

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT A FAITH-BASED  
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

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A dissertation draft submitted to the faculty of the University of Michigan – Flint  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Education Department  
University of Michigan – Flint  
April, 2024

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2024

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my doctoral committee Dr. Nathaniel McClain, Dr. Pamela Ross McClain, and Dr. Kimberly Pilieci. Your interest in creating safe spaces and educational opportunities for all students is remarkable. I am also thankful for Dr. Tyrone Bynoe who was a significant part of this project early on and has been a mentor and friend. Thank you!

I also wish to express gratitude to my professional colleagues and administrators, who have supported this process in promoting quality faith-based higher education. My EdD cohort members, who all share a mutual passion for quality education and serving students well. My educational mentors along the journey, Dr. David Eisler and Dr. George Grant, encouraged me to keep striving for excellence.

I am thankful for my family, notably Dr. Luanne Shaw, Caleb, Alicia, and Liam. Dad (Joseph O’Kelly) and my sister Aime (O’Kelly) Thurber. Dad (Donald Shaw) and uncle Dr. Richard Shaw, thank you and Go Blue! Stella, I am proud of you as you create your best life serving others. Emilee, thank you for your ongoing support and partnership (and proofreading this manuscript to bring greater coherence and flow). You all make me better! I am also grateful for *my people* Rafael and Moses who have dedicated your lives to serving others in your own ways. Always keep learning and ‘sharpening the sword’ as you create your legacy. I love you all.

## DEDICATION

As a newly single mom who brought her little boy along to Saginaw Valley State for evening classes after working all day (with coloring book and crayons in hand), you showed me the importance of hard work and the pursuit of higher education. I was never prouder than when you finished your bachelor's degree in your 50s and served others in the field of social work throughout your career. You were strong because you had to be. You would be proud. I miss you, Mama. (Renee O'Kelly; 1950 – 2022)

I also dedicate this work to my Grandma, Verna Shaw (1918 – 2005), who always emphasized the importance of education. She influenced so many young lives as a beloved elementary school teacher for Hesperia Public Schools (MI). Her legacy lives on through her students. I always loved the stories and books when I would come to visit (and the massive encyclopedia set that I got for Christmas). Thank you, Grandma.

And to my research participants who had the courage and vulnerability to share experiences. I pray that I will do justice to building a more equitable educational environment that supports your academic success now and into the future. You are the next generation of leaders, and I could not be prouder. Thank you!

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study (n = 9) is to understand the lived experiences of students of color at a faith-based predominately white institution (PWI). Students of color who attend PWIs graduate at a lower rate than their majority-culture peers and are less likely to report feeling a significant sense of belonging to the institution (Strayhorn, 2019). Understanding student perceptions of sense of belonging as a key component related to student success may help educational leaders support students in faith-based PWIs complete their intended course of study and lead to increased educational outcomes. A sample of nine (n = 9) students or former students of color were invited to participate in the study, consisting of semi-structured open-ended interviews to document the lived and told stories of participants. Analysis of interviews demonstrated six major themes reflecting the experiences of participants that can inform educational leaders. These themes were feeling different, faith and history, caring faculty and staff, connection and belonging, faculty and staff representation, and feeling comfortable to have crucial conversations and feeling psychologically safe, and also providing personal support when needed. Explaining the findings through a lens of CRT and intersectionality reveals the importance of genuine relationships and listening to students to appreciate each student's unique contributions, engaging in potentially controversial topics constructively, cultural intelligence (CQ), and the importance of faculty and staff representation.

Keywords: sense of belonging, psychological safety, intersectionality, faith-based PWI

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	8
Background .....	8
Problem Statement .....	9
Purpose and Significance of the Study.....	10
Theoretical Framework .....	12
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs .....	12
Strayhorn’s Sense of Belonging .....	13
Critical Race Theory (CRT) .....	15
Nature of the Study .....	18
Research Questions .....	18
Operational Definitions .....	19
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study .....	20
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	21
Documentation .....	21
Demographic Changes and Challenges to Higher Education .....	21
The Fifth Wave of American Higher Education and the New American University.....	24
Christian Higher Education in Cultural Discourse .....	27
Challenges for Students of Color in Faith-Based PWIs: Can We Talk About Race?.....	30
College Students’ Sense of Belonging.....	32
Summary .....	39
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	40
Research Questions .....	42
Research Design.....	42
Population and Sampling .....	43
Data Analysis .....	45
Trustworthiness .....	46
Ethical Assurances .....	48
Summary .....	49

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings .....	50
Description of the Setting and Participants .....	51
Findings .....	52
Research Question 1 .....	52
Research Question 2 .....	68
Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions.....	84
Summary of the Study.....	84
Overview of the Problem .....	84
Purpose Statement and Research Questions.....	84
Review of Methodology.....	85
Major Findings .....	86
Discussion of Findings .....	87
Findings Related to Sense of Belonging and Psychological Safety .....	88
Findings Related to Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality.....	90
Limitations of the Study .....	92
Reflections on Validity .....	93
Conclusions.....	94
Recommendations .....	95
Recommendations for Future Research .....	97
Concluding Remarks .....	98
References .....	100
Appendix A.....	111
Appendix B.....	117
Interview Protocol.....	117
Appendix C .....	120

