

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

PERSISTENCE AS RESISTANCE: RACE, GENDER, AND THE EXPERIENCES OF  
BLACK WOMEN AT MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership

by

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The Dissertation of Deanecia S. Wright is approved:

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## Dedication

To my Father and Savior who is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. –Psalm 18:2

Thank You Jesus!

My Guardian Angels  
My Grandmother, Nellmon Jean Hill  
and  
My Best Friend, Racheal Anne Brooks  
I will always love you!

My Family  
My mother, Winifred Allison  
My brothers, Trameil Wright and Lovell Gunn  
and  
My niece, Aleyah N. Wright  
Thank you for your unwavering support!

To my Best Friend, Chanell M. McNeal  
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## ABSTRACT

### PERSISTENCE AS RESISTANCE: RACE, GENDER, AND THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN AT MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation proposal submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Although colleges and universities in the United States have seen an increase in the minority student population over the past forty years, African American women have experienced limited gains in accessibility since the general expansion of the higher education systems in the 1960s (Clewell & Anderson, 1992). While women have participated in higher education for more than a century, there is limited research focused on African American women college experiences (Moses, 1989; Collins, 2001). This study employs Critical Race Theory and Womanism to guide a qualitative examination of college experiences of African American women who have graduated or successfully persisted at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is not classified as a historically Black college or university (HBCU). This study examines the factors that shaped their college experiences and overall retention in higher education. In particular, this study explores how race, gender, and institutional context impact African American women persistence at MSIs.

*Keywords:* African American women, Black women, Critical Race Theory, minority-serving institution, persistence, racism, retention, sexism, Womanism

## **Chapter I: Introduction and Background**

What does it mean to be an African American woman attending college in today's "post-racial" era? Whereas public discourse emphasizes social progress and the irrelevance of race in the United States, within an educational context, the underrepresentation of African Americans challenge such colorblind storylines. The current context of higher education centers on President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative, which attempts to address the educational issues faced by Black men and young men of color. While this policy ensures that men of color are provided opportunities to reach their full potential, what about women of color? Despite the educational challenges experienced by all students of color, the experiences of Black women and young women of color remain unaddressed. Even now, with a Black President, the experiences of Black women are obscured.

The contemporary marginalization experienced by African American students, particularly women, is grounded in a long history of institutional racism against the community (Collins, 2004; Gregory, 2001; Henry, 2010; Simien, 2006). Race and gender were and continue to be significant factors that frequently subject African American women to discrimination (Collins, 2004; Henry, 2010; Simien, 2006), and remain relevant in understanding their barriers to higher education (Holmes, 2003). From the pre-Civil War to Civil Rights eras, African American women have pursued education to seek refuge and freedom from a society that presented itself with hatred and hostility (Benjamin, 1997; Bright, 2010; Noble, 1993). Yet, the persistence of racial inequity in higher education is illustrated by institutional disparities experienced by African American women, such as the covert and overt racial practices, beliefs, and attitudes

often targeted against them (García & Guerra, 2004; Tate, 1997).

Due to the prevalence of discrimination against African Americans, their representation in college has made slow progress over time. For example, the African American college student population in all degree granting institutions only increased from 9.4% in 1976 to 13.1% in 2007, an all-time high (NCES, 2011). Accordingly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported that the undergraduate enrollment of all racial groups attending American public and private institutions of higher education has increased by 39% between 1999 and 2009 and was: (a) 62.3% White, non-Hispanic; (b) 14.3% Black, non-Hispanic; (c) 12.5% Hispanic; (d) 1% American Indian/Alaska Native; (e) 6.5% Asian/Pacific Islander; and (f) 3.4% nonresident alien. Further, women made up 58.8% of the undergraduate enrollment and men, 41.2%. During this same period, the percentage of Black undergraduate student enrollment rose from 9% to 14%. Black women made up 16% of undergraduate enrollment and Black men made up 10.3%. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) also reported that the national college graduation rate for Black men was 33.1% compared to 44.8% for Black women. The growing gender gap in college enrollment is primarily attributed to increases in college attendance among African American women. Further, while Black women surpass Black men in successfully persisting to a four-year degree, they remain historically underrepresented in the academy and our knowledge about Black women's educational experiences is limited.

A shift in college enrollment for students of color has led institutions serving a large percentage of minority students. These types of institutions are identified as minority-serving institutions (MSIs). MSIs consist of colleges and universities that serve

a large population of minority students and are comprised of different institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs); Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Institutions (AANAPISIs); Tribal Colleges (TCUs), and more. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are institutions designated to serve African Americans who were prohibited to attend predominantly White institutions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Poley, 2008). Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are institutions that have at least 25% Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) (Poley, 2008). Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving institutions serve students who are Asian American or Pacific Islander and low-income individuals (Nelson, 2011) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are chartered by one or more federally recognized American Indian Tribes located in communities with a high American Indian population or on reservations (Poley, 2008). While each MSI has an inimitable purpose and history, they are all committed to educating underrepresented minorities and to the academic success of students of color.

Central to the examination of African American representation is student persistence and retention (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Over the past three decades research primarily has focused on the lack of access to higher education (Karen, 1991; St. John & Noell, 1989; Thomas, Alexander & Eckland, 1979), and the lower retention rates for students of color (Fry, 2002; Glenn, 2003; Hu & St. John, 2001; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Such literature illuminated the role that racism and sexism played in creating barriers to higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007; Tate, 1997). For African Americans, most college

access and retention research have largely examined their experiences at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) or predominantly White institutions (PWIs) with little regard to other institutional types (Allen, 1985, 1992; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998; Walpole, 2008; Walpole, Bauer, Gibson, Kamau & Toliver, 2002).

Through the theoretical lens offered by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism, in this study I argue that race and gender matter and continue to impact the persistence and retention of African American women in higher education. CRT and Womanism provide a useful framework to theoretically ground an examination of the experiences and knowledge of young Black women in the academy because they the need to consider the multiple subjectivities of women of color, namely Black women. Further, CRT and Womanism encourage the utility and significance of narrative data to centralize the voices of Black women students whose presence in college counter dominant narratives that frequently depict the failure of African American students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In order to achieve equity in higher education, it is crucial for the academy to fulfill African American students' social and psychological needs (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998). Understanding the factors necessary to increase the persistence of African American women students at MSIs will contribute to this agenda. Although minority enrollment has increased over the past forty years, African American students remain underrepresented in higher education and continue to graduate at lower rates than their ethnic and racial counterparts (Thompson, Gorin, Obediat & Chen, 2006).

When compared to White students who graduate at a rate of 81%, the African American student graduation rate has improved by 4%, but remains 43% overall (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2010). This qualitative case study tackles the retention problem of African American students by focusing on Black women who attend MSIs.

Until recently, MSIs have not received adequate attention from scholars and policymakers (Raines, 1998). Therefore, our knowledge about African American women experiences and outcomes is limited within this institutional context. MSIs are unique institutions committed to widening educational opportunities for underrepresented students (Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Allen, 1985, 1992; Raines, 1998). Research has revealed the importance of MSIs in the access and retention of minority students (Allen, 1992; Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Raines (1998). For example, MSIs have been found to provide less hostile campus racial climates for minority students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Yet, the experiences of African American students attending MSIs have been limited to MSIs specifically categorized as HBCUs. These institutions are significant to the educational development of students of color through the targeted institutional missions to advance their completion goals and close the achievement gap within the U.S. If MSIs can acknowledge and account for the relationships between the factors compulsory for academic success, they can better explain persistence and address the underlying issue of equity and retention in higher education.

In pursuing a college education most students are faced with developmental and social challenges, yet African American college students face unique persistence challenges. I research the multifaceted college experiences of African American women

at MSIs in order to centralize their voices in higher education discourse. While African American women have made significant advances in accessing higher education, scholarship fails to adequately examine the disparities that African American women continue to encounter at four-year institutions, including the lingering impact of race and gender (Collins, 2000). Further, factors such as institutional contexts can better be examined.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Persistence in context of post-secondary institutions is defined as the ability for students to complete a program of study (NCES, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2000). For the purposes of this study, persistence is defined as the ability to complete a program of study at a public, four-year MSI. The goal of this project is to determine the factors that impacted the baccalaureate degree attainment of Black women, including the role that race and gender played in their process. As a qualitative exploration, the study also provides insight regarding the role of institutional context in shaping the college persistence of African American women.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to the lack of African American women perspectives in higher education scholarship, I used two critical frameworks that are designed to centralize the experiences of people often marginalized in the United States. More specifically, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism were the primary theoretical frameworks that I used to conceptualize my project, guide my data collection, and analyze and interpret my data.

Educational scholars have used CRT as an analytic tool to determine the impact of racial inequalities in higher education and its impact on the academic achievement for students of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Further, Womanism is an epistemological perspective developed by and for women of color (Phillips, 2006) to identify themselves as feminist without submitting to the racial paradigms that often privilege White perspectives within feminist movements. I use tenets from both frameworks to examine how society organizes itself along intersections of race and gender, and how these intersections shape the persistence of Black women.

### *Research Questions*

In an attempt to holistically examine the persistence of African American women attending MSIs, this study is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the experiences of African American women students at minority-serving institutions?
2. What factors shape African American women student persistence within the context of a minority-serving institution that is not a historically Black college or university?
3. What role does race and/ or gender play in the construction of African American women college student experiences within the specific minority-serving institutional context?

Centering the oft-ignored voices of African American women is one step in challenging their marginalization in higher education. The research questions were designed to be exploratory and simultaneously focus on the lived experiences of Black women students,

who have risen above the historical educational challenges and successfully persisted to their senior year. These women provided important insight to scholars who are interested in the persistence of African American women attending MSIs that are not HBCUs.

### **Significance of the Study**

Educational disparities continue to affect the African American population and are often obscured when students successfully persist to a four-year degree. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), African American graduation rates remain low at 43% and have only improved by 4% in the past four years. The gap between Black and White students remains exceedingly large. Thus, the significance of this study lies in its potential to reveal insight and knowledge of persistence factors grounded in the lived experiences of African American women – information that will be used to close the educational gap that disproportionately impacts students of color.

Additionally, educational disparities faced by African Americans have yet to be examined within unique institutional contexts, such as MSIs that are not HBCUs. I explore issues such as racial microaggressions, gender inequity, and campus segregation and describe how these disparities affect Black women persistence at MSIs. In doing so, I challenge scholarship that fails to account for institutional factors that impact the retention of students of color. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence to inform college and university efforts intended to improve the campus climate for African American women in the U.S. Additionally, this study offers prospective students successful persistence strategies to rise above the complex dichotomy of being a Black women attending a four-year minority-serving institution. Consequently, this study is

significant to scholars and students who are interested in improving the persistence and representation for students of color in higher education.

### **Overview of Methodology**

CRT asserts that race and racism saturate all aspects of American life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and within this context, Womanism emphasizes the need to consider the complex subjectivities of African American women (Jain & Turner, 2011; Walker, 1983). Aligned with CRT and Womanism, I use qualitative methods that honor the voices of people who are often objectified in social science scholarship. In particular, I apply a case study and counter-storytelling methods to construct an African American women-centered narrative that challenges the limited portrayals of the African American college experience.

Case studies are used as a method to describe and understand in-depth a particular phenomenon within specific contexts, which in this case is the persistence of African American women at MSIs. Researchers argue that such a qualitative approach to research provides participants the authority to share their stories, express their voices, and minimize the relationship between the researcher and participants within a study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1994). Further, counter-storytelling is an approach that enables researchers to understand, analyze, and represent participant voices in context of social, political, and economic structures in the United States, and how such structures shape and are manifested within American institutions, such as colleges and universities (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006; Patton, 1990). I engaged the participants in counter-storytelling, which allowed me to learn from real life situations as they occurred and

simultaneously legitimized the voices of the participants (Patton, 1990).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are conditions and factors that shape the study and for the most part are beyond the control of the researcher. While the study provides important insight regarding the ways that African American women navigate higher education, one limitation includes the potential sample size of participants. More specifically, the barriers to college access and retention for African American students might impact the ability to recruit a large number of eligible participants. Additionally, due to nature of qualitative research the findings could be open to other interpretations.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations differ slightly from limitations in that they are factors that the researcher attempts to control for research specificity and project manageability. For example, in this project a delimitation is the focus on African American students experiences in a specific institutional context. Participants were selected from an MSI located on the west coast of the U.S., and will not represent students from HBCUs and PWIs. Thus, the perspectives and experiences of the participants are not necessarily generalizable to the African American women student population at large. However, as a qualitative project, in-depth and contextual analysis takes precedence over generalizability, and the findings still fill an important gap in research.

## Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms will be used throughout the study:

1. *Academic Counterspace* – Sites that allow African American students to foster learning and to nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70)
2. *African American* – Any person residing in the U.S. who self-identifies as being of Black African descent. Black and African American will be used interchangeably.
3. *Climate* – The perception and judgment an individual makes about their environment at different levels of observation (Naylor, Pritchard, & Ilegen, 1980).
4. *Campus Climate* – The climate in which these interactions occur influence the learning and social outcomes students will derive (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).
5. *Color-blind racism* – A racial ideology that maintains the racial structure of white supremacy for persons racialized as white (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, pp. 2-3).
6. *Counternarratives* – Narratives that contradict dominant discourse and the portal through which a person interprets his or her experience of the world (Green et al., 2006).
7. *Counterspace* – A site where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained (Solórzano et al., 2000).
8. *Culture* – A set of shared attitudes, values, or social practices connected with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic.
9. *Gender Inequity* – Behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles and disparities based on gender.

10. *Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)* – Institutions of higher education that were historically created to primarily serve the African American student population in the U.S. Currently there are 106 historically black colleges and universities in the United States.
11. *Institutional Culture* – A set of shared attitudes, values, or social practices within an organized entity/ institution.
12. *Minority* – Persons not considered members of the dominant ethnic/ racial group within the U.S.
13. *Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs)* – Postsecondary institutions committed to widening educational opportunities for underrepresented students. (Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Allen, 1992; Raines, 1998).
14. *Persistence* – Ability to complete a traditional program of study at a public, four-year, MSI.
15. *Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)* – Postsecondary institutions where White students have historically comprised the majority of the student population.
16. *Racism* – Any action, attitude, institutional structure or belief that subordinates people or groups based on their race (Jones, 1997).
17. *Racial Microaggressions* – Brief, commonplace, and subtle indignities (whether verbal, behavioral, or environmental) that communicate negative or denigrating messages to people of color (Solórzano et al., 2000). Sue et al. (2007) suggest that microaggressions are typically expressed in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidation.
18. *Retention* – The ability for students to remain and persist within postsecondary

education (Tinto, 1987).

19. *Underrepresented* – The disproportionately low presence of individuals and groups within an institution.
20. *White* – Individual or group whose experiences and perspectives are deemed normative within the U.S., and are provided material and ideological advantages at the expense of those racialized as people of color (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

My interest in the college experiences of African American women students at minority-serving institutions began with a reflection on my recent experiences as an African American female doctoral student attending an MSI. I had the opportunity to reflect on the factors that assisted in my own retention and ability to pursue doctoral education and recognized my experience speaks to those of my larger community. My goal was to centralize the voices of other African American women in higher education and provide important insight regarding their persistence strategies at MSIs. Through a qualitative investigation of the college experiences of African American women within this unique institutional context, I used their perspectives to reveal the factors that impact Black women persistence. Ultimately, such perspectives will shape how educational researchers and practitioners understand the way that race and gender continue to affect the retention of students of color in college.

My project is organized into five chapters. Chapter one introduces the study through a concise overview of the project, including the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of study, methodological overview, the

limitations and delimitations. Chapter two is the literature review in which I explore the historical context of African American women in higher education, the role of racism in higher education, and the impact of campus racial climate and institutional contexts on student-of-color persistence. Chapter three details the methodology, the theoretical frameworks and methods of data collection and analysis, on which the study was designed. In this section I also describe the rationale for my research approach and the details regarding the research setting and sample. Chapter four is heavily data driven and is comprised of the main findings, which also highlight the unique experiences of each participant. Lastly, in chapter five, I summarize and interpret the findings of the study and use this information to provide recommendations for policy and practice related to increasing the persistence of African American women in higher education.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Educators have long been concerned with the representation of African Americans in higher education (Bell, 2004) and in the following I review research related to the challenges and social inequalities African American students face on their educational trajectories. The purpose of this literature review is to establish the research context necessary to pursue a project that examines the college experiences of African American women attending minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Aforementioned, MSIs are unique institutions committed to widening educational opportunities for underrepresented students (Allen, 1992; Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Raines, 1998). These institutions are significant to the educational development of students of color through the targeted institutional missions to advance their completion goals and close the achievement gap within the U.S.

In a research context, African American women are often studied in comparison to other ethnic and racial groups and/or have primarily been studied in association with African American men (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Watt, 2006; White, 1998). Further, studies on African American women examine students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and/or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Willie & McCord, 1972). Very seldom are African American women experiences exclusively centralized in scholarship and in context of MSIs, and rarely are the impact of racism and sexism on Black women students in the academy examined (Moses, 2001; Collins, 2001). Thus, few studies have established how race and gender shape the persistence of African American women. The goal of this study is to fill gaps in

literature by examining the factors important in successful college completion for African American women at MSIs.

This chapter is organized into three sections. First, I present an overview of literature on African Americans in higher education and more specifically, the history of African American women in higher education. Next, I discuss the ways that institutional contexts shape the student success of African Americans. Related to institutional context is the role of campus racial climate at HBCUs, PWIs and MSIs and how African American college experiences can vary across such institutional environments. Lastly, I discuss specific factors that have previously been found to influence African American persistence. Overall, the following provides readers a comprehensive background on the way that race, gender, and institutional context intersect to shape African American persistence.

### **African Americans in Higher Education**

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson, who attended Oberlin College, was the first African American woman to earn a baccalaureate degree in the U.S. (Breux, 2010). She along with other educational pioneers made higher education a reality for African Americans, a significant feat considering they had been historically excluded from participating in colleges and universities due to their race. In fact, American history chronicles significant barriers to equal education for Blacks in the United States (Bell, 2004; Rowley & Wright, 2011). In particular, slavery, segregation, and sexism have contributed to the inaccessibility and lack of quality of education available to African Americans (Bell, 2004).

In the following I present literature on the institutional discrimination against African Americans in higher education. I discuss various historical factors that have shaped African American underrepresentation and include some of the legal challenges that sought the equal access and representation for People of Color. For example, from *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the educational opportunities for African Americans have increased; however, they continue to be underrepresented in college and their experiences, overlooked.

### **Historical Context**

The educational disparities experienced by African Americans are grounded in the history of slavery. Due to the lack of public education available to this population during slavery, religious institutions were a primary source of education amongst African Americans, although not for the majority of the population (Rowley & Wright, 2011). With the abolition of slavery was the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency intended to integrate African Americans into U.S. society (Du Bois, 1903).

The Freedmen's Bureau was charged with providing educational and economic opportunities for newly freed Blacks, as well as legal representation – rights from which they were previously excluded. Although limited in its success, through the Freedmen's Bureau emerged historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). HBCUs served as one of the first mechanisms of mass access to higher education for African Americans. The ability for HBCUs remains significant in the access, retention, and persistence of African Americans. Yet, like all institutions at the time, HBCUs were racially segregated institutions. Though slavery was formally abolished in 1865, African Americans were

locked into an inferior system due to legal segregation and the notion of separate but equal, phenomena supported by the Fourteenth Amendment (Rowley & Wright, 2011).

The declaration of inherently unequal education was not challenged until 1954 in the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a legal case involving African American students who were denied admission to public schools in their communities under laws permitting or requiring racial segregation (Kaplin & Lee, 2007). Parents alleged that segregation was unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and brought forth litigation. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the separation of children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional and denied Black children citizenship rights and equal protection guaranteed by the Fourteenth amendment. Federal law prohibits states from denying any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law and asserts that states must treat individuals equally in similar conditions and circumstances (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p.662). Thus, the Supreme Court mandated schools within the United States to repair their policies and provide equal educational opportunities for all students (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Consequently, public schools and colleges within the United States were forced to take significant steps towards integration.

Research by legal scholars Robert Cottrol, Raymond Diamond and Leland Ware (2003) show that the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision challenged the notion of “separate but equal” originally upheld by the Fourteenth Amendment. In the educational arena, this type of inequality was deemed unconstitutional and therefore, publicly funded educational institutions were ordered to desegregate in order to allow equal access to education, including quality facilities, resources, curricula and teachers

(Rowley & Wright, 2011). Furthermore, legal scholar, Peter Irons (2002) argues this was an era where the laws of Jim Crow were in effect within education and it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 when protection from discrimination was ensured. The issue of access continued to become more inclusive of one's race, religion, country of origin, individual freedoms and more specifically, gender. Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision did not fully eradicate segregation in public education, it encouraged the Civil Rights movement to further desegregate institutions of higher education; which also achieved great success (Rowley & Wright, 2011).

