaggressions occurred, they felt surges of fear. Fear that they might get expelled from the university because they would be wrongly accused or have campus security, or the police, called on them. Max explains that his size perpetuated fear, which was never his intention. Max said:

> I'm 6'7". I'm 315 like you can't miss me, you know? And then put on top of that, I know I can look scary. I was waiting for the elevator and once it came to my floor, the door opened and there were students in there. I felt like I had eyeballs on me, there was this awkward silence, and I knew they didn't want me on the elevator, they started to whisper. I just said that I will catch the next one.

Max was fearful that he was going to get called into the campus safety office. Lamont had a different experience with a peer. He mentioned that he was holding the residence hall door for a female student, and she refused to walk through. Lamont said he was confused by the refusal as he thought he was being a gentleman. He said that other students were

walking by and staring as they tried to figure out the issue. Lamont said as the young lady began to walk through the door. Lamont said, “You are welcome.” The female student immediately turned around and said, “I do not want to get you in trouble.”

Lamont's response was detrimental. He said:

> I was scared for my life. Well, I mean, I am like, okay, what did you mean by that… I thought I was going to get expelled just for holding the door for someone. That really made me want to leave! I did not talk to anyone for about two weeks.

Students of color who experienced these microaggressions every day could be in states of fear and isolation, trying to navigate a hostile environment. This environment could ultimately become nonconductive for the student to return for the next semester at the university. In response to microaggressions, people of color should acknowledge their feelings of anger or hurt but try to remain calm when responding so as not to escalate the situation further (Sue, 2010).

**Uncomfortable Moments.** While all the participants shared moments of microaggressions that overwhelmed them and caused significant questioning of their longevity at the institution, Black football players tended to be in extremely uncomfortable situations. For instance, James, who served on student government, was at a meeting before a holiday break. He displayed a signature hairstyle of French braids, a popular hairstyle in the Black culture. After the students returned from break, James had a different hairstyle, sporting a blowout Afro. James felt extremely uncomfortable when his classmates were amazed that his “type of hair” could change like that. James said, “These people acted as if they had never seen an Afro before. What’s up with that?” James felt the entire student body government stopped what they were doing to ask questions or try

to touch James's hair. James said, "It's moments like these that I don't want to be here. Do I always have to teach them about our culture; it's not always my job."

Tim identified several incidents that left him feeling small and out of place. The first-year student felt the awkward silence of an uncomfortable moment when he was in a first-year seminar class when he was accused of cheating on an assignment. Tim expressed how everyone in the class looked at him like he was guilty without any explanation. Tim recalled the event like it was yesterday. He said:

> One of the teachers said I was cheating in front of the entire class. Moreover, he has singled me out in front of people, making life hard. I explained to the teacher how I did not cheat, got my answer, and everything else. However, we are still going through that kind of process of recovering from that. I know it is just the kind of thing you do not want to deal with, but unfortunately, we must.

Kenny shared that he and his teammates planned to drive to Mankato, Minnesota to see family members and friends. Kenny asked if his teammates would be okay if he rode along to visit his sister. His teammates said sure, and they started on their journey. Then it happened; Kenny recalled the incident:

> I've had someone like driving to Mankato. I wanted to go see my sister because she lives in Minnesota. As we were driving, a man saw me. He sped up past me and then had the nerve to slow back down. And then he rolls down his one. He said, 'Go back to where you came from,' and then called me a Nigger and took off. Me being back home, I mean, I faced this stuff several times, I mean the number of times this happens to people are crazy, but my teammates did not say anything, and it was silence in the car for at least 30 minutes. That was uncomfortable for me.

It was imperative that when situations involving microaggressions occurred, students needed to build the courage to challenge the societal norms. Students needed to respond in proactive and positive ways. Individuals should also try to educate those perpetrating microaggressions about why their words or actions were inappropriate and how it impacted them negatively (Sue, 2010).

**Other White Students**. During all the participants' encounters with microaggressions, they involved other students, predominantly White students, who either played the roles of perpetrators or bystanders in specific incidents. Participants who shared lived experiences with microaggressions talked about how they would need to educate most of their peers about the situation and what or what not to do in the future to maintain civility.

Two out of the 10 Black football players felt it was their new part-time job to help ease the uncomfortable moment or teach their peers how to be advocates for people of color, let alone Black people. James said it best when recounting a recent interaction with a White peer during the hair incident at the student government meeting. James said, "I took 45 minutes out of the meeting explaining what corn rolls were and twist, dreadlocks, and how it is inappropriate to touch someone's hair without asking." James mentioned that his peers and everyone else at the university could not fear tough conversations. Individuals needed to be held accountable to learn and unlearn discriminatory statements and talk to the individual.

Kenny had a similar response as he mentioned that after similar incidents, he found himself the only Black student in the classroom educating classmates on how to be advocates and take different approaches to this work. According to Kenny, "Being the

spokesperson for the entire Black race is not and will not retain him or any other Black football player that is recruited to the university." Kenny also said that during those situations, you had to mentally prepare yourself and say, "Okay, if this happens, I gotta [sic] stick do this. If that happens, I must come up with something. It can be extremely exhausting."

Another participant explained the pent-up emotion he had after the microaggressions happened to him, and how he released those emotions was critical. Max, the 6'7", 315-pound student-athlete, said he tried to correct people who used microaggressions against him with a kind, tenderhearted approach at first. However, if the subtle insults and comments deliberately continued, he releases his frustration on the football field. Max said:

> I'm kind of a Teddy bear and tenderhearted guy, you know, when I love, like I love hard, and care for those I love for. But you know, on the flip side, which is, you know why I played football too, like, if you do me wrong, you know, like if you disrespect me, and it is, and it is blatant, you know, and it is direct, it is specifically towards me then like I got nothing for you. You know I am going out there, and I played football for a reason, you know. That gave me an excuse to go out there and physically impose my will legally. I will keep that stuff in the back of my mind, and you know, store that back there, so that when it came to game time, it is like, okay, this is for all those people who have not necessarily grown up. Nevertheless, they are still stuck in our old days, when my ancestors were here, you know, facing these hard times.

The outburst of emotion or internalized pressure points that reach the breaking point could develop within individuals who were victims of microaggressions. Specific measures had to be administered to alleviate those emotions and internal pressures. Black Football players who experienced isolation and uncomfortable moments or felt the need to educate others about microaggressions should take care of themselves by talking with a trusted friend or professional counselor if needed to process any negative emotions that may have been triggered by the experience (Sue, 2010).

It was also imperative for individuals to recognize the signs and triggers of microaggressions and what they do to a person in an environment that was not friendly or welcoming to people with diverse attributes. Sue (2010) advised people of color to develop "coping strategies" for dealing with microaggressions daily. He suggested that individuals create action plans to address the various types of microaggressions they might encounter, and practice self-care techniques such as mindfulness or relaxation exercises to manage their emotions when faced with these experiences. Additionally, Sue (2010) encouraged those who experienced microaggression to seek support from family members and friends who could provide understanding and empathy during difficult times.

### *Theme 4: Sense of Belonging*

Most participants say they did not feel they had a sense of belonging at the university due to many circumstances of isolation, poor representation of Black men on campus, and university constituencies unfamiliar with Black football players' experiences and overall situations with their lives. The theme of sense of belonging clearly emerged from the interviews and communicated the conflict Black football

players had of support in one area but not in another. Many of the participants believed their university should prioritize and offer to develop them and other Black football players or Black students that would be recruited in the future. PWIs can provide African American students access to resources and networks not available elsewhere, but only if they could feel comfortable on campus and in their environment to fully take advantage of those offerings (Carter, 2020).

Eight out of the 10 participants said they did not feel they belonged at the university. Many factors related to this response came from isolation and loneliness. Doug stated that he did not feel he belonged because of the environment that the university promoted. Doug commented:

> "No one looks like me on campus." He also said that the weather helped deteriorate his mood and feeling of being a part of the campus community. Doug remarked, "I think there are just so many factors that led me to not enjoy my stay like every day. Some stuff being like the weather like, I'll never get used to being cold throughout the year. And then there'll be no sun outside, or just because of how long it lasts throughout the year. You know... It's just a mood killer like every day, you know. But other than that, people wise, it's just not many of us here except the people who were raised here and the athletes or international students. There is not a space for us."

Damal added, "That question is tough." He stated that he tended to keep to himself due to needing time to reflect on how he would navigate each day. Damal also said it was challenging that there are only a few Black players on the team. He stated, "Everybody I hang out with is pretty much White, so like… trying to relate with them could make me

feel like I do not belong sometimes, because it feels like I have to. you know, like a code switch, or whatever to feel like I can talk to them."

Lamont mentioned that no one at the university could relate to him with the situations he goes through daily. He stated:

> I do not belong. After that incident, I am scared here. I mean, there is really no one I can go to. Can anybody really relate? Well, from what I know of, or what kind of family issues I got like, financially, something I have right now. I do not belong; we do not belong here!

Participants on campus felt disconnected. Many recounted situations inside and outside the classroom that gave them the notion that they did not belong. They felt they did not belong due to being out of place and told they were outsiders and to return to where they came from. Connectedness was a priority for these Black football players and getting stakeholders to understand this was daunting. Strayhorn (2012) suggested creating programs or initiatives designed explicitly with Black football players in mind to foster a greater sense of connectedness.

**The Unfamiliarity Within the Campus.** All 10 participants felt the university could do a better job recruiting individuals that looked like them to ensure familiarity with the faculty and staff on campus. All the participants said that they were aware of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) office, which employed two Black women in charge of overseeing the implementation of the campus inclusion strategic plan. Although James spoke highly of the notion that the institution had a DEI office, he was extremely critical of how the campus perceived the work, and whose job it was to carry out the inclusion strategic plan throughout the campus. James added, "Miss W and Miss T handle their

business, and I'm so grateful for them. But mind you, they are only two people. They cannot possibly fix the whole campus." It was clear and explicitly appreciative that most of the 10 Black football players knew who the two administrators in the DEI office were. It was clear that unique programs were created out of the DEI office that built a familiar environment for students to find belonging and a place where Black football players could be themselves for a moment.

Alvin and Lamont spoke about a unique program called the SOAR (Students On A Rise) that they both felt helped fill their voids in familiar faces on campus. The SOAR program was for students from underrepresented backgrounds to engage in opportunities to become leaders on campus. Students would be intentionally exposed to the program's premier resources for students. The program held meetings where students talked to each other to provide a brave space for them to be themselves. When talking about the SOAR program, Alvin said:

> I would say the biggest thing. or the only thing that has helped from faculty and staff is Miss W and Miss T. They are big, They're a big deal, especially because I'm in the SOAR program, and I'm on that team. And we have those meetings, that's a good time to kind of be around people that can relate to you and look like you. And I feel like Miss W does a really good job with that and Miss T. I would say they could probably use a little bit more help. But I think they've really helped me out. Miss W really became somebody I could always talk to and ask her for anything and be a good role model. But they need help. It would be great to have more faculty and staff of color, just so we can relate better.

Although the university's progress in providing an environment conducive to assisting

the Black football players in trying to build a sense of belonging was slowly matriculating, significant steps needed to be implemented around help for the few who may look like these players or were advocates for the DEI work around campus. PWIs had to develop and implement policies, practices, and curricula that were inclusive of their student body's various backgrounds and perspectives.

In addition, the need for faculty members to provide mentorship and guidance to help students feel welcomed and supported within the campus community was imperative to create belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Several of the participants mentioned that one of the primary reasons they attended the university was because of their football coach. Two respondents affirmed that they drew a tight connection with their Black coach and found refuge in him at the beginning of their tenure at the institution.

However, in James, Marques, and Lamont's experiences, the coach who recruited them left for another job, which gave each of them a feeling of isolation and loneliness. The ability of the institution to recognize the guidance and mentorship Black faculty, coaches, administrators, and peers could do for the social and career development of a Black football player would aid satisfaction for future student-athletes. To do so required creating an environment where these students felt safe, supported, respected, and accepted by both faculty members and peers alike. One way that schools could foster such an atmosphere was through the implementation of diversity initiatives designed specifically for African American student-athletes in mind (Carter, 2020).

### *Theme 5: Strong Identity*

Obtaining a strong identity in any endeavor an individual pursues could produce tremendous benefits and rewards. All 10 participants interviewed answered the question

about their identity with a sense of purpose and conviction regarding who they represent and how they carried themselves. I found the Black football players' responses overwhelmingly confident in this theme as it emerged heavily in self-confidence and determination.

Developing a strong identity in something was essential because it gave an individual a sense of belonging and purpose. It could also give them confidence and self-esteem and help to build relationships with others who shared the same identity (Fowler & Smith, 2017). It was evident that the Black football players whose fathers were coaches at high schools with a similar racial demographic recalled experiences where they had conversations about goals and what challenges they would expect to cross their paths while in college. Having a strong identity could provide stability during times of change or difficulty and motivation for personal growth (Gardner & Pierce, 2019).

Additionally, all 10 Black football players could identify with a current situation or an influential moment so that people around them could understand who they were and how their small community drove one another to survive the day. The respondents had to recognize that their strong identities could lead to better mental health outcomes, such as improved psychological resilience and lower stress levels (Meyer et al., 2020). Therefore, a few of the participants' responses illuminated when asked about their Black identity and how it could add to comfort during difficult times as well as how it provided stability amidst change and uncertainty.

**Black Identity.** Marquise and Tim spoke about how they were proud to be Black and how their father prepared them for this moment. When asked the question of what Black identity meant to them. Marquise said:

> I think it means a lot to me, because being raised while attending a White school, I saw my dad be the standout. My dad is actually the first Black teacher hired in my school district, and he's the only black high school teacher at my high school. So, it made it very apparent to me that, by him doing that, it set up a good positive Black figure in my life. Because I really did not see anyone else outside of my family. Even in school. So, it was good to see that. Him being there, and how it affected the other kids that he taught and, how it affected their lives. And now he's moved toward more of a guidance counselor role, and he organizes a leadership group. And it is basically all Black people. He doesn't say it's an all-Black group. But he says it's more of a minority group, but anyone's welcome, and he has prominent Black figures come and talk to students whether it's prominent Black figures in finance, real estate, and other careers. I know he has put that motivation in me, and I will not let him down. I'm very proud.