### **Minor Progress in Access and Retention**

Although African Americans have long been denied the opportunity to pursue a college education (Clewell & Anderson, 1992), degree attainment of African American students has gradually improved over time. The Civil Rights movement achieved great success in the desegregation of public education. According to education scholar Elizabeth Ihle (1992) the University of Mississippi was ordered by the court to accept their first African American student, James Meredith, in 1962. A decade later, a federal judge ordered the City of Boston to implement an inclusive desegregation plan. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 insisted that there could be no laws to uphold political discrimination against African Americans. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 also assisted desegregation by enabling Black Americans to relocate into better neighborhoods, which in turn provided them access to better schools and colleges for their children. The Supreme Court continued to uphold school desegregation laws, and by 1971 the majority of schools in the Southern states had been ordered to integrate (Ihle, 1992).

Further, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was established to prohibit discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in any type of federally-funded program. The passage of Title VI coincided with a large movement to increase the number of African American applicants to enroll in college. According to educator, Joyce King (1996) Title VI was a direct result of “federal pressure, in the form of affirmative action guidelines, [which] compelled post-secondary institutions to increase minority access to higher education” (p. 14). Efforts to open the doors to previously segregated institutions were incessant through the mid-1970s. However, the lack of governmental and institutional support for programs geared toward the inclusion of African Americans into the general university population kept low the enrollment rates of Black college students.

### **African American Women in Higher Education**

While changes in American legislation led to educational gains for Black students, it is still important to note that African American students, including women, remain severely underrepresented in higher education. Further, in the examination of African American representation in college, researchers have noted the gender gap between women and men (Allen, 1992; Townsend, 2008; Verdugo & Henderson, 2009). Despite the challenges of their educational past, African American women have played a significant role in diversifying American higher education; not only for African Americans, but for women, overall.

Education scholar Barbara Townsend (2008) reported that in 2008, the female to male college student ratio was 133:100 in the United States. While presenting trends in enrollment for African American students, she noted that the percentage of traditional-

age male undergraduates declined from 47% in 1995-1996 to 45% in 2003-2004.

Conversely, research analysts Richard Verdugo and Ronald Henderson (2009) found that in 1980, 58.1% of African Americans who attended college were women, whereas by 2004 this percentage increased to 65%. Interestingly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) reported that African American women comprised nearly two-thirds (63%) of the African American enrollment totals in colleges and universities, while in contrast, African American men only comprised of 37%.

Education sociologist, Walter Allen (1992) examined the gender gap and argued that the “discrepancy owes more to declines in rates of Black male college attendance than to Black female gains” (p. 30). Similarly, professor Sir Ian Kennedy (2010) posited African American women have been among the most excluded, disadvantaged and oppressed groups in the U.S. By overlooking African American women, they are often isolated, demoralized and underestimated in higher education (Carroll, 1982; Kennedy, 2010). Education scholar, Joyce King (1996) critiqued how within research the educational experiences of African American women are often assumed to be identical to that of Black men or white women. However, research studies show that in conjunction with community colleges more African American women successfully persist in higher education than men (Evans, 2007; Hackett, 2002; Nora, 2002; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2008; Zamani, 2003).

As a result of higher education scholars identifying differences in the college experiences of African American men and women (Breux, 2010; Fleming, 1984; King 1996) it is necessary to consider gender gaps within Black America. Throughout history, African American women have proven their competency by persisting in their

educational paths, yet this group is still segregated, overlooked and neglected in existing research focused on African American students' college experiences (Allen, 1992).

Therefore, additional research investigating the experiences of African American women in the academy is meaningful and necessary. Further, although research has shown a trend in the disproportionate rate of African American women accessing college over African American men, less discussed are the actual institutions to which Black women students are admitted and enrolled.

### **Institutional Context**

A great deal of research point to the need to examine institutional context in the examination of African American postsecondary experiences (Allen, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005). During times of legally mandated segregation African Americans primarily attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Drewry & Doermann, 2003; Lundy- Wagner & Gasman, 2011). Thus, post-abolition HBCUs offered unique educational access for African Americans. Although more institutional choices are currently accessible to African Americans, we continue to see trends of social and racial inequalities that obstruct the representation of students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Institutional racism refers to the extant that informal barriers exist within higher education institutions that prevent students of color from succeeding (Jeanquart- Barone, 1997) – these informal barriers are discriminatory rules and regulations imposed by institutions.

Although many factors contribute to lower rates of access and retention for African American students at four-year institutions, the disparity may be largely credited

to a shift in institutional policies. While African American students experienced underrepresentation under race-conscious admissions policies, accessibility issues worsened with the removal of affirmative action protection (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003; Tierney, 1997). Through the elimination of affirmative action policies, most colleges and universities were forced to remove race and ethnicity as factors from their admissions practices, financial aid programs, and student support services that initially served to increase the access and college persistence for minority students. In this section I examine African American student experiences at HBCUs compared to PWIs, and overall the role of MSIs in serving the needs of students of color.

### **HBCUs and PWIs**

HBCUs were formed and implemented in the 1800s. HBCUs contributed to the academic success of students of color by serving African Americans who were denied access and educational opportunities from white institutions (Drewry & Doermann, 2003; Gasman, 2008; Lundy- Wagner & Gasman, 2011), and in turn, have evolved to make a major contribution to the American higher education system (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom & Bowman, 2010; Jewell, 2002; LeMelle, 2002; Provasnik & Shafer, 2004; Redd, 1998). Presently there are 106 HBCUs, or 3% of all higher education institutions in the United States (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Avery, 2009; Baez, Gasman, & Turner, 2008; Jones, 2010; Li & Carroll, 2007; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Minor, 2008). Roughly 14% to 16% of all African American students attending colleges and universities in the United States are enrolled at HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2010; Minor, 2008; Palmer, 2010). HBCUs continue to be popular institutional choices for Black students and tend to have higher graduation rates than that

of PWIs (Allen, 1992; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998; Walpole, 2008; Walpole, Bauer, Gibson, Kamau & Toliver, 2002).

While at HBCUs, the success of African American student retention and persistence is largely attributed to a predominantly African American environment of administrators, faculty and student populace, among the factors that shape Black student success at PWIs include K-12 academic preparation, financial resources, family background, student involvement, social networks, African American subcultures and student-faculty interactions (Foster, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). In that regard, education scholars Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1991) argue that African-American students, who attend PWIs, are more likely than those at HBCUs to experience greater levels of social isolation, alienation, personal dissatisfaction, and overt racism. Professor Christine Kraft (1991) also argued that succeeding in college is a collective effort; it is about integration, sense of belonging and membership on college campuses. These efforts can be measured through student development, involvement, attrition, retention and persistence; and failure to make these efforts may provide a basis for understanding why some Black students do not persist at PWIs. Due to the effects of national desegregation policies, PWIs have attempted to put forth substantial recruitment efforts for African American students since the 1960s (Fleming, 1984, p. 11). Such efforts have attracted an increasing numbers of Black students, but PWIs continue to struggle with providing adequate academic and support services essential to the educational success of African America students.

A quantitative study conducted by Allen (1992), sought to learn the differences that existed between African American undergraduate students who attended HBCUs and those who attended PWIs. His aim was to learn how African American college success was influenced by campus context and student backgrounds, or what professors Edward Taylor and Steven Olswang (1997) call “the dynamic interplay between individual and institutional characteristics” (p. 12). Allen found that African American students attending HBCUs had advantages over African American students attending PWIs, including a more positive psychological adjustment, more significant academic gains, and greater ethnic cultural commitment. Aligned with other studies (Greier-Reed, Ehlert & Dade, 2011; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Hurtado et al., 1998; Rankin, & Reason, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000), Allen’s findings also demonstrated that African American students felt alienated, hostility, racial discrimination and a lack of integration at PWIs; whereas, at HBCUs they were more likely to feel engaged, connection, acceptance, support and encouragement. Such positive collegiate campus environment/climate had a positive impact on educational outcomes, and vice versa.

### **Minority-Serving Institutions**

Yet, what are the experiences of African American students who attend four-year colleges that are not HBCUs or PWIs? Increasingly, postsecondary institutional types and contexts are changing and more and more students are attending minority-serving institutions (MSIs). MSIs are colleges and universities that serve a large percentage of minority students (Baez, Gasman & Turner, 2008, p. 3). Serving nearly 60% of all enrolled students of color, MSIs have been labeled as hybrid organizations (Cole, 2006) with distinct missions geared towards meeting minority students needs through a

political, cultural, and social schema (Cole, 2006; Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008; Raines, 1998). MSIs are significant to the educational development of minority students through their shared/targeted institutional missions to educate the increasing number of racial and ethnic American students. While MSIs have been more recognized since the 1990s, until recently, they have not received adequate attention from scholars and policy makers (Allen, 1992; Hubbard & Stage, 2009; Raines, 1998).

Sociologist, Rosario Raines argues that MSIs are a necessity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She writes, “as long as minority groups are underrepresented in mainstream colleges and universities and overrepresented in their lower socioeconomic ranks of society, then MSIs will continue to grow” (p. 80). Raines further posits that since there has been a shift in mainstream colleges and universities through minority enrollment, then there needs to be a shift in curriculum, faculty development, and college environment to meet the educational needs of racial and ethnic minorities. Her argument is supported by campus racial climate literature, which considers the impact of campus environment on student persistence (Hurtado, 2007).

Similarly, education scholars, Steven Hubbard and Frances Stage (2009) have very strong viewpoints on MSIs and the unique role of institutional agents in shaping student experiences. They suggest that most studies focus on student views and college experiences and fail to examine the attitudes, perceptions and preferences of faculty who are most directly involved with students. Using questionnaires, their quantitative study surveyed full-time faculty and found that faculty attitudes significantly influence student outcomes and was one attribute that explained some of the differences in the learning environments for students attending MSIs compared to those attending PWIs.

In this research study I provide a unique contribution to the literature about the context of higher education institutions, since little is known about the role MSIs play in the college experiences of African American women. A number of studies have researched African American student engagement in the context of predominately white institutions (PWIs) and student support systems at HBCUs (Allen, 1992; Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh, & Leegwater, 2005; Watson & Kuh, 1996). Although, these studies have attempted to analyze student engagement and the supportive nature of campus environments at HBCUs, they have essentially missed the mark with regard to outcomes for African American students at MSIs; which are rarely studied. While MSIs can be seen as good for minority student persistence and HBCUs continue to provide positive environments for African American student persistence, PWIs continue to face challenges in serving ethnic racial and minority students, thus institutional context matters with regards to retention and persistence for students of color. Moreover, further empirical evidence is needed to advance and contribute to the critical body of research about African American women students at MSIs to examine the overall campus racial climate.

### **Campus Racial Climate**

A growing body of research illustrates the challenges many college and university environments present for minority students across the U.S. (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Nettles, Thoeny & Gosman, 1986; Pinel, Warner & Chua, 2005; Sedlecek, 1987,1999; Spears, 1978). Campus climate is a multifaceted reflection and manifestation of diversity that encompasses more factors than solely enrollment rates (Kraft, 1991). For the

purposes of this study, climate is defined as the perception of a judgment an individual makes about their environment at different levels of observation (Naylor, Pritchard, & Ilegen, 1980). It is a real or perceived measure of the campus environment as it relates to interpersonal, academic, and professional interactions (Hurtado, 2007). Racial climate constitutes students' observations of their experience as racial minorities on campus. In this section, I will review literature that demonstrates how students of color often have negative perceptions of their campus environments, which in turn is associated with negative outcomes including a poor sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kraft, 1991), low self-esteem (James, 1998), and negative academic outcomes (Chang, 1999; Pfeifer & Schneider, 1974).

Scholars have identified campus climate as central to the attrition and persistence for students of color (Bennet, 1995; Smith & Associates, 1997), particularly for those who attend PWIs (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1999; Hurtado, & Ponjuan, 2005). Furthermore, researchers largely present scholarship on how students of color experience the college environment compared to their white counterparts (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In context of this project, I argued that campus racial climate is one factor shaping African American women persistence at MSIs.

### **Hostile Campus Climate**

Perceptions of campus racial climate differ between racial groups, with students of color often citing more hostile campus racial climates. Over the last decade racial segregation in American colleges and universities has become more racially diverse (NCES, 2002) but many African American students continue to experience significant

racial inequalities in college (Hausmann et al., 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000). The climate in which these interactions occur influence the learning and social outcomes that Black students experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). For example, African American students at PWIs are at a disproportionately high risk for dropping out (Greier-Reed et al., 2011, p. 23).

In a study conducted by research associates Susan Rankin and Robert Reason (2005), they quantitatively examined how students of different racial groups experienced their campus racial climate. Through a survey of students attending two private and eight public PWIs, they found that Black students were more likely than their white counterparts to experience harassment, which they define as “any offensive, hostile, or intimidating behavior that interferes with learning” (p. 46), and perceived the climate as more racist and less accepting. Rankin and Reason’s findings supported other studies that highlighted how African American students at PWIs often felt underprepared, a lack of social support, unwanted (invisible), and little to no sense of belonging; and experienced racial microaggressions (Hausmann et al., 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Yet, there is an attempt by PWIs to create a more supportive environment for African American students. For example, education scholars Tabitha Greier-Reed, John Ehlert and Shari Dade (2011) conducted a longitudinal study at a Midwestern PWI that followed 163 participants over four years to examine if the African American Student Network (AFAM) helped increase retention and graduation rates. The AFAM was an informal networking group designed for Black students, and provided a cultural counter space for dealing and coping with microraggressions and a hostile campus racial climate. The goal of AFAM was to help the PWI to increase their low persistence rates for

African American students. AFAM provided support, resources, encouragement and a safe place for students to go and feel a similar cultural environment to that of HBCUs. They found students who participated in AFAM were more likely to persist than non-AFAM students. This is an important finding because it shows that college programming can create an inclusive environment for students that enable them to successfully navigate to completion, thus having a direct impact on retention.

Overall, student perceptions of campus racial climate are important in their persistence. While a positive campus racial climate improves educational experiences for all students (Chang, 2001), African American students enrolled at PWIs are less likely to have such perspectives. In general, perceptions of campus racial climates are likely to differ between racial groups. However, with intention and effort, institutions can establish mechanisms to decrease negative campus racial climate and maximize positive learning outcomes for African Americans — it is this latter point that participants in my project illuminated about their experiences and persistence strategies at MSIs.

### **Persistence**

Although Black student educational outcomes have improved over the past three decades, (Simms, Knight, & Dawes, 1993), administrators and researchers remain concerned about retention as the attainment and persistence gaps continue to widen with regard to race and gender (Bennett & Xie, 2000, 2003). The term *persistence* takes on diverse meanings and emphasis within the context of higher education. Researchers Dustin Derby and Robert Smith (2004) offer a formal definition that describes student persistence as “students who persist and obtain a degree, but do so over an extended

(non-traditional) period of time” (p.765). However, for the purposes of this study persistence will be defined as being able to complete a program of study at a public, four-year MSI.

Psychology scholars, Joseph Trimble and Ryan Dickson (2005) state that more Black students than white students voluntarily leave college before earning a four-year degree. Further, in contrast to other ethnic minority groups, comparative studies demonstrate that issues of low retention remain significant for African American students (Mare, 1995; Steele, 1992; Wilson, 2007). Although enrollment numbers for African American students have increased, graduation rates have not aligned with increased enrollment rates. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), African American students 18 to 24 years old in 2008, represented 13.6% of earned bachelor’s degrees, with Black women representing over 60% of the baccalaureate degree populace. Moreover, it is important to note that the NCES (2010) highlighted the fact that women of Black populations are completing more degrees than the men (58.2% and 67.8% respectively).

In that regard, Black students still face a number of personal and institutional challenges that relate to their social and academic well-being, which can hinder their persistence in college (Guiffrida, 2006). In this section I present literature that points to race as central to African American persistence in higher education. In particular, I examined non-cognitive factors for Black student achievement and retention including family background, socioeconomic status (SES), faculty and peer interactions, and racism.

## **Family Background**

Research on minority retention has shown that non-cognitive factors have a greater impact on African American student retention than academic preparation (Sedlacek, 1987). More specifically, research on non-cognitive explanations for African American retention and achievement emphasized family background and socioeconomic status (Ogbu, 1990; Seidman, 2005). These studies also included campus climates and racism (Gibbs, 1997; Nettles, Thoeny & Gosman, 1986; Sedlacek, 1987; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Pinel, Warner & Chua, 2005; Spears, 1978).

Anthropologist Jonn Ogbu's (1990) case study illustrates the impact of family structure on achievement among affluent African Americans in a suburban school district in Ohio. His findings determined, "from elementary to high school the educational strategies of the African American student involved a lack of commitment to academic engagement" (p. 260). These key strategies included lack of studying, doing homework and paying attention in class, which are imperative to attaining academic success. Furthermore, Ogbu (1990) concluded "parents were equally disengaged and did not consistently and systematically supervise their children's homework closely; teach them the appropriate use of their time; shield them enough from negative peer pressure and use effective methods for motivating children to engage in their schoolwork" (p. 261).

Education scholar, Alan Seidman's (2005) review of successful minority retention programs also cited family background as an important factor African American retention and persistence. He found that African American students are often from lower-income groups, among the first generation to go to college, and from single parent homes. In addition, Seidman (2005) concluded that "for both male and female African American

students, lack of parental support and limited resources negatively affect their enrollment retention” (p. 16). Furthermore, there was a direct correlation between African Americans from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and students lesser ability to afford a college education and persist to a four-year degree.

However, important to consider in these studies are the ways in which African American family background were considered cultural deficits for African American academic success. While both Ogbu (1990) and Siedman (2005) point to African American family structure as a factor in hindering their educational attainment, other scholars have critiqued such perspectives for failing to account for the larger social, political, and economic structures that foster the conditions for African American families to struggle in their efforts to support their children in schools. Furthermore, CRT posits that schools tend to maintain the ideals and beliefs of capitalist culture, positioning the cultures of minoritized people as subordinate (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Villenas & Deyle, 1999). Power differences and conflicts that minoritized Black families experience in schools are oftentimes due to the multiple manifestations and successive conflicts of culture in school settings, including capitalist and ethnic culture of schooling.

Education scholars, Amaury Nora and Alberto Cabrera’s (1996) quantitative study reports that discrimination and the role of parental support significantly impacted the academic experiences of students of color. Their goal was to “determine the extent to which the role of perceptions of prejudice-discrimination differs in the college process for minorities and nonminorities” (p. 122). Their survey of 831 freshmen at a Midwestern PWI found parental commitment and discrimination significantly impacted the academic experiences of minorities. Students’ goal commitment was affected most by the level of

parental support received. The institutional commitment of minorities was influenced by their academic experiences with faculty and staff, while parental encouragement for white students was most influential. Student persistence was significantly and directly affected by academic performance. The greatest total effect on persistence of minorities was parental encouragement, and for whites it was goal commitment. The findings are based on a single institution in the Midwest and only surveys freshmen, though this study addressed factors affecting persistence between two groups of students at a PWI, the sample size was relatively small.

In another quantitative study conducted by psychology professor, Keisha Love (2008), it was found that African American students who have a negative relationship with their parents demonstrated lower self-esteem and poorer self-confidence. Additionally, Black students who reported not having a secure relationship with their parents had a higher chance of encountering obstacles in adapting to college life (p. 37). This study included 167 African American college students from three different higher education institutions in the Midwest. Although these studies took a quantitative approach, they are relevant to my research because a main component of my study is examining the role of family in the persistence of Black women attending MSIs.

In his classic critique, education scholar, Walter Allen (1978) believed Black family research had an unusual approach, research design and conflicting findings. Over 30 years later, several of the same issues are contributing factors to research on African American families. Understanding Blacks families in terms of the ways in which they have been affected by governmental policies, the challenges they continually face, and their strengths are impacted by several issues, namely racism (Nobles, 2007). Race

theorists argue that while racism has taken different forms from previous eras, it continues to be central in hindering African American progress (Hill, 2005) and influences studies on Black families.

Further, one of the basic tenets of CRT is the normalcy and permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). Critical race theorists assert that racism is and has been an integral feature of American life, law and culture. CRT cross-examines the privilege and positionality that comes with being white in the United States, and seeks to challenge ideas such as fairness, objectivity, and meritocracy in a society that has a legacy of exclusion and racial discrimination (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Further it allows an examination of how Black families feel race and racism have influenced educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a concept that is understood and used well beyond the scope of African American education; yet, given the sociopolitical context of American history, SES has a distinct and unique relationship with the position and progress of Blacks in education. While access to a higher education has increased over the years, degree attainment has not grown as promptly due to inequalities within and across groups, particularly groups defined by gender, race, and SES. As research demonstrates, some students from low-income backgrounds have lower educational aspirations, and rates of persistence and educational attainment (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). CRT scholars position that issues related to socioeconomic status, gender, and sexuality, as well as their intersections with race, are important factors to consider in the college access and retention of students of color

(Solórzano, 1997; West, 1991).