Marquise was bi-racial and said he was proud to be a "mixed-kid" and proud that his mother, who was White, was not afraid to stand up to other White people about her bi-racial children. Marquise said he was enormously proud to be Black and would use identity to build relationships and be unapologetically Black. When there are moments in the classroom where he had to stand up for his race, Marquise said, "I will do it loud and proud!"

Tim had a different approach to acknowledging his Black identity and was more self-aware of his surroundings and how he was perceived around peers, faculty, staff, and others who didn't look like him. Although, his father was a Black high school football coach who worked with many Black football players as well as other students of color and

White students. Tim said he learned how to stand out in the crowd and be his true Black self from his grandfather who he gave the credit to for teaching his father to be the man he became. Tim said he was young but ready to learn and not be afraid to speak up and be a strong Black leader. Tim recalled an experience that had in the locker room this past fall semester. Tim said:

> I know who I am, and this school is definitely a challenge. Like I said, there was one kid on the football team, I heard he was talking about us Blacks on the team. I know there are only a few of us here, so I wanted to get it out and just tell him how it is right there to clear the air. Like if I know the person, I just say something because I am not afraid to talk.

I asked Tim how that made him feel. He affirmed and said:

> I feel good about myself because I know a lot of people don't do that. And I have always been that way where I'll speak out about something that is wrong. Like, I don't like that people just sit and take it. It has always bothered me, not just here, at the university but just anywhere. So, I feel good about myself, and I hope people understand where I'm coming from. If they don't, at least I said something.

Tim understood how society was treating Black people, and he was proud of being a Black man that can help in changing the world and the perception the world had about Black men.

James responded to the interview question as having a strong Black identity, and was not afraid to let peers, faculty, or staff, and everyone he encountered know who he was and what he believed in. When asked what his Black Identity meant to him, James responded emphatically by saying the following:

> It means everything like, it means everything, you know. I'm a Black man, and I'll be a Black man here. I will be a Black man everywhere. It doesn't matter where I go. I am a Black man. It means everything to me, and I don't carry a chip on my shoulder, but I make sure I have my chin up because I'm like, 'Yes, I am a *Black* man, and I'm proud of being Black.

I asked him what "having your chin up meant." James replied:

> They want you to walk with your head down. They want you to, you know, feel like, yeah, White people. They feel like they know. Moreover, I think for that clarification, White people want Black men or people, in general, to feel less than that is how it has been. They want you to feel that way. And I am not saying all. I am not saying all because some of my best friends are White. I try to educate them that I am not the stereotypical Black man people see on TV or read about in fictional books.

James and others expressed that their Black identity assisted them in gaining confidence in themselves and developing a context to be influential for others that attended the university.

Some participants understood the complexity of being an advocate when much of the uneducated rhetoric from their peers was against them. Half of the Black football players said they wanted to make a difference and were not afraid to stand up for their identity and do what was right when disrespected or belittled by insensitive comments or statements.

Characteristics of a confident Black man who knew one's Black identity included showcasing the awareness of the history and struggles of African Americans, as well as its

importance to understanding their identity. Additionally, Black Football players felt free to speak out on issues affecting people of color while standing up for justice without fear or hesitation. Furthermore, they understood racism existed and actively worked on challenging it through education for themselves and others around them (Reed, 2020). The participants continued to develop their identity, and their engagement levels on campus increased.

**Pride In Their Culture.** Although participants collectively embodied a strong Black identity, it was evident that a sense of pride in their culture was also present. All 10 participants responded with no regret of being Black football players. During their interviews, students discussed societal issues affecting them on campus and national incidents across the country, and how they reacted to each significant incident. The benefits of Black football players establishing pride in their culture would be in developing increased self-confidence that would help them in all aspects of life, improving their performance on the football field, and providing the motivation needed to perform at higher levels (Larbi, 2020). The respondents also gave a sense of cultural understanding that could help them better understand their history and struggles faced as a minority group on campus. They would eventually lead to persevering at a PWI. Many participants shared that when they had a challenging day that aggravated the campus climate, they often found motivation through books, quotes, or watching something to gain strength to face the next day. Kenny responded to how he shows his pride in his culture by embracing key strategies given to him by his father. He stated, “In weak moments, I remembered what my father told me. Dad told me to listen to audiobooks on empowering my Black culture and find other Black teammates to talk to and abide in.

That helps me restore my pride."

### *Theme 6: Resilience*

The final theme that emerged was that participants' resilience could be enhanced in a variety of ways. Rudd & Della (2019) suggested strategies designed to help Black football players better navigate the challenges they faced while attending PWIs, including racism and microaggressions. One of those strategies consisted of establishing strong self-esteem and self-love to navigate the racism and microaggressions they faced. Another recommendation was that Black football players should build strong sense of self-worth and acceptance of their identity. This strategy would be achieved through self-reflection, developing positive relationships, and actively engaging in activities that validate their identity and worth. Another strategy for Black football players could be developing a support system. Black football players needed to build robust support systems of family, peers, and mentors who could provide emotional and practical support (Rudd & Della, 2019). Furthermore, these strategies could also help students achieve academic success by providing them with support systems and resources necessary for their development both on the fields and in the classrooms.

Five of the 10 participants shared insights on their resilience at their university. Dontrell mentioned that it was hard to navigate at a PWI, and it took much mental space to be himself on campus. He said, "It sticks with you. I always wonder if this is the place for me, as if I am still at this wall. Do I want to continue to fight?" Dontrell continued by expressing that many factors played into his decision, including school, sports, education, money, and situational aspects. He said, "As a Black football player here, you do not have a person that helps get over that wall to talk to you at a predominantly White

institution, which makes it super stressful." However, Dontrell also mentioned that he could not give up because his mother was a huge supporter and would not let him fail. He also said that he saw some of the older Black football players experiencing the same thing and Dontrell would talk with them to find strategies to survive.

Kenny, a man of faith, relied on God to "get him through the tough times." He mentioned that his first year was the hardest. He said:

> When I first came here, I wanted to transfer every day. I was just like. It is too cold out here. It is in the Midwest, like I am a West Coast boy. I thought everything was best on the West Coast, the best coast type of deal. And then, as I started growing up.
>
> It is good now, like I am establishing myself. I feel like I'm more established here.

When asked why he felt more established, Kenny said, "Well, first, my faith in God and believing in who I am have helped me. We talk about real-life things around James and others, keeping us grounded here." As mentioned in the identity theme, having a solid identity was one factor that kept the Black football players persevering on campus despite the trials and tribulations. Kenny affirmed that notion when he spoke about his resilience and how being a Black man helped him on his journey. Kenny said,

> After George Floyd happened, our team had a meeting over Zoom to discuss it. It was telling… like they wanted us, all of the Black football players to enlighten them with our stories, like what we've had to face as being Black men in the society and ever since then I feel like there's been more of our appreciation for being in this space. But it shouldn't be an incident such as the murder of George Floyd to get their attention. This happens every day for us and on a small scale, it happens on

campus. That is another reason I stay and tolerate this stuff; I will not quit, it's not in my DNA!

James shared that he always strived to prove the doubters wrong and would keep striving to the top. James mentioned that he looked to be a role model for the younger athletes that would come behind him. He said,

> "I want my legacy here to be legendary, like… as I looked up to those before me, I want others to do the same." James challenged himself to be more vocal and to force difficult conversations with people to keep his toolbox sharp. He said, "I will graduate, I have another year of football, but I will graduate, for sure."

Max affirmed his identity and vowed to be himself and pursue his goals. He said:

> Just talk to people, you know, don't ever feel defeated. Don't put your head down, although you might be a minority, do not feel like a minority can't do things. Stand up and be proud of who you are, stand tall and build those relationships you never know that White person next to you might be your best man in your wedding.

Doug noted that his experience was interesting. There were a lot of ups and downs, but he had to keep fighting. He noted,

> America is predominantly White. You will have to face this everywhere, especially at work. Ironically my job is just like the school I attended. I am the only Black man here. You just got to hold your own, understand and be the person you were born to be.

All 10 participants spoke about being resilient and not allowing the environment they were in make them quit and find other solutions. Although all 10 have had near-

transferring experiences, the Black football players had similar answers when asked what the university could do to keep them progressing at the university. Regarding what would keep them striving to stay and become a part of the university community, most Black football players responded with more faculty, staff, and students of color. More people who look like them could provide a place to seek refuge and gain positive insight and mentorship from a relatable face who was influential and would help create an inclusive environment to gain strength to persevere.

Astin et al. (1993) and Kuh (1993) suggested that Black football players should engage in a variety of activities. For example, they could attend events specifically designed to foster connections with other students of color or participating in student organizations that promote cultural awareness and acceptance on campus to build strong relationships with faculty, staff, and students of color on their college campuses. All 10 participants were asked about their reflections on their times at the university and what they would do differently to enhance the experience at a PWI.

**Integration Within the Community.** Black Football players lacked time to invest and engage outside the classroom. Their fall semesters were full due to being in season and focusing on academics, performances on fields, and taking care of their mental and physical health. However, during the offseason in the spring semester, most Black football players shared that they had little time to engage but did not with the other peers. Participants said they spent their free time with their teammates and did not venture out of their comfort zones.

Max shared that he wanted to get out of his head and meet new people. He said, “I wish I did.” Younger participants said they would look for more opportunities outside

their teammates to meet new faces and attend more university programs. James spoke about his residence hall advisor and student government leader involvement. He said, "Although I am integrating, we need to see the university double down on our request to grow the university. If not, they will not have many Black football players left." Lamont admitted that he needed to look for more opportunities to meet new folks, but when he did, he wanted his peers to be themselves and not try to act like someone or something they were not.

All the Black football players respectively and sometimes bluntly wanted the university to follow through on their promises and take time to understand the Black football players' lived experiences and provide the necessitates for them to enjoy the institution they selected. To enhance resilience among Black football players at a PWI, the participants' responses pointed to four essential items that promote resilience: (a) fostering a sense of belonging; (b) developing supportive relationships with faculty and staff; (c) developing an understanding of one's identity as a student-athlete; and (d) creating a culture of academic success. Rudd & Della (2019) discussed how these strategies could be implemented within the athletic department through mentoring programs, academic support services, and targeted programming for athletes from underrepresented backgrounds.

**Deductive Theoretical & Conceptual Framework Analysis**

This study was viewed through the lens of Tinto's integration theory (1993) as the theoretical framework and Black identity as the conceptual framework. Both were utilized to view Black football players' experiences at a PWI in the Midwest. By utilizing the two frameworks, Black football players' experiences could be examined in the day-to-day

moments they had to embark on to obtain a sense of belonging and utilize institutional support systems. By utilizing the two frameworks, a broad view of lived experiences of the phenomena could be completed.

### *Tinto's Integration Theory*

Components of Tinto's (1993) integration theory appeared in three of the six themes that emerged in this study, such as in family support, primarily with the Black football players' coaches. Several participants stated that their recruiting coach left them as soon as they committed to the university. This attribute pointed in the proximity of Black football players needing integration into an informal measure of staff interactions. Participants in this study spoke explicitly about when their coaches left. The Black football players contemplated de-committing and leaving the institution.

Microaggressions were the second theme in which Tinto's (1993) integration theory surfaced. In many situations, Black football players experienced subtle and insensitive comments in classes, parties, student gatherings, student government meetings, and locker rooms that prevented Black football players from feeling comfortable in attendance and choosing to leave or have adverse reactions. According to Tinto (1993)*, incongruence* was defined as the need to develop connections that would prevent the integration process and cause a lack of institutional fit. One participant echoed that one microaggression he experienced multiple times created extreme fear and caused an immediate reaction to want to transfer to another institution.

Belonging was the final theme that aligned with the first theoretical framework and dwelled within the interaction of social systems. Tinto (1993) suggested that students were more likely to remain enrolled in institutions if they became connected to social and

academic life. Black football players experienced isolation from peer-to-peer actions, a lack of programs focusing on Black culture, or mentorship and advisement from individuals who looked like them. Participants in this study did not find a feasible outlet to create an environment of belonging outside of their small group of Black football players who were on the team and shared the same experiences. They also felt the institution needed to pay more attention to the population's voices. If not addressed, the university would not retain current players and recruit Black players in the future.

Students who did not feel at home in an institution or did not believe that an institution could help them meet their goals were unlikely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Likewise, students who were *isolated* or did not engage in social interactions within the university were less likely to persist. Tinto (1993) also suggested that institutions should strive to create supportive environments for all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, so that everyone felt welcomed and included in the learning process.

**Black Identity**

Themes were also viewed through the conceptual framework of exploring Black identity with another component of the development process for Black males in the higher education space called *Nigrescence.* Nigrescence focused on self-awareness, understanding one's own experiences with racism and discrimination, connecting with other members of the African diaspora, and developing a sense of pride in one's culture. Identifying and understanding where one stood within this complex social construct could help Black male student-athletes better navigate college life and attain academic success (Gill & Brown, 2021). Participants in this study displayed a strong sense of self and

persevered and showed resilience through the day-by-day microaggressions and lack of belonging.

The participants in this study showed a strong relationship between the development process of Nigrescence within the other three themes that emerged. Strong identity resonated with all the participants, measured within four different stages of Nigresence, starting with the encounter stage. Not one of the participants in this study appeared to be in the pre-encounter stage. Although a couple of young Black football players developing in the encounter stage felt the most vulnerable, and realized they were at this stage when both athletes experienced an event that scared them. These events made them realize how their peers viewed them at the institution.

In the encounter stage, people must work around, slip through, or even shatter the relevance of their ideologies and worldviews. However, at the same time, others must hint at the direction and that person must be re-socialized or transformed (Cross, 1991). Ritchey (2014) suggested that in this stage, people encompassed a two-step process to encounter and personalize an event that happened, and it shaped their views on race. Participants in this study could also be recognized in this stage with the academic focus theme. As the Black football players experienced an uncomfortable, stereotypical spokesman representative in their classrooms, the encounter stage fit well as the student-athletes were learning how to handle themselves in the classroom when generalized questions about their race were expected to be answered by the only Black football player in the class.

The following three stages related to the last theme of resilience. The remaining participants fit into one of the three stages due to their self-confidence, education,

navigating their environments as Black football players, and pride in their campus identity. In the immersion-emersion stage, Nigrescence addressed the most sensational aspect of Black identity development, representing the vortex of psychological Nigrescence (Cross, 1991). In this stage, Black people began to shed their old worldviews and constructed a new frame of reference with the information they now had about race (Ritchey, 2014). Another example of the immersion-emersion stage was when a person had an environmental change with the opportunity to educate themselves about their identity. The transition and a commitment to the change would occur (Ritchey, 2014).