SES has a strong influence on the value and ability to access and succeed in higher education. One of the primary barriers that prevent African Americans and other racial-ethnic groups from low-SES backgrounds from attending postsecondary education is the cost of college. The probability of students attending college is more likely for students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. With less education and income, African American students from low-SES backgrounds have fewer institutional choices from which to select. They are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, less likely to be familiar with college costs and financial aid options, and often subject to lower expectations by their parents, peers and teachers (De La Rosa, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, Obidah, Christie & McDonough, 2014). Considering these experiences, low-income students have a tendency to consider cost as a primary factor in their college choice process and thus, might apply to attend institutions they view as most affordable. Socioeconomic status plays a critical role in African American education — historically and currently. Therefore, SES will continue to stand as a defining factor of access and success in earning a college education for African Americans.

### **Faculty and Peer Interactions**

Though institutional racism may be unintentional and unconscious, structural diversity continues to be a challenge on college campuses. According to Campbell (2010), African Americans are faced with the racial inequalities that make their structural position more prominent than that of other ethnic groups. Psychology professor, Tobbye Chavous (2002) mentioned that African American students who feel social segregation on campus have a less successful college experience than their non-Black counterparts.

Having a sense of well-being and social interactions are significant components in the college experience. Research by education scholar Mitchell Chang (2001), suggested college campuses that encourage continuous cross-racial interactions create a positive racial climate and improves the educational experience for every student involved.

Furthermore, past studies have linked the quality of interactions between campus diversity directly to student learning outcomes and satisfaction with the overall college experience (Milem, 2003). Research by Tomas Walker, Frances Pearson and Patricia Murrell (2010) examined the degree to which students take advantage of various opportunities on their college campuses, how that involvement impacts their career preparation, and whether the impact is the same for white and Black students. The study provided research on student involvement, and how previous researchers agree that the degree to which students are involved in their campus is directly related to their success and satisfaction with their college experience. To support their findings, the authors used Pace's theory about quality of effort, which states that student engagement in the environment promotes student development (Walker et al., 2010).

Past studies show that faculty-student interactions significantly impact student career choice, peer interaction has a significant impact on student behaviors, attitudes and success on campus and how counseling impacts students long-term career choice. Education scholars, Walker et al. (2010) found that African American students reported a higher level of interaction with peers of different backgrounds and black students used counseling services more than white students, reinforcing the significance of involvement on college campuses for African American students. Simply owed to the fact that African American students: (1) possess different levels of informal involvement with

faculty; (2) believe professors have lower expectations for them; (3) differing perceptions of the world; and (4) different personal growth and educational attainment goals than other ethnic groups. Supporting research suggested that African American students put more effort into socializing as well as work harder to succeed academically than that of white students (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Swigart & Murrell, 2001).

In college, however, African American's face racial inequalities that function as outlets to additional factors affecting educational attainment. The lack of academic access and persistence through college is indicative of many social and economic issues that hinder the African American population, and a sociological perspective becomes necessary when understanding the diversity challenge that is present for African American students on college campuses.

### **Racism in Higher Education**

Issues of racism and inequality continue to have an impact on African American persistence in higher education (Hausmann et al., 2009). Sociologists Ronald Kessler, Kristin Mickelson and David Williams (1999) report that of all ethnic groups, African Americans are more likely to report having experienced racial discrimination while in college. While defining students' sense of belonging as their psychological sense of identification as affiliation with the campus community, they "viewed students' sense of belonging as conceptually distinct from behavioral indicators of participation or integration in the social and academic aspects of university life" (p. 650). Feeling a sense of belonging can be difficult for African American students. They desire to be cared for and feel as though their presence is needed on campus. Like, Greier-Reed et al. (2011), the authors argued that when a student becomes socially and academically integrated on

campus they develop a psychological sense of belonging to the campus community, which creates positive outcomes, especially for African American students. Since they found racial differences in persistence rates between Black and whites (Blacks had lower rates), they used Tinto's (1987, 1993) integration model and Astin's (1984) model of student involvement to demonstrate how students' sense of belonging has been neglected in higher education.

First, education theorist, Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993) suggests that the persistence and retention of students increases when they academically and socially integrate their lives within an institution. This theory has been supported by Pascarella and Terenzini (1977), yet in regards to dropout decisions, it has been mutually agreed upon that academic integration is the most important factor rather than social integration. This is because there is a stronger impact on institutional commitment within the realms of academic integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993); whereas, education scholar, Alexander Astin (1975, 1984) proposes that the persistence and retention of students increases when they can relate to the college, program or activity within it. Therefore, this relation translates to participation and involvement of the students, which furthers said retention; this concept described by Astin as involvement and identification.

Notwithstanding, it is important to note that Tinto and Astin have been critiqued for not including student of color experiences (Tierney, 1997; Attinasi, 1989; Kraemer, 1997). Researchers believe that total integration is not practical because students of color need affiliation and support with those whom they can identify (Tierney, 1992; Attinasi, 1989; Kraemer, 1997). For example, research by sociologists, Ray Robertson and Danielle Mason (2008) identified numerous factors related to retaining African American

male students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). To connect their data to the literature, the authors used social theorist Joe Feagin's (1998) cumulative discrimination theory; which measures verbal and physical aggression, exclusion, subculture dismissal and typecasting (Robertson & Mason, 2008). The focal points of their study were institutional factors that were significant in the educational success of African American male students. These factors are: "faculty involvement, financial assistance, classroom environment, academic and personal support resources, extracurricular activities and the African American male students' ability to handle racism" (p. 68).

Further, their work revealed that students reported experiences being the target of racial slurs; verbally or written in public "white" spaces such as, "nigger, coon and boy" (p. 74). Like Solórzano et al. (2000), students described feelings of alienation and segregation on campus. Contrary to mental health counselor Douglas Guiffrida (2006), sociologists, Ray Robertson and Danielle Mason (2008) discuss Tinto's student institutional approach as it relates to social adjustment, academic success, student integration and individual goals and commitments which facilitate students' decision on whether or not to persist in college. Though data already exists, this study also suggests that African American students at predominately white institutions feel "type casted."

Research by education scholars Anthony D'Augelli and Scott Hershberger (1993) show that 59% of African American college students reported being targeted with racial insults at least once or twice, and 41% reported hearing racially disparaging remarks occasionally and experienced ambiguous incidents more often (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald & Bylsma, 2003). But how much accountability do colleges and universities have in addressing incidents of racism against African American college students?

According to Perna, Milem, Gerald, Baum, Rowan and Hutchens (2006), “the possible exception of desegregation mandates, higher education systems are typically not held accountable for equity...” (p. 199). Since African Americans’ attitudes and beliefs regarding race directly influences their perceptions and college experiences (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001), they found a need to achieve equity for Black students in higher education to be significant. Based on their findings, they recommend institutional researchers to examine the status of race equity as experienced by the students on their campus and for qualitative researchers to study this phenomenon.

Research by Breaux (2010) shows what racism in higher education looked like in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which supports Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) beliefs that racism still exists today as it did back in the Jim Crow era except it presents itself in new subtle forms. Breaux (2010) mentions how women historically were in a heated battle to control their own minds, bodies and time. Though his study examines experiences of African American women decades ago, it provides great perspectives of what those experiences looked like, and allows me to assess the growth (similarities/differences) and compare the potential new modern “color-blind racism” to the old blatant racism in higher education. The aim is that my study will explore whether or not color-blind racism exists at MSIs and investigate how it affects persistence amongst African American women attending at these unique institutions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the research is that there are multiple issues linked to the educational success of African Americans. Previous research suggested that it stems from historical oppression that has yet to be completely dissipated in the African American community. Moreover, African American women have mostly

been studied in comparison to African American men or white women at HBUs and/or PWIs. Scholarship has yet to exclusively examine their experiences at MSIs. While limited scholarship exists on African American women in higher education, the purpose of this study, then, is to understand the experiences of African American women students at minority-serving institutions and to discover their successful persistence strategies. This section provided the review of conceptual and empirical literature related to African American students' persistence toward undergraduate degree attainment. It discussed several personal and institutional factors relating to African American students' retention. While the goal of this study is to centralize the voices of Black women college students, the following chapter will provide my methodological choices.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

African Americans suffer from a long legacy of discrimination in American higher education that continues to shape their lives today. In this study I attempt to understand how this legacy manifests in and impacts the everyday experiences of African American women who against all odds, have challenged the institutional exclusion of their communities in higher education. More specifically, I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism to qualitatively examine the college experiences of African American women who have not only accessed college, but also persisted to their senior year at a minority-serving institution (MSI). My primary goal is to uncover the various factors that shape and contribute to African American women student persistence at MSIs that are not historically Black colleges and universities, and to understand how race and gender shape their educational experiences in this specific institutional context.

#### **Research Questions**

Constant in the literature on African American women is the way that racism and sexism shape their educational experiences and outcomes. Due to the failure of traditional frameworks to meaningfully consider the multiple identities of African American women in higher education, I used the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism to construct the main research questions that guided my inquiry regarding African American women realities in college:

1. What are the experiences of African American women students at minority-serving institutions?

2. What factors shape African American women student persistence within the context of a minority-serving institution that is not a historically Black college or university?
3. What role does race and/ or gender play in the construction of African American women college student experiences within this specific minority-serving institutional context?

CRT and Womanism make central in my inquiry how racism and patriarchy shape African American women retention, and the various persistence strategies they have employed to complete a traditional four-year program of study. In the following, I further explicate CRT and Womanism; the latter of which represents a paradigm shift in traditional feminist movements that considers the perspective of African American women. Additionally, I illustrate the setting for this study and detail data collection processes related to the participants, data sources, and method of analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

CRT and Womanism provide a useful framework to theoretically ground an examination of the experiences and knowledge of young Black women in the academy. Both frameworks highlight the need to consider the multiple subjectivities of women of color, namely African American women. Further, CRT and Womanism encourage the utility and significance of narrative data to centralize the voices of Black women students whose presence in college counter dominant narratives that only depict the failure of the African American educational experience.

## **Critical Race Theory**

CRT positions one to consider how oppression is normal in the everyday interactions among people in society (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2008). An evolving body of literature that has expanded beyond its origins in the law and has slowly been incorporated into education discourse represents the impact of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Critical race theorists investigate the ways that white privilege and racism work together to govern institutions and systems (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Legal scholars, Crenshaw et al. (1995), believe CRT shows how race and racial power are characterized beyond its legal cultures and to American society overall.

Education scholars have used CRT as a tool to analyze the impact of racial inequality in higher education and on the academic achievement for Students of Color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997). Consequently, CRT scholars in education have laid out five basic tenets that guide race-centered research within the field. The tenets are: (1) the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in the lives of People of Color; (2) the need for research to challenge dominant white ideologies within society and education in particular; (3) a commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge in understanding the education of People of Color; and (5) the utility of transdisciplinary perspectives (Solórzano et al., 2000). Collectively, these tenets offer educators a framework to not only address systemic inequalities embedded in

American education, but also to rely on the experiences of People of Color to transform the institution of education.

Race scholars Solórzano (1997) and West (1991) note that race is a social construct, and racism occurs at societal and individual levels. Thus, race and racism are critical factors in defining and explaining the experiences of people of color. However, intersectionality is also necessary to consider. Intersectionality within CRT points to the multidimensionality of oppression and recognizes that race alone cannot account for the totality of disempowerment among communities of color. Intersectionality is defined as the “examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado et al., 2001 p. 51). This is an important tenet in CRT because it guides us beyond a one-dimensional understanding of white supremacy. Intersectionality is one common concept between CRT and Womanism. One of the biggest critiques of CRT literature is that scholars have not effectively considered gender even though intersectionality calls for it – this critique validates why this project used CRT with Womanism.

### **Womanism**

The feminist movement is concerned with defining gender as a social construct and challenging the patriarchy and sexism that shape gender relations (Cott, 1986, Offen, 1988). Many scholars, including bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), and Valerie Smith (1997) have recognized that patriarchy is mainstay to the oppression that African American woman have encountered in the past and continue to encounter today. However, within their analyses there exists a critique of traditional feminist frameworks, which often exclude discussions around race. Consequently, in this section I expand on

CRT and better consider the perspectives and life experiences of Black women in the academy through the introduction of Womanism, an epistemological perspective developed by and for women of color (Phillips, 2006; Walker, 1983).

Credited to Alice Walker's (1983) collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Womanism was originally defined as:

[a] black feminist or feminist of color. . . who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture. . . [and who] sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. . . Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (p. xii).

Throughout the years, Walker's Womanism has evolved and solidified into a form of Black feminism that stretches beyond the conventional constructs of feminism.

Womanists often align themselves with feminist critiques of patriarchy but without subscription to the racial paradigms of white-centered feminist movements. Further, Phillips (2006) explains Womanism as the experiences and perspectives of woman of color—experiences and perspectives also ignored by traditional feminism. Phillips details how although most literature on Womanism is geared towards the experiences and perspectives of African American women, other women of color have come to identify with this ideological tradition.

Womanism is important in the assertion that although African American women have advanced in higher education over the years, alongside race, gender remains critical in shaping their college access and retention. Smith (1997) argues that while white and Black women share a commonality regarding how they are gendered, Black women are

doubly marginalized due to their race. Further, scholars have argued that Black people are faced with racism in larger social contexts, but Black women are additionally challenged by sexism inside and outside of their racial community. bell hooks (1992) echoed this phenomenon when she wrote:

It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life (p. 124).

She believes women are greatly oppressed but not just by white men. Black men relish in perverse victimization as well. Thus, in my project, I paid close attention regarding the ways that patriarchy and sexism played out against African American women by both whites and other Black community members. Black women remain allies to Black men, yet historically and structurally, they have been silenced and forced behind men.

The significance of research framed through a CRT and Womanist lens has begun to gain traction in educational studies. For example, Womanist scholars, Dimpal Jain and Caroline Turner (2011), discussed the politics of naming as it relates to Womanist theory by understanding how eleven women of color student leaders assess feminism and demonstrate how critical their assessment is in higher education (p. 71). Additionally, the authors examined the challenges women faculty experienced with identifying their scholarship and aligning themselves epistemologically. As implied by the authors, feminism excludes the issue of race. Thus, they criticized how feminism inadequately confronts the issues facing women of color and focuses on oppression as it relates to

gender but neglects issues of race, class and sexuality, and therefore are reluctant to align themselves with frameworks such as feminism; despite the positive or negative consequences it has in the academy.

Based on existing literature and practice, I have assessed the need for additional scholarship that addresses the perpetual challenge of African American women's experiences in higher education. The combination of CRT and Womanism helped me to frame my project in such a way that I considered the multiple subjectivities of Black women. Consequently, this study will contribute to literature by legitimizing the voices of Black women in speaking about social and racial inequalities through counter-storytelling.

### **Research Design**

According to Patton (1990) qualitative research holistically contextualizes and reveals in-depth details about a phenomenon. Aligned with critical race theorists and Womanists who emphasize the legitimacy and value of experiential knowledge (Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Philips, 2006; Yosso, 2005), I employed a case study approach to examine African American women persistence within the specific context of minority-serving institutions. Education scholar, Robert Stake (1994) suggests researchers use an intrinsic case study method to describe and understand a particular case of interest where the case best tells its own story (p. 239). Similarly, education scholars Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis (2003), explain case studies as a method to enhance our understanding of a larger phenomenon through investigating a specific case that allows researchers to focus on the particular. Additionally, researchers (Merriam,

1998, 2009; Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1995) describe case studies as heuristic, holistic, descriptive and inductive methodology where data are analyzed for themes, issues and patterns. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) also note, “case studies are an intensive description and analysis of a bounded social phenomenon, that is both a methodology and an object of study" (p. 31). Case studies offer insight and an in-depth understanding from the perspectives of those being studied, which provide the greatest promise of significant contributions to higher education.

I was interested in learning from African American women who successfully persisted to their senior year and a qualitative design was appropriate to emphasize the essence of the human experience through which experiential knowledge can be shared. Therefore, I conducted a case study of African American women experiences at one MSI where they were a minority among Students of Color. Such an approach afforded the opportunity to determine how persistence is influenced by social and racial inequalities in higher education spaces such as MSIs, which have previously been determined to be academically and socially beneficial for Students of Color. Taking a case study approach helped me to conduct a nuanced exploration of African American women realities at one MSI.

### **Counter-Storytelling**

While a case study approach helped me to focus on how the institutional context of one MSI shaped African American women student lives, I used the method of counter-storytelling to collect and interpret data generated through interviews with the women. Counter-storytelling is a means of telling the untold stories of People of Color (Delgado, 1999) and it demonstrates alternative epistemologies beyond those that perpetuate white

dominance (Bell, 1992, 2004; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Mills, 1998; and Ladson-Billings, 2000). Counter-storytelling is a critical theoretical and methodological concept grounded in Black feminist traditions and critical race feminism (Alexander-Floyd, 2010). They create a space for traditionally suppressed and marginalized groups to critique inequalities within social institutions. Purposely, counter storytelling allows women of color to discuss their experiences within a racist and patriarchal society.

While providing a means to critique the normalized dialogue that perpetuates racial stereotypes, counter-storytelling challenges the discourse of the majority and the privileged (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) argue that dominant groups use stories of created reality to justify their power in ways to uphold their privilege. Counter-storytelling, therefore, enables the stories of marginalized individuals to be expressive about their experiences with social inequality. Further, these narratives are largely legitimized in higher education as they offer individuals with a shared sense of identity that reflects dominant discourse and practices often viewed as natural, conventional and commonly accepted as the truth (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Henry & Tator, 2010; James & Leyden 2010).

Through counter-storytelling, the narratives of African American women provided the voice component of CRT and allowed the experiences and realities of this historically oppressed group to be heard. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1994) argue that if we fail to consider the voices of people of color, then we neglect to know anything useful about education in their communities. In this regard, I took an interview approach to emphasize the voices of African American women as counter-stories.

## **Research Setting and Context**

Institutional type plays an important role in the success of students of color. In particular, research has demonstrated the positive impact of historically Black colleges and universities on retention rates among Black students. However, there is less research on the experiences of Black students at other types of minority-serving institutions. This project highlights the successful persistence of Black women at a large, public, minority-serving institution — thus revealing the benefits and challenges of being a minority student within and among other minorities.

### **Research Site**

The site for my project was State University (SU) (a pseudonym) for a public four-year minority-serving institution in Southern California. SU is one of the largest state universities in the area and it serves over 28,000 students and employs nearly 3,300 faculty and staff members. SU houses nine colleges, offers 60 bachelor degrees and 28 credentials, as well as extended learning and other special programs.

According to Steven Hubbard and Frances Stage (2009) MSIs are increasingly more likely to serve a more diverse population of students than other institutional types. SU is an MSI and is designated both as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Consequently, a large percentage of their student population are Students of Color: 29.5% Hispanic, 11.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7.4% African American, and 6.6% “Non Resident Alien.” 31% of the students are White and another 13.6% of the students’ racial background was “Unknown.” By serving a large population of minority students, SU reinforces the educational issue of African American persistence in higher education.

The identification of SU as a site is an example of an extreme case sampling strategy; a case selected “from the extremes, cases that are unusual or special in some way” (Glense, 2011, p. 45). SU has many African American students enrolled, however, these students have the lowest completion rates compared to any other ethnic group in the entire state university system. Consequently, next to Non Resident Alien students, this population of students has the lowest number of students who persist. For example, in 2012-2013, only 4.1% of Black students earned a baccalaureate degree compared to Latino/a students at 25.1% and White students at 38.5%. Research shows African American persistence remains problematic in higher education due to the “same historical, political, economic, social, cultural and psychological patterns that have existed since 1619” (Allen, 1992, p.41). However, because gaps in literature exist on MSIs, our knowledge is limited about African American students’ experiences and outcomes at these types of institutions. Furthermore, in the Fall 2013 SU enrolled 54.5% women compared to 45.5% men. Thus, SU site was opportune to explore the factors essential to successful college completion for African American women attending MSIs.

Within my site, I gained access to students by contacting departments and student organizations that served Black students on campus. Since SU is an institution with low African American retention rates, and the intent of my study was to improve persistence amongst African American women at minority-serving institutions, I did not encounter difficulties when I entered these spaces.