Next was the internalization stage, which encompassed a transition period where one worked through the challenges and problems of a new identity (Cross, 1991). This time was critical because the person moved away from how others viewed them to how they viewed themselves. According to Ritchey (2014), Black people began to think granularly about their newfound racial identities and how they shaped or would shape their lives.

Finally, there was the internalization-commitment stage which focused on the long-term interest of Black affairs over time (Cross, 1991). In this stage, the Black student-athletes could begin shedding poor self-worth thoughts of themselves and embrace positive Black self-definitions, having a transformation that achieved a healthy racial identity to forge success to persist in college. The participants in this study embodied the four stages of Nigrescence and built remarkable resilience and perseverance that would establish the Black football players to challenge the university about being in the status quo on enhancing the quality of the university environment so that all students could grow intellectually, socially, and culturally.

## Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The essence of the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI was that participants were cautiously optimistic about what the institution could provide for them. Theme one shared the academic focus all participants had as a top priority with the understanding that the college experience was more than football. Theme two displayed family support, filled with encouragement and advice from individuals, primarily not at the university. In theme three, microaggressions contributed to distress, heartache, and thoughts of transferring from the university to break free from the daily insults and insensitive comments. Theme four described the lack of intentionally fostering a sense of belonging, which left participants feeling isolated and lonely at the institution. In theme five, a strong sense of identity and self-confidence emerged. Finally, theme six, resilience, through shared lived experiences, shaped the foundation of the Black football player's desires to continue and accomplish personal goals and aspirations.

# Limitations

Despite the importance of this research study, a few limitations must be acknowledged. Due to the nature of this study, all data collected was from participants from a small private institution. I recognize the results of this study could have been more influential with the implementation of more environmental factors, such as larger classes and more demographic groups. A larger institution would warrant other opportunities for participants to express diverse interpretations of their experiences. The sample size in this study is limited to student-athletes at a single PWI, so the results may not apply to other PWIs or student-athletes at different types of institutions in different demographic

areas. Additionally, the study's sample only involved Black football players, so the results may need to be more generalizable to other Black players from other sports within the university.

**Future Research**

Future research to further understand the lived experiences of Black student-athletes at PWIs should include a more diverse sample, such as student-athletes at different types of institutions, both male and female identifying athletes and athletes from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds and compare to HBCUs. Future research would benefit from following the Black football player's post college career experiences and studying if they differed from their college experiences. Additionally, future research should include a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of Black student-athletes, including how Black football players navigate and negotiate complex team power dynamics when interacting with coaches and peers in their locker rooms and off campus settings. Finally, future research needs to focus on how White students understand microaggressions and how they affect their campus climates.

## Chapter 5 Case Report

This research report on the lived experiences of Black football players at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest is intended to share findings and future recommendations with crucial constituents at the university. The essence of the report is for engagement purposes and is intended for essential stakeholders and leaders within and outside of the university.

### *Introduction*

For Black football players to succeed at the institutions they attend, key factors and components must be in place to foster opportunities for success. The primary concern with Black football players attending PWIs is the lack of support they may receive regarding academic resources, mentorship, and financial support. As PWIs were often associated with higher tuition costs, many students from low-income backgrounds might need help to afford the necessary resources to succeed academically (Brennan, 2021). Additionally, Black football players also have a concern with their institutional environment due to the lack of diversity, cultural understanding, and support for their efforts from the institution's administration and staff as well as other students on campus. Black football players often face hostility and racism on campus that can harm their overall experience. Even when this is a result of unconscious bias or unintentional harm, the effects are real and impactful.

Furthermore, due to racial disparities in college sports recruiting and scholarship opportunities, it could be difficult for Black football players or other athletes to compete at high levels or even get recruited by top schools (Brennan, 2021). In response to the current societal push for social justice and equality, many Black football players or other athletes may internalize the stereotypes and expectations of them on campus, and this may affect their academic performance, social interaction, and sense of belonging at the university. According to Allen (2020), PWIs needed to find ways to create positive racial climates for all students on their campuses, regardless of race or sports affiliation. Therefore, the findings in this study must be considered to engage in deep analysis of the campus climate with critical stakeholders to ignite the institutional change desired to create an environment of inclusive excellence.

### Who is the Researcher?

The researcher is a full-time administrator at the institution reviewed in this study. The researcher also played collegiate football at a PWI located in the same region in the late '90s. The study on the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI in the Midwest was to partially fulfill a requirement for his adult and higher education doctoral program.

### *Background and Methods*

A private, liberal arts university in the upper Midwest was examined for the phenomenological study. The interview questions were formed from both theoretical frameworks and prominent themes noted in the literature review. The interview questions

sought to understand the lived experiences of Black football players on campus and in the community.

***Participants and Data Sources***

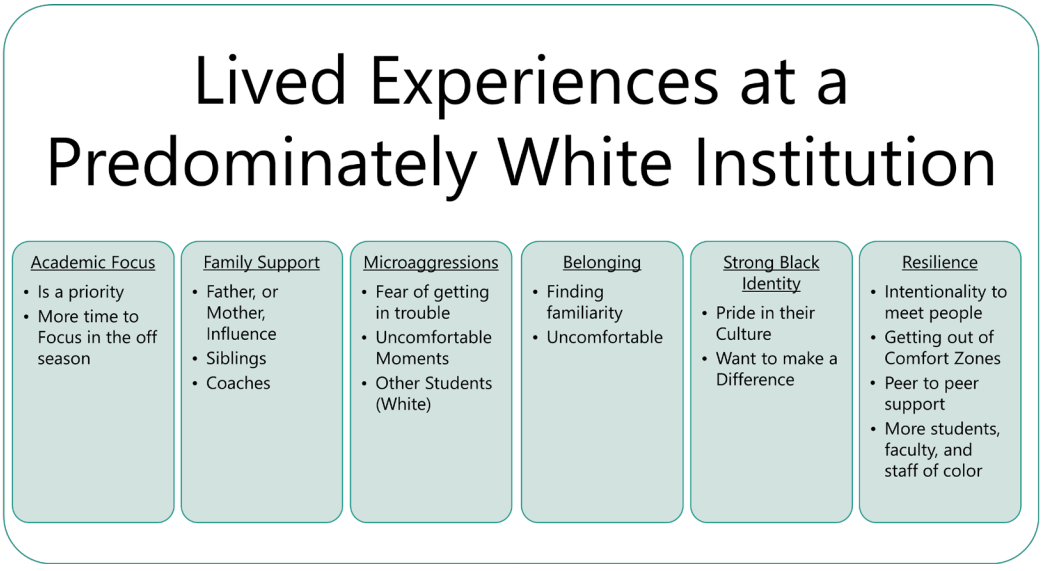
The literature on Black football players' experiences at PWIs was integrated to explore the research and comprehend the challenges, disappointments, and intense moments of despair for this group of athletes. A thorough review was completed to understand the complicated inroads related to belonging, support systems, and engagement. The complication is not only within the campus community itself, but also the pressures of performance on and off the field, academic requirements, and the motivation to graduate from their institution.