### **Data Collection and Research Sample**

I utilized in-depth interviews with 15 African American women to gather data to

construct counter-narratives of young Black women whose voices are underrepresented in higher education scholarship. Given that I was interested in understanding Black women college experiences, interviews enabled me to vividly capture the ways in which these women ascribed meaning to their experiences. By relying on the experiential knowledge of these women, I sought to capture the complexity of being both Black and a woman in the context of MSIs.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

My participants were selected using a criterion sampling strategy at State University. According to Patton (2002) criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet specific criteria relative to your research topic. To qualify for my study students had to identify as: (1) African American, (2) female, (3) 18 years of age or older, (4) a Senior or recent SU graduate, and (5) willing to share their experiences. Due to the lack of research focused specifically on African American women students' college experiences at MSIs, I chose to look only at this group. Further, using a criterion sampling strategy was appropriate because "the logic and power of purposeful sampling...leads to selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth" (Glense, 2011, p. 44). Using this sampling strategy allowed me to learn a "great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

Recruitment of participants occurred on campus through the purposeful distribution of recruitment materials to campus entities that serve African American students. More specifically, I provided a recruitment letter and email to the faculty located within all Ethnic Studies programs on campus, including African American Studies, American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Central American Studies,

and Chicana/o Studies. The majority of students enrolled in Ethnic Studies courses are minority students and I assumed many would be eligible or know someone who was eligible for participation. Further, to recruit students from a diversity of majors, I also provided my recruitment letter and email to the Deans of every college on campus, and asked them to distribute the information to their respective programs and department listserves. Finally, I conducted targeted recruitment by getting permission to make classroom announcements of my study within the upper division African American Studies classes, as well as the main African American-serving student organization, the Black Student Union. I also utilized my relationships with various African American Studies faculty and students who were familiar with my research interests and who expressed support for participant recruitment within their classes and student organization meetings. Several participants were also recruited through outreach activities at my church. The geographical proximity of my church to SU and the racial representation of Black parishioners was appropriate to promote public awareness of my project.

After I recruited a few participants, I employed snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as a recruiting technique where initial participants identify or provide names of others that meet the research study criteria and might be willing to participate in the study (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). I made contact with prospective participants via email, inviting them to participate in the study. As a result, I was able to recruit 15 African American women students to participate in my project.

#### *Research Invitation and Informed Consent*

In the invitation letter to prospective participants, I explained my connection to the university by providing a brief description of my role as a researcher and the purpose

and procedures of the study. Additionally, I listed the risks and benefits participants may experience as a result to the study. The research invitation also described my plan to protect their confidentiality, how participation would be voluntary, and who to contact with questions and concerns.

Furthermore, I distributed an informed consent form that also explained the research study. This form was approved and validated by the IRB at SU and allowed the women to make informed decisions regarding their participation in the study. According to anthropologist, Corrine Glense (2011) this document informs participants, “(1) that participation is voluntary, (2) of any aspects of the research that might affect their well-being, and (3) that they may freely choose to stop participation at any point in the study” (p. 166). I asked each participant to sign and date the document and collected it for my records.

### **Participants**

There were 15 self-identified African American women participants involved in the study. Twelve were seniors enrolled at SU at the time of the study and three were recent graduates. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 26 years old. Only five of the participant’s parents completed a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution, consequently, ten of the women were first-generation college students. In fact, as illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2, two of the women’s parents had master degrees while the remaining 13 participants’ parental attainment varied from unknown to bachelor degrees; none of their parents earned a doctoral degree.

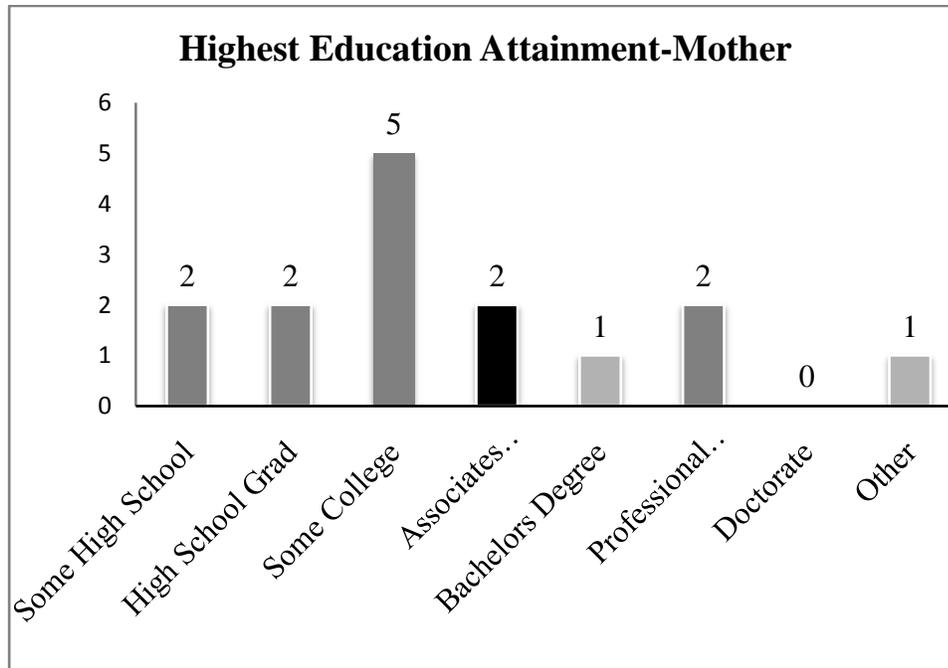


Figure 1. Highest Education Attainment of Mother

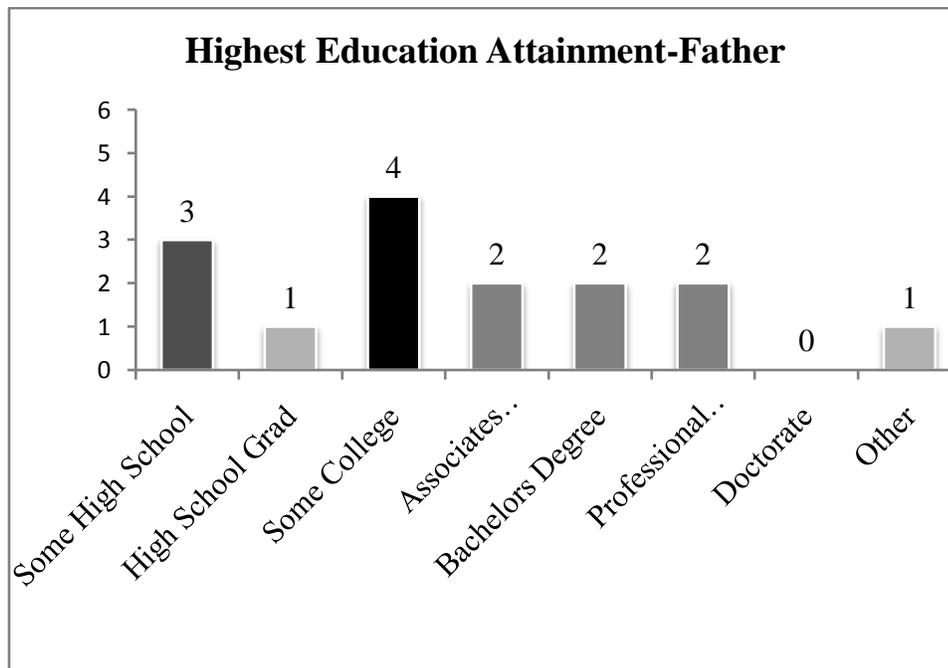


Figure 2. Highest Education Attainment of Father

While 13 of the participants were born and raised within the United States, two participants indicated being born and raised elsewhere. However, all of the participants held an in-state residency status. Only one participant self-reported having an upper socio-economic status (SES); one participant, middle class; six participants, working class; and seven participants classified themselves as having a low SES with a family annual income of \$45,000 or below. While financial aid was the primary source for college costs, three participants received financial support from their parents. Thirteen of the 15 women worked at least part-time (20 hours a week) while enrolled at SU.

Further, programs of study varied: five participants selected majors in the social and behavioral sciences; four participants, in the humanities; three participants, in health and human development; two participants, in the arts, media or communications; and one participant in business and economics. Table 1 (see page 59) provides a general overview of the African American women college students who participated in this study. For purposes of anonymity participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1

*Overview of Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Racial Background	Age	Place of Birth	Academic Standing	First Generation
Jourdan	Female	African American	22	Lynwood, CA	Senior	Yes
Georgia	Female	African American	21	Oklahoma City, OK	Senior	No
Grace	Female	Black	22	Oakland, CA	Senior	Yes
Antionette	Female	African/Native American	22	Bakersfield, CA	Senior	Yes
Iman	Female	African American	23	Indio, CA	Recent Graduate	Yes
Kara	Female	African American	23	Los Angeles, CA	Senior	Yes
Sadie	Female	African American	21	Fort Campbell, KY	Senior	No
Eva	Female	Black	21	Gardena, CA	Senior	Yes
Tamara	Female	African American	24	Oxnard, CA	Recent Graduate	Yes
Beverly	Female	African-Nigerian	22	London, England	Senior	No
Toni	Female	African American	22	Oakland, CA	Senior	Yes
Rita	Female	Belizean American	21	Inglewood, CA	Recent Graduate	Yes
Francis	Female	Black	21	Beverly Hills, CA	Senior	No
Liya	Female	Black	26	Ethiopia	Senior	No
Ella	Female	African American	23	San Bernardino, CA	Senior	Yes

## **Participant Descriptions**

Jourdan was the first participant I interviewed. She is a 22-year old college student from Lynwood, California. She described how accessibility was the primary reason she attended SU. As a first-generation college student, Jourdan attended SU because it was far enough from home where she could gain independence but close enough to access her family.

Georgia, a 21-year old senior originally from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma described how affordability was the primary reason she attended SU. As a student from a working class family, Georgia attended SU instead of her first choice college because based on her parents' income, she was not offered financial assistance.

Grace, a 22-year old senior from Oakland, California shared that attending a racially diverse university would prepare her for work in a global society. She plans on earning a Doctor of Psychology with hopes to open her own practice and non-profit organization where she will interact with a variety of young men of all nationalities.

Antoinette, a 22-year old senior from Bakersfield, California explained that she never desired to attend college, but after several discussions with a campus representative, she decided to attend SU. Further, the athletic department offered her a full scholarship for track and field.

Iman, a 23-year old recent graduate from Indio, California described how college size was the primary reason she attended SU. Iman desired to attend a large public institution. She believed State University offered a wide range of academic choices and a diverse student body.

Kara, a 23-year old senior from Los Angeles, California attended SU because she was targeted and recruited by the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at SU. As a first-generation college student, Kara received academic and financial assistance from EOP.

Sadie, a 21-year old senior from Fort Campbell, Kentucky shared that she primarily attended SU because she had a relative who had also attended the college. Additionally, she wanted to attend college far away from home where she could gain independence.

Eva, a 21-year old senior from Gardena, California was not offered admission to her first choice college in Texas. However, SU was geographically accessible and served as a central reason she attended SU.

Tamara, a 24-year old recent graduate from Oxnard, California was also influenced by EOP to attend SU. As a first-generation college student, Tamara, was attracted by the academic assistance offered through EOP.

Beverly, a 22-year old senior originally from London, England (but currently from Rancho Cucamonga, California) attended SU out of fear that she lacked the admissions requirements for other institutions. Therefore, she only applied to SU. Beverly, is from an affluent family where both parents hold Master degrees.

Toni, a 22-year old senior from Oakland, California shared that racial diversity was the primary reason she attended SU. As a student from a diverse area, Toni attended SU because she believed the campus would offer her a diverse college experience.

Rita, a 21-year old recent graduate from Inglewood, California described how geographical accessibility and diversity were the primary reasons she attended SU. Rita, decided to attend SU because it was not too far from home.

Francis, a 21-year old senior from Beverly Hills, California shared how she attended SU out of fear that she lacked the admissions requirements for competitive institutions. Therefore, she applied to state universities and selected SU because it was not too far from home.

Liya, a 26-year old senior from Ethiopia (but currently a Van Nuys, California resident) chose to attend SU because it was affordable. As a student from a low-income family, Liya attended SU instead of her first choice college because it enabled her to commute from home and save some money on housing, as well as work, so she could contribute to her family's income.

Lastly, Ella, a 23-year old first generation college student from San Bernardino, California attended SU because it offered her academic support. In particular, she was part of an EOP program that financially assisted fostered youth.

### **In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews**

The women who elected to participate in this study were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. This form took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was collected at the start of their interview. Subsequently, I began the interview with a pre-interview session in which I formally welcomed participants; and reiterated to them the interview purpose, confidentiality procedures, the meaning of informed consent, how they could contact me after the interview, and the length of the interview. Additionally, I briefly described the interview protocol and explained I would audio record their

interview, and asked for their permission to do so. I provided them with a consent form that required their signature in order to move forward with the data collection process. From there, I allowed each participant to ask questions or express any additional concerns they had regarding the study.

Aligned with Rossman and Rallis (2012), I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the 15 African American women college students, which provided the opportunity for the participants and I, the researcher, to “co-construct” (p. 176) events and develop a deeper understanding of these events. A semi-structured interview is a mixture of structured and unstructured questions that allow new ideas to emerge throughout the course of the interview (Merriam, 2009). A semi-structured format permitted flexibility and encouraged the participants to respond openly.

Since the goal of this qualitative case study was to contextualize and give meaning to the college experiences of African American women, I used the interview protocol to gain a detailed understanding of their lived experiences and worldviews. I learned what they thought and felt regarding a range of topics, including their family background, their college-going process, and experiences in higher education. I tried to elicit the women’s life histories so that I could learn about their past experiences up to the present, the specific details of their persistence, and their reflection on the meaning of their experiences. This holistic approach allowed me to thoroughly investigate my participants’ perceptions of reality as they constructed it.

I conducted my interviews from Fall 2013 to early-Spring 2014 semesters. The interviews occurred in locations convenient to the women, including both on- and off-campus. Hosting the interviews in their preferred location offered participants a familiar

cultural setting and provided a social and psychological climate necessary to encourage them to fully engage. Glense (2011) suggests, “For depth understanding, you repeatedly spend extended periods with fewer respondents and observation sites” (p. 46). In my project, many of the interviews were longer than anticipated because the participants found them as opportune times to share for the first time a reflective perspective on their college experiences. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. At the close of each interview, I asked participants if there were any additional experiences they would like to share and informed me that if they recalled any stories after the interview that they were welcome to contact me.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Preliminary Data Analysis**

The audio recordings of all interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim in order to prepare for data analysis. When analyzing qualitative data, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) recommend for researchers to “explore every possible angle to find patterns and relationships among the data” (p. 152). Since this case study focused on the descriptions of the lived experiences shared by my participants, I individually transcribed the interviews immediately after each interaction. This allowed me to identify initial codes and early networks of code, and take and record the participants’ responses, reactions and attitudes while they were still familiar. Additionally, for a more accurate illustration of the interview climate, I took reflective observational notes to reference the participants’ body language during the interview process to ensure congruence for future analysis. I wanted to verify that their body language aligned with their narratives, which

allowed me to make necessary adjustments in my interpretation of their responses. Bringing meaning to collected data in qualitative research is an iterative and complex process (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). I began the data analysis process in Spring 2014 by reviewing the transcribed interview data and creating codes for initial themes that reflected similarities among the women's stories and literature on the experiences of African American women in higher education.

To assist with organization of data, I imported the transcriptions into Dedoose. As suggested by Yin (2009), a computer program such as Dedoose is a helpful tool for organizing case study data; however, the researcher is ultimately responsible for the analysis and must rely on rigorous techniques established for analyzing empirical data. Dedoose allowed me to code the data by individual cases and connect the codes to the original data source. I became fully immersed in the data, gained the ability to organize the data into chunks, and appropriately interpret the material.

### **Codes, Networks, and Thematic Data Analysis**

In order for the participants' voices to be heard, I conducted a holistic analysis that captured each participant's experiences as an individual (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). From there, I reviewed each individual transcription three times in order to understand the overall illustration of the information gained. Once I developed a familiarity with each participant's transcript, I re-read and manually coded the data through the inductive analysis process by highlighting and color-coding the data. During this process I began with specific observations to detect patterns, developed provisional hypotheses, and lastly, drew general conclusions from the data. Traditionally, this process is used to ensure that concepts stay as close as possible to the participants' own words.

Aforementioned, I used Dedoose to classify, sort and file the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Though manually transcribing and computer software are similar, “your study is only as good as the data you have to analyze and the care that you take in analyzing the data” (Bloomberg & Volpe p. 148). Therefore, I used both in order to ensure that my data was coded, organized and interpreted efficiently. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) manually transcribing allowed me to “interpret the emotional tone that is often critical to understanding the findings” (p. 147); this tone is usually neglected by computer software as it fails to consider the contextual basis of information. Nonetheless, “software analytical packages are essentially a tool that can make the numerous tasks of the analytical process efficient and are certainly useful in assembling and locating information” (Bloomberg & Volpe, p. 147). After this process was completed, I began interpreting the data to discover the commonality of ideas and answers from the participants. This information is presented in chapter four.

### **Researcher Role**

When conducting a qualitative case study, the primary role of the researcher is to descriptively investigate the conscious phenomenon and transform the experience into a textural expression of its essence (Morse & Richards, 2002). Against this methodological backdrop, the researcher is the primary tool for collecting data. Since, the researcher is the only instrument that is sufficiently adept to comprehend and collect data, it is necessary for the researcher to become aware of their own suppositions – perspectives, opinions, interests, biases, prejudices and assumptions throughout the research process (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In order to qualify my ability to conduct research, I needed to develop a researcher identity cognizant of my suppositions. This researcher identity

allowed me to describe relevant aspects of my expectations and previous experiences in order to clearly state my position and the perspective from which my study is driven.

My background as an African American women college student certainly affected the interpretive paradigm or “lens” that I have developed throughout my personal college and life experiences. In this sense, participants might have seen me as an empathetic researcher. However, my training in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership has enabled me to learn data collection and analysis skills that helped me minimize my bias and illuminate the perspectives of the participants in my project. Glense (2011) believes it is necessary for researchers to enter the field with a clear conscience. Thus, while I used my personal experiences to inform how I should respectfully interact and honor my participants’ stories, I used my academic training to contextualize their stories with larger societal phenomena.

In my pursuit of higher education I attended both a PWI and an MSI, which garnered me a unique perspective on the meaning of educational attainment as it relates to persistence. I have lived the struggle and managed to persist beyond Bachelor and Master degrees, and to a doctorate, despite the barriers that presented themselves along the way. My educational trajectory served as the basis to many suppositions I have developed and desired to examine at a minority-serving institution. Because it is essential for me to address personal biases (Glense, 2011), I used several strategies to help alleviate possible biases and suppositions that would challenge the trustworthiness and authenticity of my study. By doing so, I provided a more authentic and trustworthy description of African American women college experiences at MSIs.

The strategies I employed included keeping a reflective journal that allowed me to address the personal “lenses” developed over the years, document my emotions and reactions during the research process and return to my past experiences as a college student. This practice made me aware of my personal perspectives and how they led me “to ask certain questions [and] make certain interpretations of actions within the research setting” (Glense, 2011, p. 154). I also sought consistent feedback throughout the research process that allowed my peers, colleagues and other members of the academy to provide ongoing critique and new perspectives to challenge my suppositions. A constant feedback loop allowed me to strengthen my arguments and refine my study as suggested by researchers (Fink, 2000; Shenton, 2004). Finally, throughout the study, I used member checks (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) with participants, which not only helped me remain grounded in the work, but also balanced my understanding of the results of the inquiry with others’ understanding. Member checks were used throughout the study in an effort to solicit feedback as findings emerged (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). According to Maxwell (2005), soliciting feedback from participants decreases the likelihood of researchers to misinterpret what participants say and/or do. To this end, this served as a means to identify my own biases and enhance the validity of my findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In compliance with State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), my obligation to inform my participants who I am, what my research is about, why I am interested in learning from them and what I will do with their information was universal. According to Glense (2011), “research subjects must have sufficient information to make informed decisions about participating in a study” (p. 163). Therefore, as a researcher, it

was my responsibility to ensure the participants were well-informed about my research purpose through an informed consent process and that they understood the risks and benefits they could experience as a result of my study. They were also informed that without penalty, they could withdraw from my study at any given point.

To reduce risks and maximize my moral obligations, I ensured transcripts and field notes did not possess personal identifiers, raw data was kept under lock and key and on a password-protected laptop, and data was only shared with personnel who were directly involved in the research process, such as my dissertation advisor. In addition, I provided my participants with adequate referral services, as a precaution to adverse events. By taking these steps to protect my participants, I prevented ethical dilemmas from occurring and strengthened the quality of my findings.

I designed this study utilizing a qualitative approach to develop an understanding of Black women experiences at minority-serving institutions. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism, frameworks that enable the examination of race and gender in the college experiences of African American women, guided my study. I used the tenets of CRT and Womanism to examine not only social and racial inequalities experienced by the participants at SU, but also their retention strategies at this MSI. Specifically, counter-stories were used to learn how African American women students persisted within this unique institutional context. The following chapter includes the results and research findings categorized into themes. Additionally, I provide the outcomes of the research findings and offer an analysis of the data derived from the narratives of 15 African American women students at SU.

## **Chapter IV: Findings and Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences of African American women who have graduated or successfully persisted to their senior year at a minority-serving institution (MSI). In this chapter I reveal key findings that emerged from the data I gathered in interviews with 15 African American women college students at State University (SU). In particular, there were three major factors that permeated the higher education experiences of all the participants: (1) Race and Racism; (2) Gender; and (3) Family Influence. Furthermore, data revealed that the participants faced a multitude of challenges such as financial hardship, family pressure, racism, and sexism by both their non-Black and Black male counterparts. Despite the numerous challenges the women shared, I also found that they used a variety of persistence strategies to overcome these challenges. Among the strategies they employed were to find a mentor, build relationships with faculty and staff, and religious faith. In the following section, I highlight the voices of the young Black women to provide important insight into the individual and institutional factors that shape the persistence of African American women college students at a MSI.

### **Race as Relevant**

In light of rapid demographic shifts and legal challenges to affirmative action in the United States, colleges and universities have long endured racial tensions on their campuses. SU prides itself on being an accessible, student-centered, high-quality and affordable source of higher education that meets the needs of students from underserved communities. SU serves a growing number of first-generation, low-income, and non-traditional students, and diversity is immensely valuable to the institution. In the

following section, I show how the participants demonstrate the relevance of race throughout their college experiences. I also identify the comprehensive perceptions African American women had of race at SU. In addition to perceptions based on lived experiences, I go on to discuss structural racism, presumptions of incompetence, and internalized racial discrimination as they relate to institutional context. While racism at MSIs has received little attention in the literature, it is included here to provide additional insight into the campus racial climate at MSIs. African American women college student perceptions represent how they view and interact with the campus, thereby providing a lens through which everyday encounters are understood and whether they reinforce or dismantle preconceived notions of the campus.

### **College Choice**

The college choice process is a complex and often confusing stage where students make final decisions on postsecondary options (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper 1999). For African American students, the representation and visibility of students of color influence their college choice process. In other words, the reality of attending a MSI served as a major factor in the women choosing to attend SU. In American society we believe race no longer matters, yet MSIs are explicitly acknowledged to address the issues of students of color in particular.

Minority-serving institutions proved to be attractive to the young Black women in particular, most of who thought diversity was an important factor in going to college. Many of the women shared they specifically attended SU because it was a racially diverse institution. For example, Tamara, a recent SU graduate from Oxnard, California expressed,

I feel like [SU] is very diverse. So campus-wise, that's why I chose to come here, because it was very diverse. I didn't want to come to a college that was just one race.

Tamara was from a predominantly white area and shared that she only attended white schools prior to attending college. Similarly, Beverly, a graduating senior from London, England shared, “I feel like maybe that's a benefit being at [SU], that it's such a diverse school that you can really prevail.” Like, Tamara, Beverly lived in a predominantly white area and attended majority white schools prior to attending SU. Kara, a graduating senior, from Los Angeles, California who attended predominantly Black and Latina/o schools added, “I mean, campus is so diverse. Especially this campus is so diverse. So it's like, kind [of] just fit in wherever.” These women’s voices highlight the relevancy of race in that the institutional context of a MSI ultimately led to their college choice.

Research herein assumes race and racism have influenced the experiences of African American college students. As previously discussed, a CRT methodology was used to facilitate the collection and analysis of data through the counter-stories told from the perspective of individuals from marginalized cultures (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). While State University’s mission directly focuses on increasing minority student access and success in higher education, and the women expressed racial diversity as an influential college choice factor, they also described that they still experienced instances of racism.

### **Structural Racism**

The women chose to attend SU because of its racial diversity, however upon arrival, some students encountered structural racism — both institutional racism and the

broader effects of social racism (Tatum, 1997). One form of structural racism of which they became acutely aware was the underrepresentation of Black people on campus. To illustrate, Grace, a graduating senior, from Oakland, California said:

There's not enough [African American students]. There's not enough culture for us here [State University]. And I'm not saying that it's just about the resources that are provided, but I think that we also play a part into it to. What we choose to do and what we choose not to do.

Her experience is significant because not only does she feel State University failed to offer enough culture, but that the lack of a large Black student population prevented them from establishing a strong Black culture on campus.

Many students, such as Beverly, felt that Black student apathy was influenced by the lack of effort from the university to grow a strong Black community on campus. She expressed:

I get disappointed in the school sometimes. I see we celebrate Cesar Chavez like a whole festival, a whole day, and I still don't know who the hell this man is and I've been here for five years. Five years! We have Martin Luther King Day off, that's great. Great, whatever. Not once do you see during Black History Month or on Martin Luther King Day anything recognizing that man. But you recognize Cesar Chavez, whoever the hell he is, because no one, ask any person of any race; they still don't know who he is. Ask someone who Martin Luther King is – a racist knows who Martin Luther King is! I feel like that's the one thing where the school disappoints me: that you're [SU] all about diversity, you're all about

making sure minorities feel equal, and everything. But I feel like we [Black students] are the one minority that you guys [SU] don't put that same effort into. Even though this form of racism was not directed at these women, the participants evidently saw that the absence of seeing more students like themselves on campus was reflective of structural racism.

Further, Beverly expressed her frustrations with the African American Studies (AAS) department, an academic department devoted to teaching students an appreciation of Black cultures in the global diaspora. She stated, “I've been disappointed with the [AAS] department. Not with individual professors, [but] with the department as a whole. I know they're here for us, but I don't really see it.” In her opinion the AAS department was a campus entity that needed to better advocate for Black students on campus and could play a key role to build a campus-wide community for Black students:

It's overwhelming to be at a school with 40,000+ students and it's 3000 of us that all look the same, but there's only maybe a hundred of us that are actually connected to one other. I feel like that department needs to stop waiting for people to come to them and [AAS] needs to go to the people; put yourself out there. I feel like a lot of people's experience as an African American... just having that support system would be a lot better [for us].

Concerns over the absence of “Martin Luther King Day” or not enough Black cultural representations on campus, especially in the AAS department, are reflective of the institution not having resources for Black students or valuing their experiences. Francis, a graduating senior from Beverly Hills, California added:

There are certain things that [other] people can't relate to if you're not of color.

Like, somebody might not experience being talked to a certain way or being followed. There's just certain things that not everybody can relate to. I feel like being on campus, finding people of different cultures that you really connect with, can sometimes be a challenge 'cause there's certain things that they just might not understand.

The women's narratives highlighted that Black women did not see their community strongly represented on campus. Further, they believed there was a lack of safe spaces and felt an overall absence of support from the institution. They also acknowledge the relationship between their perceptions and issues related to structural racism. The African American women students articulated feeling a lack of institutional support and believed the devaluing of Black bodies led to the ability for people to commit microaggressions against Black women on campus with no repercussion. In other words, because there was not a large Black presence or strong commitment to Black students at the institution, people inevitably mistreated them.

### *Microaggressions*

As previously mentioned, racial microaggressions are defined by Solórzano et al. (2000) as subtle insults that are verbal, non-verbal and/or visual, which are directed towards people of color (p. 60). It has been found that students of color attending predominantly white institutions tend to encounter some form of racial microaggressions due to the institutional context, whereas research focused on HBCUs suggest the campus racial climate to be supportive and familiar.

Students of color at PWIs often cope with racial microaggressions through the development and utilization of counterspaces in and out of classroom settings. Solórzano

et al. (2000) believe microaggressions that occur in social and academic settings have real consequences, namely, a negative perception of campus racial climate for African American students and ultimately, feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and isolation (p. 69). Furthermore, the microaggressions African American students experienced left them feeling minoritized and doubtful of their academic potential. Similarly, the African American women in this study admitted experiences with microaggressions and how such hostility shaped their academic experiences to be stressful.

The majority of the women mostly encountered microaggressions inside of the classroom from both faculty and peers. The women shared stories of how faculty tended to have preconceived notions of their Blackness based on the ways society has defined Black women. To illustrate, Tamara, a communications studies major, shared that her retention and persistence was shaped by the negative perceptions of Black women as “loud, ghetto and unintelligent” by her non-Black counterparts. She revealed that she lacked confidence when walking into a room on campus and said, “I wouldn't just be seen like the rest of the students.”

She felt her classmates and professors would instantly stereotype her based on her outward appearance. Tamara struggled with finding her place in most of her classes. She shared further that if she failed to meet her classmates and professors expectations, or speak up in class, she would just get passed over:

I feel like the way that Black women have been seen over time, it kind of alters the way like we see ourselves. So, sometimes [it] shows in our academic work. And because we're expected to be a certain way or people perceive us to be a certain way, it affects the way Black women think about themselves.

Compared to their non-Black counterparts, some of the women also felt that faculty tended to have lower expectations of them and reported stories of negative interactions with faculty. They further explained how these negative interactions often led to self-doubt, which resulted in them trying to build relationships to feel to a sense of belonging. Similarly, the women felt white students had negative assumptions of them because of their skin color and some of those assumptions pertained to their academic competency. All of the Black women attempted to uphold a “worthy” academic standing while dealing with the conflicts that arose from disparaging perceptions of them as Black women on campus. They navigated through a multitude of racial stereotypes that fueled the creation and perpetuation of racial microaggressions.

When asked what role, if any, did race or ethnicity play in their college experiences, participants spoke on various negative experiences with professors and fellow students. Tamara, a communication studies major explained that there were not many Black students in her upper-division courses. She described how her classmates and professors would often depend on her Blackness to add to classroom discussions. She expressed:

Sometimes they would single me out. Like one of my classes was an intercultural course, and they'd ask me how it would feel from a Black person's perspective, as in a Black woman. Like how does it even matter? Why would they single me out to ask me that and not anyone else. I don't speak for my whole race, that's something I can't do. There's so many voices, and who am I to silence everyone else just because I'm an African American woman.

Toni, a graduating senior and Urban Studies and Planning major, described her struggle with being the only Black woman in her upper-division courses. Toni is from a rural area in Northern California where she experienced mostly racially diverse educational environments. Like Tamara, Toni experienced being pigeonholed as the voice of the Black community during classroom discussions. She expressed:

[If] there is a white guy teaching the class, I am not necessarily offended with him, but if I'm the only Black person in this class, some of the ignorance is a little hard to digest. Some people are like, "can you give examples of institutionalized racism because racism is over?" And there are these perceptions that we don't deal with anything and some of that is difficult. There are certain times in the room where I feel I by default have to be the voice for the whole Black population because I am the only one in there and they're saying things; Things that are a little unsettling.

Toni felt professors were not culturally sensitive when discussing race-sensitive issues and that the assumption that she was the sole representative of Black people was a microaggression by which she was often offended during classroom discussions. Toni went into her classes with an open mind, ready to learn and make friends, but found that professors and other students were not as receptive because of her skin tone.

Like, Toni, many of the women often felt that their non-Black counterparts made them feel as if they did not belong on campus. Such was the case for Kara, a psychology major:

Sometimes I feel like they feel that we [Black women] shouldn't be here. This [higher education] is not for us. I don't really like to talk like that 'cause I don't

like to see color. I'm not into that type of thing. It's so annoying to me. We really need to move on from that. But sometimes it is what it is. I'm just like, "Hey, whatever." This is how it is. I've just got to show these [White] people that I'm here just like you're here. I've worked just as hard, probably if not harder, to be here. So, we need to have a mutual respect around here.

Prior to attending college, Kara attended racially diverse schools where she developed an understanding of students' perspectives from different backgrounds and learned how to function in a multicultural, multiethnic environment. She felt that SU was not culturally responsive to Black women, especially in the classroom, a place of learning where she felt that every student should be able to concentrate on studying and have an equal opportunity to learn. She believed faculty did not create an environment where students respected each other and diverse perspectives on issues. Thus, when discussions on race occurred in the classroom, the Black women simultaneously became outcasts and spokeswomen for the Black population at large.

The women described the classroom as the place on campus where they experienced distractions that took away from their learning process and were most subjected them to microaggressions. These classroom experiences were similar to that of Black college student experiences at PWIs. Minority-serving institutions do not ensure diverse faculty and/or staff, it is only at the student level that this designation is given. It is critical highlight the students felt this way, however, it is a topic that educators fail to discuss.

#### *Academic [In]Competency*

Centered on the prejudiced presumptions associated with race, gender and class, women of color have been perceived as easy targets for discrimination in higher

education. While African American women continue to have disproportionately low numbers of attainment in institutions of higher education they are often presumed incompetent. Many women experienced uncomfortable and negative incidents within the classroom including but not limited to insensitivity, being ignored, and discouraged from class participation. Some of the African American women shared experiences of de facto segregation by their professors and classmates, which sometimes led to negative, self-critical thoughts in which they were unable, sometimes unwilling, or simply unaware of how to seek assistance and advocate for themselves. For instance, Tamara, a communications studies major described her experience of what it was like to be labeled by faculty and peers in her department:

When you walk into the class, and you're a woman of color, I feel like you're automatically placed in a category unless your professors are like a hippie or something, or someone who is not threatened by that. I feel like a lot of professors in that [communications] department, are really threatened. I didn't see a lot of Black people in my major; there were only a few. It was mostly whites, so that was like a sign for me. Like "well, are you going to sit here and go through this or are you going to bail out?" You're like the only one, and a lot of times I was the only Black person in my class, and especially a Black woman. They automatically think you're supposed to be aggressive, and especially in communications. They want you to speak out, so yeah, it was kind of tough. So, that was [their] perception of me before I opened up my mouth.

Within the context of this study, Tamara discussed the significance of the omnipresence of whiteness as she expressed the absence of People of Color in her upper-division

courses. She graduated from State University in 2013 from a college that included majors related to arts, media, and communication. She experienced racial and gender discrimination simply because her faculty and peers held prejudicial perceptions of African American women.

Similarly, Kara, a graduating senior and psychology major shared a common experience:

Now, I'm in a class with 250 people and I can be the only Black mixed [person], but of course they probably see me as [an] "all Black" person in the class. And you try not to look at it, but it makes you feel a little weird. Like, "Hey, am I supposed to be here?" You know? What's going on? Nobody looks like me.

Insulted by the reception she received from her professors and classmates, Kara was surprised that for the first time in her life she was treated as "the fly in the buttermilk." Since she did not see herself represented in her upper-division courses and often felt isolated in the classroom. Kara mentioned how this underrepresentation could directly affect the ways that Black women persisted:

I think the fact that we don't see a lot of us around here, that's a really big factor in how we succeed around here. [Be]cause it doesn't feel good not seeing a lot of you.

Kara, along with many other students, were personally offended by the absence of Black women campus. They believed white faculty did not interact or connect with them and found it difficult to establish relationships.

Kara went on to discuss a consciousness of having to prove themselves as being worthy of attending SU and demonstrate how Black women are not relics of their slaved past. Based on her reflections of her classmates, she described:

I've had situations where it's time to do group work and nobody wants to do the work with [me]. So I've literally had to put myself out there. I don't know what your perception is, but let me fix that, 'cause I'm not a dummy. I do my work. I'm not lazy. 'Cause you have to prove to people, because they already think a certain way about minorities; African Americans and Latinos. So it's like, I gotta work extra hard.

Double consciousness is a concept American Sociologist, W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) defines as, "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 5). In other words, facilitating the formation of a dual identity, in which one's very sense is divided into two selves. Double consciousness occurs with the realization and reminder that minoritized people are not part of the dominant group, and has been used to describe the experiences of Blacks in white America. Upon becoming cognizant of her classmates' reluctance to include her on group assignments, Kara's double consciousness is characterized by the disconnect between her self-perception and the stereotyping of Black women as intellectually incompetent.

Segregation and stereotypes became a common topic of conversation during most of the interviews. Tamara, a communications major also indicated that faculty made comments about African American students

I feel like there's a stigma being passed over. If I was to speak out in class and because I wouldn't stay quiet, or I wasn't being so aggressive when I was

speaking... one of my professors even made a comment, "oh, you're really well-spoken." And I was like, what is that supposed to mean? How did you expect me to speak? How was I supposed to answer the question?

Tamara's recollection largely represents the presence of stereotypes. Her professor's surprise that Tamara was a well-spoken Black woman in a class dominated by white students highlights some of the learning experiences that Black women have at MSIs. As they navigate the campus environment, Black women find themselves combatting stereotypes regularly.

Jourdan, an honors English major, found that like Tamara, race and gender worked against her in the classroom. As a Black woman, she asserted that societal views and expectations of Black women led people to minimize her. She said:

I think that [short pause] when we come to college, we already have to break down a lot of barriers. Because of what people think and assume we [Black women] are, people assume that we are undereducated. People assume that we're incapable of so many things. And so, we already have that up against us.

Jourdan deeply feared the idea of confirming the negative stereotypes. She never wanted to be viewed as the modern day "Jezebel," "Sapphire," or "Mammy" – stereotypes deeply rooted in the history of Black enslavement in the United States. She further discussed her struggle with these stereotypes, as she believed her non-Black counterparts ascribed the stereotypical view of Black women to her. Consequently, up until her third year in college, Jourdan struggled with expressing herself in class. While her fellow classmates and professors stereotyped that she was uneducated and disregarded her, their views are grounded in the historical construction of African Americans as intellectually inferior,

poor, and of low-status (Sue et al., 2008). Overall, the women felt they did not belong nor were not supported, which negatively impacted their confidence to succeed.

### **Gender**

While women experienced barriers at school due to racism, they also experienced challenges related to gender and patriarchy. As illustrated by Toni, who was raised in a predominantly Black and Latino/a area, the importance of gender is supported by her lived experiences:

Well, I'm a Black girl in White America, first of all. I'm aware of that. I'm aware that there are gonna be obstacles for me, there are gonna be perceptions of what I can bring to the table, before I even come to the table, based on my skin color.

The significance of this statement is representative of the experiences of African American women in higher education, particularly minority-serving institutions. Her narrative acknowledges the imposed consequence of being a Black woman in a white world, and how her life opportunities are both dictated by “obstacles” posed by both her race and gender.

Similarly, Iman, a journalism major and recent graduate from SU talked about how she had always been fearful to share her point-of-view in class because she did not want her non-Black counterparts to silence her based on their racialized and gendered misconceptions:

I felt like it was difficult to sometimes express myself. If I disagreed with some of the students, or my classmates, I felt like they would think, "Oh, you're the angry Black girl, or the Black girl with the attitude." So, sometimes it was hard

for me to say things or be able to speak my mind comfortably because I felt nervous about how they would think or what they would think about me.

One of Iman's biggest hurdles was her awareness of how Black women have been scrutinized throughout history, and she found it difficult to shake the negative connotation that came with the way people identified her. She felt that her professors and peers would interpret her performance in terms of stereotypes, and she was always worried about being mocked and ridiculed. As a result, she experienced stereotype threat — the added pressure that stereotyped individuals experience in situations where their behavior may confirm a negative group stereotype (Steele & Anderson, 1995). Iman shared that this experience resulted in negative physiological and psychological outcomes (Smith, 2004; Sue et al., 2008). While trying to avoid confirming to stereotypes, Iman's academic performance was affected (Smith & Hung, 2008).

As was the case with English major and graduating senior Sadie, who shared that her experiences with stereotype threat made her apprehensive to participate in class because she was afraid of that her non-Black counterparts would judge her intellectual ability negatively. She expressed:

I was afraid to talk [be]cause I didn't wanna be that dumb kid in class, or ask a question I should have known [the answer to]. Even though I feel like if you don't understand something then it's not a bad question to ask. But some students here feel like, oh, you should of known that because of [pause] I don't know, your background or something. But it's just like; we're not all the same.

Sadie limited her classroom participation to overcome the stereotypes associated with being Black and being a woman. Consistent with the historical response to Blacks

in the U.S., her response highlights Black women's inferiority in higher education. It is unfortunate that stereotypes of Black women have been so deeply ingrained in American society, Black women like Iman and Sadie were stereotypically viewed as being "the angry Black girl, or the Black girl with the attitude." Thus, not only was it a racial issue but a gendered as well. It was a gendered issue because internalized racial oppression impacted the Black women and how the women interacted with each other.