The lived experiences of Black football players were examined and showcased discussion points ranging from motivation, isolation, unfamiliarity, and cultural identity. Ten interviews were conducted via Zoom with interviewees from the study institution with the following criteria: Black football players between the age of 19 and 24 who are either currently on the football team or just concluded their last collegiate season. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed and recorded using Zoom. Emergent themes and significant statements were then identified.

***Key Findings***

Interviews with the Black Football players provided rich and authentic information that spoke to the essence of the lived experiences at a PWI. Overall participants disclosed plenty of material about their day-to-day interactions on campus. Each transcript was analyzed individually and again amongst all the transcripts to identify the emergent themes. A second coder and peer debriefer helped contribute to the credibility of these themes. Six themes emerged amongst the data collected from all participants, including academic focus, family support, microaggressions, belonging, strong identity, and resiliency.

*Figure 2 Themes of Black Football Players Lived Experiences*



### *Key Theme 1: Academic Focus*

*Public Domain*

All 10 participants interviewed displayed great focus and goal setting when this theme emerged. They all shared situations or stories about focusing on their academics to keep pace with the school year. One shared that he used a whiteboard to write down all his courses and what was due in each class. Another used the spring semester to schedule his challenging classes and put football lower on the priority list so he could focus on what was "more important.

Others shared stories of being the first in their families to go to college or potentially finishing. Some reported that football was and would always be secondary compared to academics and that students used football as a tool to find a university that has a phenomenal academic record. Although many Black football players confessed that the institution was challenging academically, all agreed it was one of the essential pieces of their college experiences.

A few revealed some discrepancies in support for their long-term goals with academics. They often found themselves enthusiastically attending tutoring sessions until they received an adverse reaction from specific peer tutors or felt uncomfortable in the rooms. Unfortunately, a Black football player said he would not use that service again. However, he found the help he needed from a teammate and was slowly gaining momentum in the class. According to Harper, (2018) Black athletes at universities with top sports teams often had lower graduation rates than their peers, despite having access to the same academic services. The author attributed this discrepancy to a need for more engagement with those resources. Some Black football players like to be recognized as student-athletes rather than football players and try to make sure no special treatment is given because of their status as athletes. One football player said, "I like that some faculty take their time to get to know me, and not just label me and give me special treatment like others do."

These Black football players liked the sports aspect of their college lives and appreciated the opportunity to go out and compete each Saturday. However, they all knew that completing their degrees was not only a personal goal but also the dreams and aspirations of the ones they held dear to their hearts.

### *Key Finding 2: Family Support*

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Family support was the second emerging theme in the analysis. Many Black football players disclosed that this theme was and remained a significant factor while attending a PWI. All told stories of when they had difficult situations and a family member or a coach stepped in to advise, console, or motivate them to continue through those times of despair. The Black football players felt a sense of pride not to let those essential network members down and hang on until the semester ended. In many cases, the football players would need to leave campus

for a day or could not wait to go home during a scheduled institutional break so they could reorganize, rethink, and refuel for the next semester.

Black football players found a sense of urgency to find a familiar voice, face, or advocate when they felt isolated, betrayed, or in a precarious situation. Connections to those support systems were utilized via Zoom, a phone call, or emergency meetings when necessary. One player told a story of him intentionally checking out of engaging with the campus community and calling his girlfriend or family members back home until he was ready to reinsert himself into the community.

Overall, all participants expressed experiencing an overwhelming feeling of restoration when mentioning talking to their families for support throughout the school year. Black football players recounted the number of instances when they required supportive check-ins from family members, they deemed their "lifeboats" were influential and would hopefully be less frequent as they progressed through their college careers.

***Key Finding 3: Microaggressions***

Sue (2010) noted that micro-aggressive experiences could range from subtle verbal comments to more overt exclusionary actions directed toward individuals based on their identities or characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender expression/identity, sexual orientation, and/or disability status. All 10 of the Black football players interviewed mentioned that they experienced microaggressions on campus in their classrooms and in many of their interactions with other peers. African American students experienced higher levels of racism compared to other racial minorities and non-minorities on college campuses because they were more likely to be exposed to microaggressions such as subtle insults or slights based on their race or ethnicity (Sue, 2010).

Many of the football players cited struggling with the frequency of insults and how there was no accountability from the perpetrators who either were unaware or did not fully understand the damage microaggression could cause to those who experienced them. During the interviews, the players expressed great concern about how exhausting it was to not only explore microaggressions, but also try to correct and educate the perpetrator on why those statements or insults were inappropriate. Therefore, proper training and practical educational adjustments from stakeholders in collaboration with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office is crucial for the success of this group of students and their peers.

***Key Finding 4: Belonging***

*Public Domain*

The fourth theme identified from the interviews was developing a sense of belonging. Creating a sense of belonging is essential for any student attending a university. Furthermore, for Black football players at a PWI, it is a matter of retaining that student. Players faced many challenges in finding an environment where everyone felt welcome, respected, and valued, regardless of race or ethnicity. A welcoming environment could lead to better team dynamics on the field and improved academic performance in the classroom (Carter, 2020). Players cited that they experienced extreme challenges in finding spaces where they could feel at home. They encountered isolation, loneliness, and feelings of emptiness on campus. Black football players also expressed that finding university personnel that looked like them was highly challenging, contributing to them not having a sense of belonging.

One player's story demonstrated that relationships were vital in unfamiliar territory. The player expressed that all his faculty from his courses throughout his senior year never took the time to get to know him on a personal level. Instead, they viewed him only as a football player. The young man said that his senior year was mainly the hardest because he could not make any "personal connections" with faculty members. The player cited that he was ready to give up. However, he wanted to prove to everyone he encountered that he was more than a football player. He sought out a faculty member from another department and developed a strong relationship that enabled him to get the good job that he desired.

The institution must review its strategies to create an inclusive environment for Black football players to feel accepted for more than what the perception of others portrays them as. University stakeholders must discuss how practical strategies can be implemented within the athletic department that includes mentoring programs, academic support services, and targeted programming for athletes from underrepresented backgrounds.

Stakeholders need to pay close attention to the campus climate and invest in creating an atmosphere that helps promote diversity and inclusion within college sports and institutional programs, which can have positive long-term effects on campus culture.

***Key Finding 5: Strong Identity***

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The next theme that emerged from the interviews was overwhelmingly clear: the player's confidence in themselves to drive their identity as Black men. The players agreed that during their rough, uncomfortable moments at the university, they had had instances of transferring and leaving to find purpose and familiarity and to be with family. One player told a story of how he suffered during a moment of weakness and was alone sitting in his residence hall, wishing he had someone like himself to discuss the details of

his worry. He was fed up and wanted to return home and throw his dreams and aspirations away. In this weak moment, the player remembered what his father discussed and listened to audiobooks on empowering his Black culture and finding other Black teammates to listen to.

Although players shared that there was no connection to the university, they abided by one another on the team and tried to create a sense of community. Carter (2020) suggested that colleges and universities needed positive representation for Black football players to relate with and by them showing pride in their culture. It helps to create a positive representation of Black athletes, which can help to inspire other young people of color who may be looking up to them. All players showcased a robust Black identity and affirmed that their strong identity significantly contributed to their perseverance and resilience.