### *Internalized Racism*

The women provided a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which this form of internalized oppression impacted their retention. While previous research on race and racism have found Black women to be negatively impacted by the experiences of racism, very little has been researched regarding the specifics of how internalized racial oppression impacts the retention of African American women at minority-serving institutions. Some theorists posit that internalized racism is the adopting, believing, accepting and incorporating the negative beliefs provided by the oppressor as truth (Parmer, 2004; Pheterson, 1986; Rosenwasser, 2002). Furthermore, in addition to believing the messages and images, those negative beliefs get acted out or manifested towards others who share the individual's racial identity, towards those from other groups of color or towards the self in insensitive ways (Duran & Duran, 1995).

Because one of the most powerful tools of the oppressor is to silence the other, the greatest divide within the African American student population prevailed through internalized racism. For example, Tamara, a recent graduate, shared her experiences of cultural dismissal even as an incoming freshman. Tamara is from a predominantly white area in Oxnard, California. Prior to attending college, all of her friends, teachers and

classmates were white. Thus, she was taught to speak and behave similar to that of white norms. However, prior to enrolling at SU she participated in the Summer Bridge Program offered through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP).

The Summer Bridge Program is a four-week program that allows select first-time freshmen students to experience the university's environment prior to entering the fall term. It allows students to participate in enrichment activities, and provides the opportunity to build relationships and network with other students, faculty and staff. However, Tamara experienced challenges with cultural acceptance and wanting to be seen as 'Black enough' by other Black women students. She felt they excluded her because she did not share similar cultural experiences. Tamara described being rejected from her own race as hurtful. She expressed, "I know I was an outsider." Her narrative provides insight into the ways in which Black women perceived other Black women solely based on outward appearance and mannerisms. From K-12 to State University, she described her experiences with internalized prejudice as a familiar commonplace:

Some of them would say [that] they just thought I was white washed or whatever [be]cause they had assumed that everybody there in that program came from LA county and I was the only one who didn't. So they were like that, it was strange to them. I kind of just started talking to other races, but I did make a few friends that were in my race that I'm still friends with them now, but it was hard. It was hard because I've always felt like I've always been turned away from my race. I've never really had many Black friends or anything like that. I've always been like they say, the token. Which I didn't want to be like that. I would love to embrace my race.

Tamara's desire to embrace her race stemmed from being uniquely raised to conform to white norms. Although proud to be a Black woman, she was not viewed as a Black woman by other Black students, especially in college. She constantly struggled with being herself and all throughout her educational experiences she felt like an outcast, alone, undesirable and even estranged.

Similarly, Grace, a graduating senior from Oakland, California unapologetically shared her encounters with other Black women on campus:

There's definitely a disconnect between Black women in that we don't respect each other for some reason. I don't know why. A lot of girls say, I say it myself, I'd rather be friends with a guy than with girls because we're messy [Black women]. We're messy, and we talk too much or something like that. Yeah, there's, there's a strong disconnect there.

Grace's narrative is not arbitrary, it is a form of internalized sexism that is a result of a patriarchal society where friendship is often denounced and competition predominates. Because these women experienced challenges posed by racism their retention was shaped by white supremacist thought. The women's narratives reflect patriarchal thinking, which impacted their abilities to build friendships with other Black women on campus.

In another example, Eva, a 21 year old senior from the College of Health and Human Development, ascribed the disconnect between Black women to their rivalry for hegemony. She expressed that her interactions with women of her own her race were nonexistent:

I feel like it's like a secret competition because most of the people I hang out with

on campus they're not even Black. There are not a lot of us so we just...I thought, I think for one it's just the competition because I see some Black girls they give me dirty looks, I don't know why because I feel like I don't mean mug people, but I guess I do give off a vibe like don't speak to me.

Her vibe may be attributed to her social status and/or family background. She is from a dual-parent, upper-middle class family where roots of this kind of discriminatory practice usually emulates that of White supremacy. Internalized racism enables People of Color to view their racial group, and/or, themselves through the lens of white supremacy. Notwithstanding, internalized racism impacted the ways in which Black women interacted with one another, which resulted into prejudices and discriminatory behavior. Though she described her college experience as color-blind, Eva fell prey to the ideology of internalized racism. The internalization of such racist misconceptions can cause individuals to refute their own culture and connect with another (Clark, 2001).

Beverly, a graduating senior from Rancho Cucamonga, California shared her perspective. While she believed she was never negatively affected by race, she too believed she was incapable of connecting to other Black women who experience racial discrimination. She expressed:

I haven't been affected negatively by race, personally. I've never had something racial being thrown at me. I think it's a blessing, but also can be a curse because I don't know. When some people [Black people] talk about "oh, this happened," I'm just like, "oh, I can't relate." Like, I feel sorry, but I can't relate. I don't know how to feel about it.

Beverly, grew up in an affluent area where she was afforded a private education at

predominantly white schools. She identified with and became accustomed to the white culture and therefore, never had to embrace her Blackness. According to Clark (2001), internalization of racial beliefs can cause self-alienation in African Americans, causing them to “identify with their oppressor”, even to the extent of imitating their oppressors’ external appearance.

Grace described her frustration with Black students like Beverly, who fail to realize the presence and relevance of racism especially in the presence of white students. She said:

I'm offended and by my own people in my African American Studies classes, when they say that racism is subtle. And that it doesn't exist any more or anything like that. And we have all of these Caucasians sitting in our classes. Who are just sitting looking at us [Black people]. And hearing what we're saying, as if we're making it okay for them to do the things they do [microaggress].

Grace’s narrative highlights that some Black women in fact internalized racism by devaluing Black people and their extensive history of racism in front of white students and professors. Beverly’s take on the oppressive thoughts of the dominant culture supports literature affirming internalized racism is connected to the cultural imperialism of a dominant white culture that exists in the U.S. (Clark, 2001; Pyke, 2003). It is complicated that some participants shared that they did not feel Black enough, and while some of the women wanted to separate themselves from other Black students, they wanted to at the same time be seen by other Blacks as culturally connected through a Black culture.

Contrarily, Kara, a graduating senior believed, as a Black woman, her college

experience was altered by white students based on her lighter skin tone:

I don't think that I get that full experience. Because my skin is lighter. Of course, I know I'm Black, but a lot of people don't. A lot of people see it like, "oh, well, she's light skinned Black, so that's different. I can be walking with my friend and she's so chocolate with these long twists, or long braids. And I've got my hair like this [curly]. And they'll still treat us completely different. We've gotten that before. People staring at us weird. But I don't think I get the full experience. I think I do experience some things of being African American, probably because of my hair. And when I talk, then people are like, "Oh, you Black, oh, alright."

Comparable to Tamara's experiences with racial discrimination, Kara's narrative tells us that white students too commodified and defined her Blackness centered on her outward appearance and mannerisms. This suggests that the ability for a Black woman college student to develop an identity at a minority-serving institution is an illusion and constructed around stereotypes. Findings in this study related to retention and persistence suggest that all of the women who encountered racial discrimination were negatively impacted by these experiences. This is significant because it highlights the prevalence of interlocking oppression at minority-serving institutions.

Several women shared experiences of the negative impact of internalized oppression, which often resulted in uncertainty and low-self esteem. Sociologists, Maxine Thompson and Verna Keith (2001) suggest the development of dark skinned Black women's self-esteem is negatively impacted by internalized racism. Therefore, this study illuminated many areas within the phenomenon of internalized racial oppression that supports previous research and practice. The participants discussed

instances of internalized racism and the color complex or skin tone bias — the preference of lighter skin tones over darker skin tones (Thompson and Keith, 2004). Their narratives indicate that Black women who suffered from internalized racism experienced challenges with cultural dismissal due to the importance of physical attractiveness imposed on and internalized by Black women living in a racist, sexist and patriarchal society.

### **Gender Roles**

According to the social hierarchy in American society, Black women remain in the worst position. Traditionally, the position of Black women has been closely tied to the institution of family while men have been individualized and defined through public institutions (Janeway, 1980). Thus, Black women experience patriarchy in their everyday lives. Though males are superior, changes in the family therefore have a direct impact on the lives of women.

Historically, African American family life has been analyzed and interpreted from the perspectives of white middle-class families, which have alternately misrepresented African American family dynamics, values, behaviors and styles. Over the past centuries historical trends of the African American family-structure have undergone profound changes. The understanding of traditional American family life can be directly related to the customs correlated to what it means to be an African American woman in a post-civil rights era.

Unmistakably, the complexity and experiences of African American families are rooted in and impacted by slavery, post-reconstruction racism and modern day oppression. While most Black families share a patriarchal culture similar to White

families, notions of presumed patriarchy often revolve around the implications of sheer population count. This study found that seven of the participants were raised in a dual-parent household, three were raised by a single mother, two were raised by a single father, two were raised by their mother until she passed away and neither of which had a relationship with their father and lastly, and one who was raised by her father until she was placed in the foster system.

Data revealed, the participants who were raised in a dual-parent household experienced less challenges while pursuing their degree at State University. However, the findings in this section illuminate the voices of African American women who had expectations and roles in their families that were not given to anyone else. Several of the women articulated their status of being a Black woman and how they painstakingly had to create a balance between the requirements of the university, work and family responsibilities. To demonstrate, Jourdan, a graduating senior said:

Sometimes we [Black women] have to be everybody's everything. We gotta be the mama and the daddy, we gotta be the one who goes to school on the behalf of their whole family, we gotta be all [emphasis] these things and sometimes we just need to be us. As true as it gets in our pains, in our joys, in our successes and failures but just us [emphasis].

This young woman had to take on the role of her father who was incarcerated when she was two years old. While her mother worked, Jourdan consumed the role of parenting her younger siblings. She mentioned that she often had to suppress her voice, ignore her feelings and exhibit resiliency for her relatives, especially her younger siblings.

Consequently while attending college, Jourdan was forced to structure herself as a

person who took on the responsibility of maintaining family unity and meeting the requirements of the university. She expressed:

I would look for people to support me and to help me, to be there and I had people around me but I felt like no one was there. And they would be very vocal, uh present in their relationship with me when they needed something, but no one was sensitive to what I may have been going through—to even having the consideration to ask, how are you?

Jourdan described herself as “the helper who has no help” because several people depended on her but as she struggled with her own issues and did not have anyone to turn to even on campus. Thus, while attending State University she suffered from depression. She said, “I went from a social butterfly to a person that didn’t talk to anyone. I went to school, did my work and then I came home...in my room for hours and hours in the dark.” She did not feel happiness, excitement or hope; she just coasted day in and day out and was numb to everything around her.

She went on to mention:

I have been everybody [emphasis] that everyone wanted me to be. My family wanted to see me excel, it was the hope that you know I would...I’m the baby of the family, so it was the hope that I would become the successful one and change everything and all of that and I carried that with me proudly, but that [emphasis] became overwhelming.

In response to having too many responsibilities and no structural support she developed insecurities that negatively impacted her college experiences. She stated:

I was trying to find security in everything. I wanted to find security in academics because I wanted to know that I was smart enough. I wanted to find security in the type of men I was dating because I wanted to know that I was pretty enough. I wanted to find security in all these things and friends because I wanted to know that I was nice enough.

Based on her narrative she understood the circumstances happening outside of campus, academics was the one part that should could control. Consequently, she believed she had to prove not only to herself, but to classmates and professors as well that she belonged at State University.

Like Jourdan, Kara also performed the act of balancing. As the oldest of eight children, Kara explained that she meticulously balanced the tasks of being a college student, working at least half time and parenting her younger siblings. Kara's mother passed away in high school and she too had to take on the responsibility of caring for her family. She said:

I feel like if anything is going wrong for them, I need to fix it. Because our mom is not here, and that's the number one person you run back to when anything is going on. Whether you're a guy or a girl, I mean, if you have that relationship with your mother. Because they don't have her anymore well, because neither one of us have her anymore, I step up, and I'm like, "Okay, well, you know you guys, if you need anything, anything going on, come to me. Let me know. Because I'm not mom, but I'm as close as it's gonna to get.

Kara's story validates that several women entered college with complex lives and while continually dealing with those complex lives it often impacted their retention. She

struggled immensely with keeping up with course work, finding time to study for exams and working to care for her family. She described her roles outside of school inhibited her ability to gain the full effect of being a college student. She often felt disengaged and believed that outside of the Educational Opportunities Office, no one supported her on campus. Family and school structured the circumstances of these women; for many this meant a double load and a demanding period of life during the same years that Black men can focus on school. For Black women, it is just an added responsibility that current institutions fail to consider.

Because this patriarchal dynamic was playing out amongst Black women they still did not feel a sense of belonging on campus and therefore, sought out relationships that perpetuated patriarchy. Due to feeling a general lack of support from the institution, another retention issue resulted from the women trying to create their own sense of belonging through relationships with their peers, particularly Black men on campus. The women struggled with acceptance and desired to fit in so much that it interfered with their coursework. For instance, Iman, a recent graduate described how she developed insecurities in college that stemmed from a lack of belonging. She admitted, “I think, just like a lot of the issues that I had, the insecurities and the things that I developed, came from me trying to be sexually active or whatever.” She desired to feel integrated and included on campus, but her interactions with other Black men only created more problems. She further stated:

I was the type I liked to fool around, but I never really wanted to have sex. But, you can't really fool around and not have sex. So, it wasn't easy for me to have

sex. I think it was just something I did just to feel close with someone, feel intimate with someone even though it wasn't really intimate.

While acknowledging her attempt to find a sense of belonging from men on campus only made her feel worthy for the moment, Iman associated sex with campus inclusiveness only to uncover prominent retention issues.

Similarly, Sadie, a graduating senior, credited structural racism to unhealthy relationships and insecurities that developed throughout her college experiences. When asked to describe what her higher education experience has been like, she stressed her challenges with fitting in. She stated:

I think a lot of the time us as women we get caught up in wanting someone, or wanting someone to want us. My freshman year I got involved with a guy who I met through a friend... And so we got involved and I really cared for him but I think it was like an adolescent care. [Be]cause I didn't, I wasn't really in relationships in high school. And he kinda took advantage of me, meaning like, he used me for like food, and to stay at my dorm and stuff. But I never saw it as nothing bad. Because it's like, oh he's doing what he's gotta do, and then he comes back to me, like at night after work and stuff like that. Totally stupid way of thinking. But then, [I] thought it was okay.

Similar to Iman, she acknowledged that finding temporary affection was not a permanent solution to solve their problems on campus however, for Sadie, it was a repetitive cycle. She involved herself with more college boyfriends who provided her a brief sense belonging and comfort she still managed to struggle with insecurities.

Black men can serve as allies of Black women. In context of structural racism and microaggressions on campus, these Black women empathized and sought solidarity with Black men. Womanism centralizes Black women's experiences and guides us to see that what happens to women of color impacts what happens in all of their other relationships as well. Interestingly, Black men are a part of their healing and obliteration. So, this leaves one to ask — how could the institution have fostered better opportunities for the young women who felt isolated, excluded and unsupported? How can we better hold institutions accountable for serving Black women students? Black women have struggled with balancing several responsibilities outside of school, in addition to seeking relationships with people who they might help, but found them to be just as lonely and isolated and realized there was no space for Black students to get support all together.

### **Persistence Strategies**

Despite all of these issues of racism, gender, and patriarchy, the women were still able to be resilient because they navigated these situations with different strategies. Resiliency is the ability to cultivate strengths or returning to “original form or position after being bent” (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993), and reparation of one's self after hardship (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Combined the women experienced various barriers but resisted such challenges with strategies.

### **Family Motivation**

Although the women had difficult responsibilities that took attention away from school, those same families provided the motivation and encouragement that the young women needed to be resilient. All of the participants mentioned family influence and

emotional support as positively affecting retention as they worked toward their educational goals. In this study, the participants shared the impact of family, primarily their parents, and their influence on the women's college career. The women revealed that family support promoted academic success although in different ways – through advocacy and pressure. The women shared that encouragement stemmed from the obligation to perform well academically. One of the perceived obligations was to serve as a role model for younger family members. Further, several participants felt pressured to succeed to prove that they had the academic ability, work ethic and determination to be successful at a four-year institution despite the characteristics of their family. Thirteen of the fifteen participants referred to influences of various family members upon their higher education experiences. Family members including parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, nieces and nephews encouraged participants as they sought to attain their educational goals. Quite often influence came in the form of advocacy and pressure, while support came in the form of encouragement.

This can be seen when asked to describe the factors that influenced their ability to attend college. Liya, for example, emphasized the role of her parents in her educational experience, “my parents, my parents and my parents. [laughs] I owe it all to them...they were the biggest influence.” Although her mother did not attend college she grew up in a dual parent household where her father earned a Bachelors degree and education took precedence. She attended a private Catholic school in Ethiopia but struggled to earn acceptable grades, and therefore her parents sent her to attend school in the United States where they believed the school system would be easier for her to succeed.

She explained:

Over there [Ethiopia] they want the best of the best and they make things super hard for you. Which is part of the reason why my parents brought me here, because I wasn't being successful there. So, they wanted me to go through school here and make something of myself [short pause] I guess. So, back home I was [a] very average C student. Here, especially high school, I was an A student. I was like, "Oh school is easy in America." Teachers make it easy. You know what's on the tests, back home you don't know what's on the test. They just teach you and they bring random stuff on the test. We [would] still have very good students that would ace it [laughs].

Based on the narratives shared by the other participants, Liya had a unique experience. In every effort to ensure she successfully earned a four-year degree, Liya was sent to private schools, her parents hired tutors for additional academic help and supported her older sister in college. She said, "Just seeing their effort somehow influenced me to go to college. It wasn't even an understanding of I need to go to college it was just, my parents told me I'm going to go [to college]." There was no question about the influence Liya's parents had on her higher education aspirations. When asked what role her family played in her pursuit to college, she reflected on her parents' firm beliefs that earning an education will lead to life's success.

The majority of the women also credited their family for influencing their ability to attend college, but most were first-generation college students. When asked to describe the factors that influenced her ability to attend college, Ella responded, "The fact that my parents didn't go. I wanted to be the first one to go. My foster parents encouraging me to go and just my own drive of wanting to actually go." Her drive to

attend college derived from her familial experiences. As a young girl her mother was incarcerated and her father was abusive. At the age of fourteen, she and her ten siblings were placed in the foster system. She emancipated at the age of eighteen and decided that college would be the best option to rebuild her life. Although, her family did not financially support her, members of her family for whom she served as a role model positively influenced her.

When asked what role her family played in her pursuit to college, Ella replied:

The only role that my brothers and sisters have played is just asking me questions about how school is and how they can get into school. So, that keeps me going to want to finish and so once I'm finished I have this knowledge to help them get to where I was.

As the second oldest of ten brothers and sisters, she saw her responsibility as an advocate for her younger siblings. Their emotional support positively influenced her college experiences, which caused her to push harder for academic success. She stressed her main goal in life is to, "Get a good job and take care of my family and that's it. I'm really simple. So, definitely graduate, get a good job and just continue on living life."

Like Ella, Jourdan, another first-generation college student whose father was incarcerated and whose mother did not earn a four-year degree discussed the ways in which her family supported and influenced her ability to attend college. It is important to note that while she described her family as "very supportive," she simultaneously provided a critique that such support pressured her to succeed:

My family has been very supportive in my college experience. There were some things that I had to learn on my own along the way [short pause]...only because I

have a very different experience than the rest of my siblings or my parents. So, a lot of things they just didn't know. But they always showed that they believed in me, they always put a lot of high expectations on me but not to the point where like it was so [emphasis] overwhelming. I mean at times I did feel overwhelmed by having to carry that but that was a reflection that they believed that I could do it, for me and I was honored by that.

While Jourdan felt pressured to succeed, she also found encouragement through her obligation to perform well academically by family members. Similar to Ella, one of her perceived obligations was to serve as a role model for younger family members. She also mentioned she did not want her circumstances to prevent her from achieving a four-year degree. She expressed, "I've always known that I was going to go to college especially since in my family dynamic, I only had one sibling who went to college and that sibling left college because they ended up having a child." Because her mother and father did not attend a traditional four-year institution and she took pride advocating for her younger siblings. Jourdan aspired to prove that she had the academic ability, work ethic and determination to be successful in college. Though she felt pressured into successfully completing a college degree she understood that it did not just benefit her, but it was for the collective good of her family.

On the contrary, Grace, a graduating senior, shared her experience. When asked to describe the factors that influenced her ability to attend college she replied:

My sister, my oldest sister, she definitely, set the expectation high or the standards high. So, me always following in her path and going to college and knowing that

if I want to be successful in life then college is the way to go. You know, to get that degree.

Grace's sister is 17 years her senior and took part in raising her after their father unexpectedly passed away. All of the participants mentioned family influence and emotional support positively affecting retention and persistence. However, family support is not enough. Institutions need to be more responsible for serving Black women students and this alludes to some of the women who had the opportunity to be involved. Thus, it is important to highlight the voices of the women who described places within the university structure where there was a sense of support through curriculum and an institutional program. When some women experienced microaggressions, they utilized coping strategies to deal with the racism and discrimination. Data showed these women found solace within the curricular experiences through the African American Studies (AAS) department in addition to structural support provided by the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP).

### **African American Studies**

Some students found consolation within the curricular experiences through the African American Studies (AAS) department. Similar to critical race theorists Tara Yosso and Corina Lopez (2010) education scholar, Lori Patton (2006) posits Black students continue to seek out safe spaces on campus and believes such spaces are crucial to their success. She further notes safe places may be offices, mentors, peer groups, or other support mechanisms, including Black cultural centers (p. 629). Many of the women candidly confessed to enrolling in African American Studies courses simply to be in a

learning environment that integrates African American scholarship into the curriculum and provides a coveted cultural setting.

Case in point, Grace, selected African American Studies as a minor purely because her department did not provide the support she needed to persist as a Black woman at SU. She described:

I take a lot of Pan-African studies classes because we [African American women] are not talked about in any other classes. And I'm very close to the Black community. It's very big in my heart. It's gonna be my targeted audience as a psychology major. Because we have a lot of issues, I think a lot of things go unsaid. I think there's a lot of ignorance when it comes race and ethnicity. I don't look to any other ethnicity and look down upon them. I value everyone's culture. But I don't think that everyone does. I think that the university and to my knowledge, I feel that we [State university] focus more on the [other] different communities. For example, the LGBTQ community. There's a lot, a lot of support groups. We have an entire PRIDE center for them. And I know that we have a Black house, and I know that we have the Pan-African studies department but I don't feel that we have the support that we need.

While many of the women experienced campus-wide cultural barriers, they felt that outside of AAS the African American culture was overlooked, they did not see other women who looked like them and there was no other space for them to go; even though at a diverse institution. Research in this study reveals that racism, on both structural and individual levels continues to be a very significant aspect of African American women college students attending minority-serving intuitions. These findings support Neville,

Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne's (2000) previous research which found the persistence of racism to significantly affect individual lives.

### **Student Support Services**

While all of the women agreed that State University did not provide spaces specific to African American women, some of the women described places within the university structure where there was a sense of programmatic support, specifically in the Educational Opportunity Program office (EOP). The primary goal of EOP is to provide educationally and economically disadvantaged students with opportunities and the support necessary to achieve educational and professional goals. Based on the marginality students described, which resulted from the perception of no structural support, EOP provided emotional, physical and financial support that was significant to the success of African American women college students attending State University.

Students who participated in EOP expressed members of the office to be extremely supportive. The women felt connected to EOP because they felt the staff truly cared for their well-being. Kara, a graduating senior, owed her acceptance and ability to attend college to EOP. She said, "If it wasn't for them [EOP], I would not be here." She further explained that the program offered her a second chance after being rejected from State University because of her low high school grade point average:

Almost everything that I'm doing here...is all thanks to them. All thanks to them because even when I was going to get stopped out my second semester, I was able to go back to someone in EOP. I was almost on my knees, like, "Please don't let them kick me out! Please, don't let them take me out." And she was like, "Okay, you know, you have to get your stuff together. I'm going to help you this time,

but you better make sure you get yourself together." And ever since then I never let myself fall as much as I did those first two semesters.

She shared experiences of navigating college alone but when she sought additional help she turned to EOP because she had established relationships and their office offered a familial environment:

... students that are a part of EOP, [if] we don't have food and go in there and tell them [that] you don't have food, they go out to the store to buy you some food. Of course they're not going to stock you up, but they [are] going to make sure that you have some food in your stomach. Or if you let them know that you don't have anywhere to stay...because we're all low-income students. In order for you to be EOP, you have to be low-income [and] first generation. So, we [are] coming from LA. We [are] coming from Oakland. We [are] coming from all these little rural cities. And you know everything that goes on in cities, I mean...

While Kara described how some low-income, first-generation students turned to EOP for support, it is important to note that she was raised in a low-income, single-mother head household and sadly shared how her mother's death impacted her while attending high school. After her mother passed away, she worked part-time, but still did not have the financial means to pay for housing or college. Therefore, Kara lived with friends, a boyfriend and even mentioned that while attending SU, she lived in her car until EOP "put their hearts and souls into [her]," and significantly impacted her retention and persistence.

Ella, a graduating senior, was also a student in EOP who found the program staff to be her support system while on campus. When asked to share who played a role in her

pursuit to higher education, she responded, “just having those people just there just to support you. Like EOP you know having...those people who watch you. They kind of become your family so, they kinda just guide you through.” Ella mentioned that her mother was incarcerated and despairingly shared that she and her siblings were placed in foster-care high school as a result of her father’s abusive behavior. She emancipated at the age of eighteen and entered into college alone. Ella, along with the other participants, told stories concerning personal factors that better contextualized their desires to seek support from educators who share similar backgrounds.

In a similar manner, Iman, a recent graduate, further described the benefits of having programmatic support throughout her college experience. Reiterative of what the previous women shared, Iman mentioned that she sought encouragement from a Black women leader in EOP who displayed genuine interest in her educational experiences. She shared:

If she would notice that something was wrong she [would] be like, "Oh hey, come talk to me. I want to talk to you." And I remember one day I was like, "DJ, I need you to pray for me tonight [or] whatever I'm going through some stuff." And I figured she was going to go on, and be like, "Okay, I'm gonna pray for you." [But] She [would] be like, "No, let's go talk about it right now." So, she took me to the room and we prayed about it or whatever was going on. So, she helped a lot too...I would like to say all the women I worked with in the office like in the undecided office for EOP there, were really kind and supportive and just supportive. [laughs] I guess it's like your moms you don't have, with you all the time.

She was very appreciative of EOPs' efforts to support students of color on campus. Like, Tamara, Iman is from a single-mother head household; her mother suffered from an illness and dealing with homelessness during college, she said that finding this type of support influenced her decisions to persist from semester to semester. The women who were connected to EOP and/or the African American Studies department indicated that their participation in those programs enhanced their experiences at the institution.

On the other hand, these programs are not largely funded and certain students do not have access to them due to limited resources. For example, EOP is selective. This program can only select a limited number of students through an application process and more notably, not everyone who deserves to be in EOP gets accepted into the program. Therefore, Black students who may or may not have been EOP eligible did not have access to that resource. Also, not every student is connected to the department of African American Studies, nor is this department located in everyone's college. In fact, only one student minored in African American Studies, none of the participants majored in PAS, and only six were involved in EOP.

### **Counterspaces**

Within the context of higher education counterspaces are defined as forums that permit open discussions regarding racial encounters and allow students to share their perspectives concerning discrimination without repercussions (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000, p.64). Research herein has found counterspaces to be significant to the retention and persistence of students of color. In this study, participants provided insight into the access and utilization of counterspaces, and lack thereof, by African American women at State University and how those spaces shed light on campus climate. Additionally, some

students demonstrated that there are limited campus resources specific to Black women students. Interestingly, State University does provide campus resources for African American students on campus, but data revealed that not all of the Black women were familiar with them and many perceived there are no counterspaces or structural support.

Solórzano et al. (2000) posits that counterspaces are an important strategy for the academic survival of minority students. The narratives related to the experiences and perceptions regarding counterspaces affirmed the students' academic experiences at the university. While it is important to understand the intersection between counterspaces and campus climate, previous research validates that creating a positive campus climate allows students to feel connected to the university and can be achieved by establishing positive and personal learning environments (Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998). The findings from this study led to identifying ways to better serve African American women such as creating additional institutional support programs specific to this population of students, which could ultimately increase retention and persistence at institutions of higher education.

#### *Perception of No Structural Support*

In response to how the students were supported within State University, the perception of no counterspaces appeared throughout the findings. This perception was one of the most prominent issues impacting retention and persistence. To fully understand how the women understood structural support by the university, they were asked to share the support systems State University provided for African American women students. In response, Liya, a graduating senior, said, “none that I know.” Similarly, Sadie, another graduating senior agreed, “I honestly don't know any, at all.”

Beverly added, “none, none...at least, that I know of. None. Unless you personally, maybe know a professor that you can go talk to.”

Tamara, a recent graduate, reiterated their point. Though she was a member of a program for first-generation, low-income students on campus, in discussing institutional support, she expressed:

I don't feel like there's any [structural support]. Unless you know a professor or somebody that works here that you feel like you can confide in. That's really like somebody that's pursuing and achieving their goals. There's not really any positive outlets to me.

Like Tamara, Ella believed that there is no campus support for Black women on campus. Ella is a graduating senior who was actively engaged in campus clubs and organizations. She described herself as “really involved” on campus and shared that she was a part of the Black Student Union, Hope Fellowship, Committed Feet Dance Ministry, Meet Each Need With Dignity (MEND), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping those living in poverty and to lead them toward self-reliance and financial stability. UNIFIED We Serve — the only volunteer program on campus that serves underserved communities yearlong, and the Marilyn Mandolin Project. Though she was actively engaged in campus clubs and organizations, it is important to note that when asked to share support for African American women on campus, she stated:

Specifically resources geared to African American students...African American women students I mean there's nothing specific. I think we have more like broad African American student organizations. Like engineering, that engineering

organization for those majors [and] Hip Hop think Tank but nothing geared towards African American women.

Also like Tamara, Ella was also a member of a first-generation, low-income program on campus. Though, she mentioned State University offered resources to the Black student population overall, she believed that the institution did not provide a space for African American women. To further demonstrate the participants' understanding of institutional support offered by SU, Jourdan, a graduating senior, further voiced her knowledge of campus organizations; nonetheless her response still coincided with the responses of the other women. She said:

I know that we definitely have a lot of African American Studies resources available. We have publication opportunities, we have Hip Hop Think Tank, BSU like I said, the natural hair club which is [SU] Naturals, those are things that speak to us being African American, but that's the thing, I don't know if there's something that specifically speaks to us being African American women. The natural hair club does, but that's specific to hair [emphasis]. And they go into things like esteem and stuff but with the attachments to hair [emphasis]. And so, that [campus support for Black women students] is something I feel is lacking, possibly.

Although she identified resources available for African American students, she emphasized the necessity to have a space for Black women students. Jourdan was grateful to have an opportunity to share her story in this study. She highlighted that before this study, no one had ever listened to her speak for an hour. She further stated:

That's something that I would suggest too...for African American women, that we need. We need an hour to share our story, You know what I mean? [Be]cause some students, we don't have that.

Though State University is a diverse institution, the participants believed having a space where they could go and be themselves would have been beneficial to the achievement for Black women on campus. This would have provided them with an open forum to discuss the factors that affected their educational experiences, especially regarding academics. So, what are the institutions now responsible for? Institutions are responsible for creating more opportunities for Black women to have these spaces. Where they do not have to create them, they are already there for them or if they do create them, the institution supports them.

### *Black Women Spaces*

Because there is a perception of no institutional support by some students, and limited forms of campus support by others, Black women have essentially had to construct their own spaces. This demonstrates that Black women who are on campuses without curriculum and programmatic support have hope because they can create their own counterspaces. Solórzano et al. (2000) discovered that African American students created counterspaces to deal with the racial microaggressions encountered on campus (p. 70). Similarly, Grace described the Sister Circle at State University.

Although the Sister Circle space was new and did not directly benefit the students in this study, they all expressed the need and desire to have a space as such. Grace described the new organization on campus to be specific to Black women students. She said:

I know most recently we have the [Sister Circle]. Which is some of the faculty, women of color, coming together. Just to sit and build connections with African American students. Or [Black] women students. And I think that's great. I think that's great. I wish that it would of happened a long time ago.

Grace was heavily involved in campus clubs and organizations; however, she still longed to have a counterspace where she could go, be herself and talk about her racial and gender experiences in the classroom without repercussions.

The participants in the group felt that social counterspaces were important because they gave them space outside of the classroom to vent and interact with others who have similar experiences with microaggressions. The Sister Circle serves as a resource for current and prospective students, however, the women in this study did not benefit from the organization because of their current academic status. The Sister Circle would have offered participants a supportive environment to mutually work towards educational attainment. Solórzano et al. (2000) stated that — academic counterspaces allow African American students to foster their own learning and to nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge (p. 70). Nonetheless, while it may appear that counterspaces provide students protection from the regularity of racism, State University did not offer such space and therefore the women who did not participate in EOP or connect with AAS, did not have steady opportunities to interact with Black woman leaders regarding their social and academic well-being.

Counterspaces provide women of color a place where they can network with others who look like them and a space that allows students to be themselves.

Additionally, the objective of this space is to help Black women feel a sense of identity and better connect to the Black culture at State University. In turn, the Sister Circle serves as a vital resource for making the campus climate more welcoming and helps Black student find congruity with the campus climate (Patton, 2006, p.631).

Furthermore, the findings in this study are consistent with Solórzano et al.'s (2000) research that revealed that African American students created counterspaces within —African American student organizations, organizations or offices that provide services to African American and other students, Black fraternities and sororities, peer groups, and Black student-organized academic study halls (p. 70). Although this space is new and therefore did not benefit the students in this study, they all expressed the need and desire to have a space as such.

### **Summary**

Conventionally, African American women have struggled with numerous obstacles to succeed in higher education. This historically marginalized group remains subjected to stereotypes and substantial microaggressions even at MSIs. Although each woman persisted to her senior year, most of them faced stigmas attached to being a Black woman and/or their level of Blackness which resulted in negative psychological and physiological experiences (Smith, 2004; Sue et al. 2008). Further, most of the women entered college with complex lives and the university failed to consider their roles and expectations outside of school.

The insensitivity of the University is connected to the segregation and stereotypes of Black women, especially in regards to racism in the classroom and curriculum.

Similar to Solórzano et al., (2000) women in this study felt that whites had negative assumptions of them because of their skin color and most of those assumptions pertained to their academic ability or inability which led to participants limiting their academic performances in the classroom — stereotype threat.

The findings indicate their experiences in State University correspond to the negative historical response to African American women in higher education. Unfortunately, scholarship challenging the dominant discourse of African Americans is limited and as a result, Black women students were left combating views used to marginalize and oppress them. Then again, using CRT and Womanism voiced their experiences to empower African American women in higher education through the counter-narrative to the dominant account for the Black women college student experience at minority-serving institutions.

Since the diverse college campus influenced their college choice, Black women students expected to find SU to be represented by an environment in which race would not be a significant issue, and one in which Black women would integrate and strive towards their common goals of attainment. However, both dark and light skinned women experienced racial microaggressions, dark-skinned Black women suffered considerably more because they were often disconnected from women inside and outside of their racial ethnic group.

Research shows lighter toned African American women receive privileges of social acceptance, socioeconomic status, in addition to the perception of higher intelligence and competence (Edwards, Carter-Tellison, and Herring, 2004). The dark skinned African American women were perceived as lower class, lower intelligence,

physically unattractive, and experienced difficulty in relationships (Bowman, Muhammed, and Ifatunji, 2004; Parrish, 1944; Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 1992). This perception is due to others' colorist judgments and their own internalized awareness of themselves from within a colorist perspective.

Findings in this study related to retention and persistence suggest that all of the women who encountered racial discrimination were negatively impacted by these experiences. This is significant because it highlights the prevalence of racism and internalized oppression at minority-serving institutions. Similarly, the findings in this study suggest that this form internalized discrimination emulates white supremacy because the participants with lighter skin shared stories of having better advantages in their higher education experiences simply based on the color of their skin. It is concluded that race and racism play a significant role in the retention and persistence of African American women college students attending minority-serving institutions.

Although several women agreed that the campus was racially and ethnically diverse, they were frustrated that this diversity was not reflected in faculty, fellow classmates and their Black women counterparts. Of particular interest is the fact that the participants felt a need for an ethnic course to learn about themselves as a race and surround themselves with professors and students who look like them. However, outside of the AAS department the negative experiences in the classrooms involving faculty and students shows negative perception and insensitivity towards African American women resulting in classroom segregation which was also perceived to exist campus-wide.

## Chapter V: Discussion

Issues of racism and inequality significantly impact African American retention and persistence, yet institutions of higher education have adopted colorblind policies and programs that fail to address the issues that Black women face. Though race relations have seemingly progressed, education scholars, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2002), and Tyrone Howard (2008), believe much work remains to be done because Black students continue to face hostility in the academy. This harsh reality has fostered an oppressive and emotionally isolating experience for Black students striving to navigate colleges and universities (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005). For the Black women at the center of this project, their perspectives reiterated these trends.

To combat the research that perpetuates the colorblindness of contemporary higher education scholarship, I used Critical Race Theory and Womanism as methodological tools to examine how racial and gender oppression remains relevant even within minority-serving institutions. Through counterstorytelling, the women revealed that race, gender, and institutional context impacted their persistence. Black women students' voices demonstrated the complexity of being Black and a woman in college and identified various factors that shaped their experience. In the latter parts of this chapter, I make recommendations regarding campus programming for Black women students grounded in their voices and experiential knowledge.

Overall, in my study African American women revealed they lacked a sense of belonging, were cognizant of structural barriers that shaped such isolation, and faced particular challenges trying to navigate a minority-serving institution while simultaneously balancing family roles and responsibilities. Study participants described

the feeling of being outsiders, where their peers and faculty treated them an unequal, within a university setting that is often lauded for countering such oppressive behavior. Despite the fact that minority-serving universities possess the ability to empower and liberate students, the Black women students in the study found that even in this collegiate environment it proved to be a racial battlefield where they had to prove their deservedness to be there. Several participants described their higher education experience as layered, with a need to prove that they had the academic ability, determination and work ethic to be successful at a four-year institution. These participants recalled feeling invisible because of the indifference they felt from the institution.

Due to anti-Affirmative Action policies tying the hands of institutions, many administrators now use policy as an excuse for not being specific and targeting Black students in they way they need to on college campuses. This colorblindness has been to the detriment of Black women students in this study and higher education, generally. Participants found the undergraduate experience to be filled with inferred rejection. Many of the participants were combatting the pensive and reticent fight against isolation, invalidation, and loneliness on campus – the latter serving as a prominent feeling described by the women throughout my time with them. Consequently, in my study I conclude that race and gender need to be centrally considered in efforts to enhance the academic and social experiences of African American women at minority-serving institutions. Therefore, the recommendations I put forth are indeed the opposite of colorblind practices normalized within higher education.

## **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The findings from this study present several implications for theory and practice from the perspective of Black women at a multicultural, multiracial institution. Black women play a significant role in the growth and diversity at institutions of higher education. However, due to racial and gender discrimination, retaining Black students continues to be a challenge. Thus, relative to theory, there are many implications for scholars about the lingering presence of racism and patriarchy within higher education systems, in addition to implications regarding the tenets of the Critical Race Theory and Womanism. Further, this study has implications for student persistence scholarship regarding the prominence of family responsibilities and family influence on Black women, and the lack of consideration institutions demonstrate for the outside lives of students during the educational process. There are also practical implications for college administrators, faculty and staff concerned with better addressing the needs of African American women students at MSIs.

### **Persistence as Resistance**

The tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism guided my ability to better recognize and draw out the ways that racism and patriarchy played in the lives of African American women who had persisted at MSIs. Several participants shared stories of stereotype threat and negative differential treatment on campus, which suggest that Black women students remain a marginalized and oppressed group even within a minority-serving institutional context. The negative campus climate subjected many Black women to acts of racism, particularly in the classroom, as well as within and outside of the African American campus community. The negative campus racial climate

fostered a strong sense of isolation. The sense of isolation mediated by the structural racism on campus in part played a role in seeking a sense of belonging with other African American students, particularly with men, even if such relationships proved to be unhealthy and reflective of patriarchy. Further, while some of the women were able to seek solace within entities such as the Educational Opportunity Programs or the African American Studies department, many of the women did not access such spaces or felt these spaces to be limited in the ability to surround themselves with Black women, and have a safe place to openly discuss their racial and gendered encounters.

The complex and layered narratives of the women demonstrated and validated the power of experiential knowledge to present counterstories to dominant higher education discourse that reduces African American student experiences. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), in order to say we know anything about people, we must first talk to them. Grounded in the voices of the participants, this study created a platform for other African American women to challenge the overwhelmingly negative societal view of Black women in higher education. The stories shared by the participants provide educators with evidence of continued racial and gender discrimination in higher education, even at those institutions deemed “minority serving.”