***Key Finding 6: Resiliency***

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The last theme found within the interviews with the Black football players was resiliency. The players found a combination of teammates, coaches, family members, and a few of the administrators the university employed to help build resilience and support to continue. Players admitted that they need to be reminded constantly about their goals to finish the season and, in some cases, graduate. Like the emerging theme of strong identity, the players would only take so much until they reached the boiling point and left. The support needed from the university was evident and would need to be implemented to foster academic and athletic success, while simultaneously fostering a strong sense of community and perseverance.

One player's story demonstrated that fighting himself to stay present and dealing with the issues on campus and progressing through to graduation were vital to him being resilient. The player simply expressed that "he will not quit, it's not in his DNA to do so!" Players indicated the need for more faculty and staff of color to be hired at the university so Black football players can gain advice from like-minded individuals who may have experience campus climate strains that are detrimental to their success in college. Those established relationships can help players develop mindsets and action plans that can enact resilience within each unique experience of a Black football player.

The institution must review its strategies to create programs or an environment for Black football players to build their confidence and resilience. University stakeholders must discuss how to engage practical strategies like educating students on how to speak up for themselves when they feel mistreated or discriminated against is essential. This strategy can help Black football players assert their rights and ensure their voice is heard. Strengthening these types of initiatives for not only Black football players can benefit from but for all students to assist in creating an open dialogue that all can learn from.

***Recommendations***

The key findings throughout the research process identified that the university was making strides towards becoming more aware of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues and initiatives for constituents of the college. However, more improvements must be

made for Black football players regarding institutional belonging and social engagement. The recommended changes include the following: more opportunities for mentorships and building relationships, orientation, anti-racism training, and diverse hiring practices. These investments could enable Black football players to feel supported, develop a sense of belonging, and fully integrate into the campus community. While the lists of recommendations are not comprehensive or exhaustive, they offer a starting place to implement positive changes for the betterment of the entire campus community.

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**Recommendation 1: Mentorship and Relationship Building.** One key finding in the study was a lack of belonging within the university's support systems. Black football players discussed searching for other individuals that were Black and could share relatable stories or situations that they had to persevere through. Thus, it is imperative to create student-led organizations and mentor programs that would allow growth and a space for developing a sense of community among Black players. The literature review also affirmed that the following types of initiatives could offer timely and impactful support:

*Public Domain*

- Create a student-led organization for Black football players to provide mentorship and support. This group could offer academic, social, and emotional support and create community among the players.
- Connect with HBCUs to build relationships between their athletic programs and those at PWIs, so that students can access additional resources and networking opportunities outside of their university program.
- Create a mentorship program that pairs current PWI students with successful alumni in their respective fields. Creating synergies between current Black football players and alumni who successfully navigated their college experiences while playing football.

***Recommendation 2: Orientations and Anti-Racism Training.*** Implementing specific orientations and anti-racism training for all students can have several benefits. The institution will need to intentionally provide platforms for anti-racism and microaggression training for white students to understand the impact of those everyday insults and statements to Black students and how to more appropriately engage with others to foster connection and respect. Below is a list of recommended actions that is informed by both the interviews and the literature:

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- Develop a comprehensive orientation program that discusses issues pertinent to Black student-athletes, including racism, institutional bias, and cultural integration within college football programs at PWIs. The orientation will advance with more relevant topics as the student matriculates through their college career.
- Raise awareness of resources available to student-athletes that focus on mental health, academic performance, career development, physical fitness, and nutrition. These resources will assist them in making well-informed decisions about their future success as an athlete and beyond.
- Host events throughout the year that are focused on celebrating the accomplishments of

Black football players at PWIs. These events include award ceremonies or special recognition events where these athletes can be recognized by peers, faculty members, coaches, and other administrators.

***Recommendation 3: Diverse Hiring Practices***

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Black football players face many challenges with isolation and loneliness. Many express being uncomfortable with not seeing anyone in the faculty, staff, or coaches that look like them. More investments must be made to orchestrate a comprehensive plan to hire and retain a diverse and knowledgeable staff for Black football players to feel welcomed and included in the campus community. During the interviews, a secondary theme emerged focusing on influential coaches who left the university after the player committed to attend the institution. Below are a few initiatives that are supported by the research that could make a difference:

- Educate coaches, trainers, and university stakeholders on the importance of hiring diverse staff, committed to equal treatment, regardless of race or ethnicity to foster positive reinforcement for all players, no matter their background.
- Increase the number of Black coaches, Black Faculty, and Black staff members and Black mentors at PWIs to support Black football players. The university will need to add a detailed plan on how to retain the new coaches, faculty, and staff members.
- Create an advisory board of faculty members, students, alumni, and former athletes from diverse backgrounds who can help guide recruitment efforts for Black student-athletes into the university's athletics programs.
- Finally, partner with HBCUs to recruit talented postdocs from those schools and offer competitive salary and financial aid packages that make it easier for staff and athletes to attend PWIs.

***Directions for Future Research***

The themes that emerged from this study displayed clear and compelling results and pointed to specific improvements to assist in the development of creating a sense of belonging that is welcoming and authentic. One direction for future research is to investigate team dynamics within PWIs to determine if there is an imbalance between Black and non-Black athletes that might affect their experience playing college football. A second potential direction future research is to analyze the effects of media representation, advertising, and marketing on the perception of Black football players at PWIs. Other directions for future research can be analyzing post college experiences of Black football players who attended a PWI in to determine what kind of opportunities they have after leaving college. Another study that would gain interest is an analysis of White students' understanding of how microaggressions affect the campus climate. The study can focus on the intentionality of in-class and out-of-class cultural humility courses to better prepare students for life in and out of college.

### *Conclusion*

This phenomenological study of identifying the lived experiences of Black football players attending a PWI in the Midwest constructs a road map for institutional stakeholders. This road map addresses some of the challenges Black football players are presented with when attending a PWI. The campus community has a great resource within the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office; however, the institution cannot only rely on this resource to be the only support for students with the evolving of more athletic programs and rising student enrollment. It is imperative to cultivate a strategic action plan to recruit and retain diverse staff to assist Black football players to become all they desire to achieve. The proposed recommendations provide a clear path toward institutional belonging, support systems, and engagement guidance. These proposed modest changes could significantly impact Black football players' lived experiences at a PWIs.

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**Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participate in the Study**

Dear _____,

I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation study as I am completing my doctoral degree in educational administration and leadership. My dissertation research is to understand the essence of your lived-experiences-lived experiences as a Black football player at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest.

You have been purposefully selected as an ideal candidate to provide a rich description of your experience of being a Black student-athlete at this institution.

Your involvement in the study is entirely voluntary and you could decline at any time. The study will include an individual interview, lasting approximately 55-60 minutes scheduled at your convenience. There are no expected risks involved in participating. While you may not benefit, I hope the results of the study will better help institutions support and create a sense of belonging for Black football players in the future.

Before agreeing, please read the attached Informed Consent Statement for additional details about the study. If you agree to participate, please contact me at mark.blackburn@usd.edu to schedule a time for the interview. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Karen Card, at karen.card@usd.edu for any further questions.

Thank you,
Mark.