Whereas other higher education discourse would simply highlight the barriers described by the African American women participants, CRT and Womanism led me to interrogate the ways that resistance and social justice efforts were manifested. Such an analysis has theoretical implications in the framing of higher education issues, particularly retention and persistence. The findings reveal that many Black women students rely on various strategies to help them overcome the barriers they faced as

African American women. Persistence strategies included family support, the explicit challenge to racial stereotypes, and staying grounded in their faith. Additionally, some participants elaborated on the significance of relying on mentors to overcome feelings of isolation. More specifically, through the counterstorytelling of African American women students, we learned that they are not passive recipients but instead, active agents of their education.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Implications for practice are recommendations centered on initiatives institutions need to develop to better facilitate the retention and academic success of African American women students. While campus entities such as EOP and the AAS department were obvious counterspaces identified by the participants, many participants longed for a place specific to African American women on campus and were hopeful in a newly founded Sister Circle – though not directly beneficial towards their academic success. The hope for the potential of such a space to enhance the persistence of African American women students is critical to understanding the need for administrators and policymakers to form institution-wide support groups for African American women in postsecondary contexts. It is important to highlight the Sister Circle is not a permanent institutional entity, but rather a campus community effort among a few faculty members and students, whose continued participation will ultimately determine the sustainability of the space.

### *Mentorship*

The women emphasized the importance of having a network of Black women and space geared towards their experience. While they described the gendered tensions

between other African American women, their participation and enthusiasm for the research project demonstrated the desire to foster empathetic connections with other African American women in higher education. Thus, institutions may need to consider establishing university wide mentor-mentee programs or a Black women alumni-mentoring program. Such programs could include important components, such as an environment where alumni and current students could build powerful networks through coaching, career path planning, establishing strategies for success beyond college and informal activities where bonding can occur. Current students would have the opportunity to foster a stronger sense of belonging while simultaneously learning about academic and career opportunities from women who share similar cultural backgrounds and also successfully persisted.

#### *Living Learning Community*

Most participants faced racial microaggressions committed by their non-Black counterparts and some experienced rejection by other Black students, both of which led to the women to feel a strong sense of isolation. Based on such phenomena, institutions should facilitate spaces that Black women students can call their own, such as a living learning community. An African American woman-centered living learning community would create an environment where Black students could foster a sense of belonging and community, and create a more academically supportive environment to enhance their educational experiences. A living learning community would promote engagement, increase involvement, improve interaction with faculty and peers and lastly, increase the overall satisfaction with the SU experience. Since Black women students come into college with added responsibilities and complex lives, this space could facilitate

collaboration between like-minded individuals and assist women with the transition involved in learning how to *incorporate college into their pre-existing lives*.

The women in this study felt the institution was discriminatory, inconsiderate, and insensitive to their needs; which had a direct impact on their approach to their retention. As a response, the majority of the participants described the importance of having a physical space and network of Black women on campus where they could go and surround themselves with individuals from similar sociocultural backgrounds. The implementation of a living learning community would enable Black women to develop a peer network committed to their personal and academic success. Consequently, offering Black women an opportunity to connect to the institution outside of the classroom and beyond EOP and AAS would empower the women to realize their full potential and aid in their retention and persistence at the university.

#### *Curricular and Pedagogical Reforms*

As noted in chapter two, previous research highlights that People of Color are more successful in a learning environment that is collaborative and supportive than one which is competitive and individualistic (Colbeck, Cabrera, & Terenzini, 2000; Hirschy & Wilson, 2000; Sánchez, 2000). For minority-serving institutions, the study demonstrated that most of the participants experienced racial microaggressions in the classroom by their non-Black faculty and peers. Without exception, the women noted their professors were not cognizant of how they perceived Black women in the classroom, which encouraged other students to discriminate against them as well. Thus, professors need to be more culturally sensitive in the classroom. Education scholars Sanza Clark and Sandie Crawford (1992) believe, “the greater compatibility between the

student and the institution, the higher probability that the student will complete all degree requirements” (p. 60). Therefore, MSIs should seek to increase the number of Black students on campus, as well as diversify faculty and staff and furthermore, implement curriculum to better reflect Black communities.

By increasing the number of Black students on campus, institutions create environments that connect students based on a shared academic uniqueness and allow them to support one another throughout their college journey. Additionally, diverse faculty and staff members infuse information pertinent to the lives of Black students, including topics such as racism, discrimination and inequality into classroom discussions, assignments, and curricula. This is vital due to the fact Black students at MSIs report being spoken to negatively by White students and professors. Professors and staff members of color are more likely to advocate for multiculturalism, employ varied teaching methods that cater to the numerous learning styles of People of Color, especially Black women. They genuinely care about students of color and more likely to push them academically; ultimately increasing self-efficacy and resulting in optimal educational outcomes for Black students. Therefore, the final practical implication revolves around the ability of Black women to use the negative effects of alienation for motivation to succeed within MSIs.

### **Research Significance & Contributions**

This project makes an empirical contribution to higher education literature and African American Studies research. Because scholarship on African American students blatantly illustrates the achievement gap amongst Black students and other ethnic/racial

groups, it neglects the perspective of Black women. While African American women face barriers in higher education, there is limited research investigating ways in which to better serve these students. This study sought to contribute to the dismal body of research on the experiences of Black women college students at minority-serving institutions, which can assist with increasing retention, persistence and graduation rates of this particular student group. Further, this study provided the persistence strategies used by resilient Black women who successfully persisted to their senior year at a MSI despite their financial hardships, family roles and responsibilities, being stereotyped, racialized, and viewed as outsiders within this unique institutional context.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several opportunities exist for future research concerning the persistence and college experiences of Black women students at minority-serving institutions. Conversely, this research project has made significant contributions to the area of African American women in higher education. Upon completion of this study, I suggest five meaningful recommendations for future research:

1. Further explore the experiences of African American women students who did not persist in their program of study at MSIs. This will allow educators to compare and contrast the experiences of those who did not utilize the persistence strategies versus those who did.
2. Continue to explore the persistence strategies of Black women students at MSIs through quantitative research methods to identify larger trends that the individual stories richly demonstrate.

3. Explore the persistence strategies of African American men who have successfully persisted to their senior year. Understanding their experiences would further illustrate the impact of external environmental and institutional factors on African American retention and persistence at minority-serving institutions. Additionally, it would better illustrate the impact of gender differences within this institutional context.
4. Conduct a comparison study on Black women at other minority-serving institutions. A multi-site project would expand the narratives of African American women in other geographical areas to determine how MSIs can better serve this student population.
5. Explore the experiences of all students of color at MSIs and examine how they differ from each other and examine the similar or different factors that influence the persistence of each ethnic group in higher education.

### **Summary**

Utilizing a qualitative method, I designed this study to develop an understanding of African American women students' successful persistence strategies they employed while attending at a minority-serving institution. Specifically, the study explored African American women students' perception of the various factors that shaped and contributed to their persistence at MSIs through personal interviews. This chapter provided an overview of the study, discussed major conclusions that emerged, and presented implications for theory and practice in addition to recommendations for future research.

The findings stressed the importance of family support for African American women students as it directly impacted their academic success in the form of inspiration

and motivation. Several participants shared stories of utilizing negative societal stereotype discourse as motivation to strive for academic success. Additionally, there was evidence of racial microaggressions and internalized racism within their African American campus community.

The findings showed that institutional context is an important factor when looking at students of color at minority-serving institutions. While previous research suggest that MSIs and HBCUs are similar in context due to their cultural similarities, findings in this study showed that as the minority within an MSI, Black women experienced racial and gender microaggressions. However, the data also showed the women involved in EOP and AAS at MSIs were offered more social and psychological support, a greater sense of community and satisfaction, which are all factors that contribute to high persistence, program completion and cultural diversity; similar to that of HBCUs. Nonetheless, participants believed if they had a counterpace and strong support network during their time as an undergraduate student it would have significantly impacted their experiences at State University.

Further, this study revealed that a positive campus racial climate improves educational experiences for African American women. The participants who had positive perceptions of campus racial climates differed from the Black women who did not. However, to maximize positive learning outcomes for African Americans, namely Black women, educators must understand these different perceptions and their implications especially within the context of minority-serving institutions.

The outcomes of this study should help educators at minority-serving institutions better understand the experiences of this traditionally marginalized group. This study is

significant to the academy because it provides some insight regarding what factors might contribute to the educational gap that disproportionately impacts Black students. African Americans continue to face challenges in higher education however, these challenges are often ignored when students successfully persist to a four-year degree. By using critical perspectives, educators will be able to better understand how race and gender affect Black women in higher education and the persistence strategies they employed to complete a program of study at multicultural, multiracial institution.

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APPENDIX A

**STATE UNIVERSITY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AT A  
MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION PROJECT  
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Email from Education Leadership & Policy Studies to African American women college students who are graduating Seniors or recent graduates from California State University, Northridge.

Dear Student,

I am writing to inform you about a dissertation study that is being conducted at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) regarding African American women in higher education. Deanecia Wright, a doctoral candidate, is conducting the study as part of the Ed.D. degree requirements.

The purpose of Deanecia Wright's dissertation study is to explore the college experiences of African American women at a minority-serving institution. This study will examine the way race and gender shape their retention and the various persistence strategies they have employed to successfully complete a normal program of study. The intent of this study is to contribute to existing research by examining the factors important to successful college completion for African American women at minority-serving institutions. Your participation in this study would be to participate in one 60 minute, one-on-one interview and maintain a structured journal on your college experiences.

Any personally identifiable characteristics, such as your name or school, will not appear in the study. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Your time investment in this study is greatly appreciated. If you would like to participate, please contact Deanecia Wright at [deanecia.wright.107@my.csun.edu](mailto:deanecia.wright.107@my.csun.edu) or (661) 878-6047. Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study.

Best,

Deanecia Wright

## APPENDIX B

### State University, CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

#### African American Women College Experiences at a Minority-Serving Institution

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

#### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore the college experiences of African American women who have successfully persisted to their senior year at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is not a historically Black college or university. This study will examine the factors that shaped their college experiences and overall retention in higher education. In particular, this study will explore how race, gender, and institutional context impact African American women persistence at MSIs.

#### **SUBJECTS**

##### *Inclusion Requirements*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Deanecia Wright. You were selected as an ideal participant in this study because you are (1) African American; (2) female; (3) 18 years of age or older; (4) a Senior or recent CSUN graduate; and (5) are willing to share your experiences. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

##### *Time Commitment*

This study will involve approximately five hours of your time, over the course of one academic semester.

#### **PROCEDURES**

The following procedures will occur: I will contact you for my study through emails and a research invitation letter. Based on the responses given, I will select and email 20-25 participants who provided meaningful information to follow-up and verify your participation in the study. This email will also include options to set up the date, time and location of your interview. The duration of this process will require a minimum of fifteen minutes to complete. Then, I will ask each participant to complete a demographic questionnaire; this will allow me to gain additional information about you without taking too much time away from the interview process. This questionnaire will require ten minutes for completion and each interview will be approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audiotaped with a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim immediately following the interview.

##### *Audio Recording of Participants*

During the course of the project, you may be audio recorded. Your initials here \_\_\_\_\_ signify your consent to be audio recorded. You will be audio recorded for reasons related to data analysis and interpretation. During the audio recording, you may decline to be recorded and have the recorder turned off at any time during the interview. Digital audio recordings (i.e., files) will be

stored on the laptop (password protected) of the principal investigator. De-identified records in the form of transcriptions (i.e., files) will be maintained on the laptop (password protected) of the principal investigator for the period through which findings from the study will be disseminated. After this period digital audio files and transcription files will be destroyed.

## **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Given the purpose of the study on issues that may be personal, some interview questions could be more sensitive, including questions related to experiences with and/or perceptions of race, gender, faculty and peer interactions, campus culture, and family influences. You may feel uneasy about answering some of these interview questions. The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include: mild emotional discomfort, boredom and/or embarrassment. You may elect not to answer any of the questions with which you feel uneasy and still remain as a participant in the study. If, after your participation in the study, you feel that you need to seek support services, please contact CSUN's University Counseling Services in Bayramian Hall, Suite 520, 818-677-2366, 818-677-7834 (TTY), or e-mail: coun@csun.edu.

This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life.

## **BENEFITS**

### ***Subject Benefits***

You will not directly benefit from participation in this study

### ***Benefits to Others or Society***

You may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. However, this study examines the college experiences of African American women and the role of that race, gender, and institutional contexts might have on these experiences. As a participant in the both the one-on-one interview and the journal activities, you may develop a greater awareness of race and/or gender, which may facilitate change for you personally. In addition, findings from this study may contribute to our knowledge on the subject. The information gleaned from the study may lead to greater baccalaureate degree attainment among African American women attending minority-serving institutions.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION**

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

## **COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT**

### ***Compensation for Participation***

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

### ***Costs***

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

### ***Reimbursement***

You will not be reimbursed for any out of pocket expenses, such as parking or transportation fees.

## **WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES**

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study you should notify the principal investigator immediately.** The principal investigator may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

### ***Subject Identifiable Data***

- Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of findings. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality as a participant in this study. If you consent to participate, you will also be assigned a random, three-digit number to protect you. No identifying information will be used, and your institution and/or program will not be identified by name in any published report.

### ***Data Storage***

- All research data will be stored on a laptop computer that is password protected.
- The audio recordings and journal responses will also be stored in my home office in a file cabinet under lock and key then transcribed and expunged at the end of the study.

### ***Data Access***

The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

### ***Data Retention***

- The researchers intend to keep the research data for approximately seven years and then it will be destroyed.

## **IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS**

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, or phone 818-677-2901.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT**

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep.

**Participation in this study is voluntary.** You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University,

Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

*I agree to participate in the study.*

---

**Participant Signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Printed Name of Participant**

---

**Researcher Signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Printed Name of Researcher**

APPENDIX C  
STATE UNIVERSITY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AT A  
MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION PROJECT  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**I. Pre-interview Session: Introduction/Background**

**Welcome and Introduction:**

Good morning/afternoon/evening. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin the interview session, I'd like to give you the opportunity to read and sign the Consent to Participate in Research.

**Purpose of the Interview:**

As we discussed, this interview is a one-on-one interview intended to collect information for a research study that explores the college experiences of African American women at minority-serving institutions. During this interview, we will talk about your college experiences and perceptions regarding factors that contributed to your persistence.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information you share with me today will be used for research purposes only. Pseudonyms will be used for confidentiality purposes; and personally identifiable characteristics, such as your name and school, will not be used to identify you in any report or document. Today's interview session will be audio-recorded. I will also be taking notes of the conversation. The audio recordings will be transcribed for analysis. The audio recorded file, transcribed file, and notes will be stored securely in a password-protected laptop of the principal investigator until completion of interview analysis. Upon completion of analysis, files and notes will be destroyed. Only the researcher identified in the Consent to Participate will have access to the files and notes. The files and notes will be accessed and analyzed in strict confidentiality. Finally your name or personally identifying information will not be used in any published or public reports.

**Informed Consent:**

This consent notice summarizes some information from the Consent to Participate in Research and communicates the procedures, potential risks and discomforts for participants, potential benefits to participants, payment to participants for participation, participation and withdrawal, and rights of research participants. Procedures in this interview are limited to semi-structured one-on-one interview sessions between the researcher and research participant. While the study will primarily focus on the research participants' personal perspectives regarding their college persistence, some interview questions may involve issues of a personal nature. You may feel uneasy about answering some of these interview questions. You may elect not to answer any of the questions with which you feel uneasy and still remain as a participant in the study. You may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. However, findings from this study may provide insights into student persistence and may contribute to our knowledge on the subject. Interview participants will not be paid for their participation in this interview.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You are not obligated whatsoever to answer or respond to any question or to discuss anything that you are not inclined to answer or discuss. You can skip any question, or any part of any question, and will not face any penalty for answering, or not answering, any question in any way. You may ask that the audio recording be stopped at any time and/or may leave the interview at any time for any reason without consequences of any kind. You may withdraw consent at any time and discontinue participation without interview. You can halt your participation in the interview at any time. You are not waiving legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this interview.

**Identification and Contact Information of Principal Investigator:**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, the details of this study, or any other concerns please contact Deanecia Wright at her mailing address: 40755 Englewood Ct. Palmdale, CA 93551. Alternatively, you may contact Deanecia via telephone at (661) 878-6947 or via email at deanecia.wright.107@my.csun.edu

**Timing:**

Today's interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Are there any questions before I get started?

**II. Interview Session**

**Main Questions:**

1. Can you describe your K-12 schooling experience?
  - a. Can you describe the K-12 schools you attended? [Prompt: Location, private/public, racial composition]?
  - b. What type of student were you?
  
2. Can you describe the factors that influenced your ability to attend college?
  - a. What factors helped you to pursue college?
  - b. What barriers did you experience in your pursuit of college?
  
3. Can you describe your higher education experience?
  - a. What is/was your major and/or minor?
  - b. How would you describe your academic performance in college?
  - c. Can you describe any extracurricular activities in which you participated while in school?
  
4. What were some challenges you experienced while pursuing your degree?
  - a. How did you overcome these challenges?
  - b. Did you seek any sources of support?
  - c. What on-campus resources did you utilize?
  - d. What off-campus resources did you utilize?
  
5. Who has played a role in your pursuit of higher education?

- a. What role has your family played in your college experiences?
  - b. What role have your peers played in your college experiences?
  - c. What role have faculty, staff or other campus representatives played in your college experiences?
6. Can you describe what role, if any, did race or ethnicity play in your college experiences?
- a. What is it like being an African American student on your campus?
7. Can you describe what role, if any, did socioeconomic status play in your college experiences?
- a. How did you pay for college?
  - b. Did you work during college?
  - c. Did you receive any financial aid or scholarships?
8. Can you describe what role, if any, did gender and/or sexuality play in your college experiences?
- a. What is it like being a woman of color on your campus?
9. What do you think are some of the primary issues affecting African American women college students? [Prompt: In general and on your campus]
- a. What resources are available on campus for African American women students?
10. What impact do you think higher education has had on your life?
- a. How did attending your college shape your higher education experiences?
  - b. If you could change anything about your college experience, what would you change?
  - c. What are your future goals and aspirations?
  - d. What advice do you have for other African American women who want to pursue higher education?

**Closing Questions:**

I would like to give you a final opportunity to help us examine these issues. Before we end the interview, do you have anything else you would like to add regarding your experiences as an African American woman college student? If there is anything else that you recall after our interview session, I invite you to share it by contacting me.

**III. Post-Interview Session: Debriefing and Closing**

Thank you for participating in today's interview session. I greatly appreciate you taking the time and sharing your ideas with me. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifiable characteristics will be used in any report or document. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this interview. Do you have any questions at this time?

APPENDIX D

**STATE UNIVERSITY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AT A  
MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION PROJECT  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please fill in the blanks or circle/check the most appropriate answer for the following questions. You may leave responses blank if you do not prefer to answer a question:

Preferred Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth (MM/DD/YY)? \_\_\_\_\_

Where is your place of birth (City/State/Country)? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your racial and/or ethnic background? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is/are the highest educational attainment level(s) of your parent(s)?

Mother  
Doctorate  
Professional Degree/ Masters  
Bachelors Degree  
Associates Degree/ Certificate  
Some College  
High School Grad  
Some High School  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Father  
Doctorate  
Professional Degree/ Masters  
Bachelors Degree  
Associates Degree/ Certificate  
Some College  
High School Grad  
Some High School  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the first in your family (including siblings) to attend college?      Yes      No

If not, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been/ were you in higher education?

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10+

Academic Standing/ Class Status?      Senior      Recent Graduate

When is/ was your date (year) of college graduation? \_\_\_\_\_

Are/ were you a transfer student?      Yes      No

Which colleges or universities do you attend/ have you attended?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is/was your academic major(s)/ minor(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

In what college is/ are your major(s)/ minor(s) located:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arts, Media and Communication  | <input type="checkbox"/> Health & Human Development   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business & Economics           | <input type="checkbox"/> Humanities                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Science and Mathematics      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering & Computer Science | <input type="checkbox"/> Social & Behavioral Sciences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not Listed (please specify)    |   |

How would you describe your socioeconomic status while in school?

- Low     Working     Middle     Upper     Other

Which of the annual income categories best describes you or your family while in school?

- |  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Under \$15K       | <input type="checkbox"/> \$15,001 to \$30K | <input type="checkbox"/> \$30,001 to \$45K  | <input type="checkbox"/> \$45,001 to \$60K |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$60,001 to \$75K | <input type="checkbox"/> \$75,001 to 90K   | <input type="checkbox"/> \$90,001 to \$100K | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100,001+        |

Are you currently employed?            Yes            No

How many hours do you work per week? \_\_\_\_\_

Which best describes where you live?

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Living at home with family | <input type="checkbox"/> Residence halls             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus housing         | <input type="checkbox"/> Sorority/Fraternity housing | _____  |

How long is your commute to campus (minutes)? \_\_\_\_\_

State Residency Status (for enrollment purposes):

- In-State Student             Out-of-State Student             International Student

How do/ did you pay for college (check all that apply):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial Aid (Grants)       | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent(s)                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial Aid (Loans)        | <input type="checkbox"/> I pay my own tuition          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scholarships (Institutional) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scholarships (Private)       |  |