Mark Blackburn
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
University of South Dakota
mark.blackburn@usd.edu

## Appendix B: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH DAKOTA
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

**CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**
**The University of South Dakota**

Title of Project: Identifying the Success of Black Football Players at a Predominantly White Institution

Principal Investigator: Dr. Karen Card, School of Education, Delzell Hall, Vermillion, SD 57069,
605-658-6621, karen.card@usd.edu

Other Investigators: Mark Blackburn, School of Education, Delzell Hall, Vermillion, SD

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a current Black collegiate football player attending an PWI located in the Midwest. You must also identify as degree seeking student athletes that are classified from Sophomores to Seniors. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

### What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the essence of the lived experiences of Black football players at a PWI located in the Midwest. This study investigates players' perceptions of institutional belonging, and support systems to enhance their abilities to graduate from their institution. 10 people will take part in this research.

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

Participants will be sent email invitations asking for their participation. Once the participants have been identified and agree to participate, each will be asked to complete a 45–55-minute interview conducted face to face using Zoom to capture the verbal recording of the interview. The interview will begin by reviewing informed consent and allowing the participant to ask any questions they may have about the process. It may be possible that the researcher will need to provide the participants with follow-up or clarifying information via email. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed to remove identifying information with the recording being destroyed. Finally, participants will be asked to review the transcript of their interview as a form of validation to ensure accuracy. If follow up interviews are necessary for clarification purposes, they will be scheduled and kept to no more than 5-10 minutes.

**What risks might result from being in this study?**

There are no known risks associated with this study.

**What are the benefits from this study?**

Although participants may not directly benefit from being in this study, others Black football players might benefit as this study will help inform and enhance support systems at the institution and bring attention to opportunity to create a sense of belonging for players with the possibility of improving retention and graduation rates by focusing on Black identity development.

**How will we protect your information?**

I will protect the confidentiality of the participants research records by using aliases and protecting all research documents on a password protected external hard drive. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the study. All interviews will be recorded to assist with transcription purposes. Once the interview is transcribed, the recording will be destroyed. All participants may request to review the transcript for accuracy.

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any report published with the results of this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. To protect your privacy, we will not include any information that could identify you. We will protect the confidentiality of the research data by removing all given names and using aliases in transcripts, other research materials, and any published works resulting from this study. However, given that the interviews could be completed on zoom from any computer (e.g., personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to give your responses. As a participant in our study, we want you to be aware that certain "key logging" software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit. It is possible that other people may need to see the information we collect about you. These people work for the University of South Dakota and other agencies as required

by law or allowed by federal regulations.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study. Please initial: _ Yes _ No

I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however, I will not be

identified. Please initial: ____ Yes _No

## How will my information be used after the study?

Your deidentified study data may be used in future studies or shared with other researchers without asking for additional consent for that sharing.

## Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is up to you to decide whether to be in this research study. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

## Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

The researchers conducting this study are Dr. Karen Card and Mark Blackburn. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact:

- Dr. Karen Card, (605) 658-6621, karen.card@usd.edu
- Mark Blackburn, (605) 359-3405, mark.blackburn@usd.edu

If you have problems, complaints, or concerns about the research, questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you want to talk with someone independent of the research team, you may contact The University of South Dakota Office of Human Subjects Protection at (605) 658-3743.

## Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please understand what the study is about. Keep this copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

Thank you

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. The interview is set up to take no longer than 60 minutes. This semi structured interview process will also be confidential.

**Participant Background Information:**

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself as a student and football player.
2. What drew you to this university?

**Sense of Belonging as a Black football player:**

3. What have your experiences been as a Black football player at the university?
4. How (or where) have you been able to find a sense of connection and belonging within the university community?
5. Do you feel that the path you are currently on at the university is the path that will assist you to graduate? Why or why not?

**Support Systems:**

6. What services have you used or found helpful in your time at the university?
7. How has your experience been as you expected it to be? Different from what you expected?
8. In your experience, what does the institution do well to enhance your success as a Black football player?

**Black Identity & Campus Engagement:**

9. Can you describe how and when you first became aware of your Black identity?
10. What does your Black identity mean to you? Can you describe your involvement on campus during the off season?

**Wrap-up Questions:**

- Is there anything else you would like to share?
- Is it alright to contact you again if I have a few clarifying questions when I analyze the data.

## Appendix D: Significant Statements by Theme

These statements are presented in an organized and concise manner, providing a comprehensive overview of the significant statement's participants spoke of while being interviewed in this study. The purpose of these statements is to provide additional insight into each theme and to further illustrate the points made throughout the study. Additionally, they serve as a helpful resource to explore topics in greater depth. In short, these significant statements offer invaluable guidance for those seeking to gain deeper understanding on key issues related to Black football player's lived experiences at a PWI in the Upper Midwest.
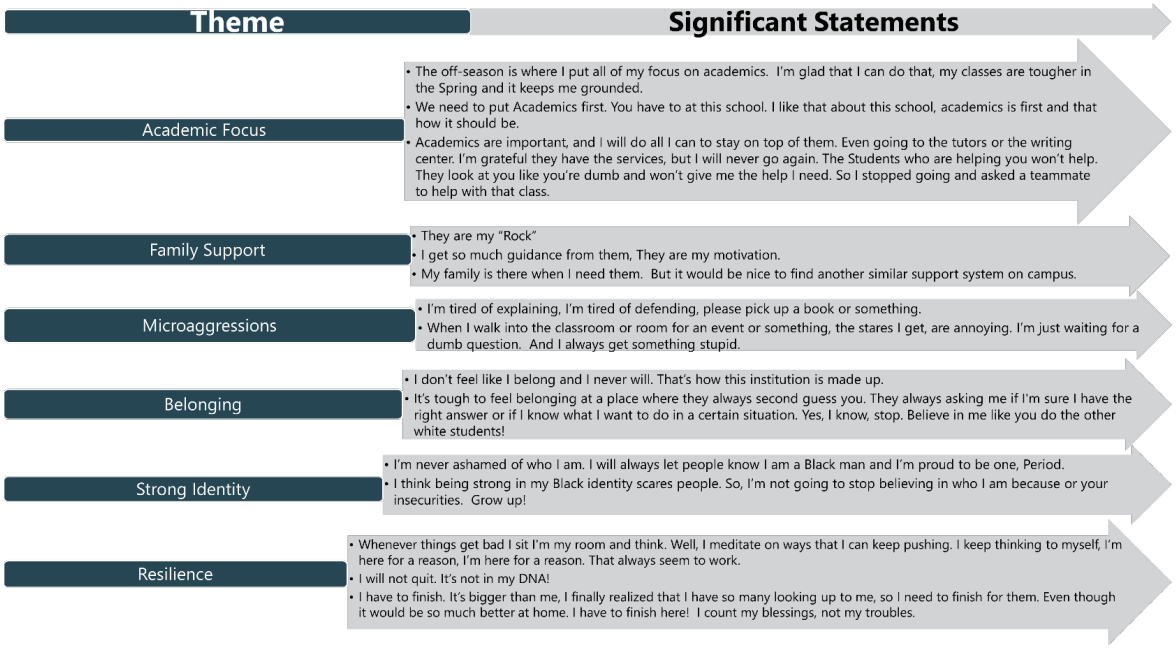
*Figure 3 Significant Statements by Theme*