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2022), the number of undergraduate students pursuing college degrees has declined by 5% between 2009 to 2019. Lower enrollment of undergraduate students in recent years has caused significant strain on universities, especially in the Midwest (Grawe, 2018). Many private faith-based universities have experienced even greater drops in enrollment than public universities, despite herculean efforts to recruit and retain students in academic programs (Rabey, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased racial disparities and resulted in lower student enrollment and significant budget cuts for many universities nationwide, but especially in Christian colleges and universities (Rabey, 2020) and in two-year community colleges (NCES, 2022). Grawe (2018) has posited that universities who embrace and support disadvantaged students (i.e., students of color, first generation college students) will help mitigate some of the strain caused by lower enrollment and advance best practices in supporting students most vulnerable to dropout. Educational leaders have sought to implement evidence-based strategies to enhance access to higher education among students of color and first-generation college students, often with increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) best practices to help mitigate the demographic shift in areas more significantly impacted by these demographic changes (Grawe, 2018).

Despite demographic changes over the last several decades, students of color continue to earn bachelor's degrees at a significantly lower rate than majority Caucasian students (African-American = 10%, Hispanic = 15%, Caucasian = 62%) (NCES, 2022). As of 2009, minority



student graduation rates were also lower at Christian universities (18.8%) when compared with secular universities (30%) (Reyes & Case, 2011). This gap in graduation rates increased to 20% between Caucasian and Asian students graduating at a higher rate than Hispanic and African-American students (Tate, 2017). The racial and ethnic gaps continue to widen when considering graduate and post-graduate degrees conferred, with students of color earning proportionally fewer advanced degrees (NCES, 2022). The private University in which this study was conducted reports similar graduation rates (50%) of both African-American undergraduate students and Caucasian students, and boasts a 50% overall graduation rate (NCES, 2023). Recruiting and retaining students of color has been cited as an integral component to best practices in supporting at-risk students and higher education promoting more equitable outcomes (Grawe, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).

### **Problem Statement**

Students of color who attend predominately White institutions (PWI) graduate at a lower rate than their majority-culture peers and are less likely to report feeling a significant sense of belonging or emotional attachment to the institution (Strayhorn, 2019). Lower graduate rates among racial and ethnic minorities remains a problem that educational leaders have sought to address (Bishop, 2018; Bond et al., 2015; Lorenz, 2017). According to Strayhorn and Terrell (2010), despite progress in access to higher education among all racial and ethnic groups, Black college students are more likely to attend two-year community colleges, less selective universities, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). According to PEW Research (2016) comparing graduation rates among various racial and ethnic demographics, African-American college students graduate at roughly half the rate (22%) of their Caucasian counterparts (41%) and are almost twice as likely to drop-out before obtaining a college degree.

Evidence suggests that systemic racism within institutions of higher education is partly to blame for subpar educational outcomes for students of color (Harper et al., 2009).

Higher education institutions have seen significant drops in enrollment over the past five years, resulting in greater racial inequalities and lower graduation rates among people of color, only further highlighting the aforementioned inequities among students of color (NCES, 2022). Additionally, students of color are less likely to earn advanced degrees beyond the undergraduate level (NCES, 2022). Educational leaders understand how changing demographics reflect the necessity of fulfilling their mission by supporting students who may not feel they belong or are emotionally safe on college campuses. A preliminary literature review on the subject of sense of belonging revealed a gap in how sense of belonging is experienced by students of color who attend faith-based predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Jun et al., 2018; Rayes & Case, 2011; Paredes-Collins & Collins, 2011). There are multiple studies affirming a gap between educational outcomes and sense of belonging among students of color at PWIs (Romero & Liou, 2023; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Suarez et al., 2022; Thomas, 2019). There is only one similar study (Shyne, 2021) that has focused on the target population of the faith-based, private university that remains the focus of this study; however, the study evaluated student perspectives on academic support services in particular.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative *narrative inquiry case study* was to understand the lived experiences of students of color at a faith-based predominately White institution (PWI) and ultimately inform policy on retention and student success. There are multiple studies affirming a gap exists between sense of belonging among students of color at PWIs (Romero & Liou, 2023; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Suarez et al., 2022; Thomas, 2019). The

significance of addressing racial identity and sense of belonging in educational praxis is also supported by the increasingly politicized and polarized cultural environment that has made racial factors and potential cultural and social barriers points of popular conversation (Davenport, 2022). Strayhorn's (2010) quantitative study of the relationship between resilience, academic self-efficacy and success (i.e., GPA, retention, sense of belonging), and "affective variables" (i.e., self-efficacy), considered with racial identity may be especially relevant to the present proposed study.

Understanding student perceptions of sense of belonging as an important component related to student success may help educational leaders support students in faith-based PWIs complete their intended course of study and lead to increased graduation rates. Strayhorn (2019) has noted the significance of sense of belonging on minority college student success in PWIs and the importance of targeted or intentionally-focused educational supports, especially for marginalized students (i.e., students of color, first generation college students, LGBTQ+). Strayhorn (2019) has likewise identified the importance of student sense of belonging when a student identifies with multiple minority statuses (i.e., African-American + sexual minority; immigrant + language barrier; student of color + physical disability). Students of color continue to face unique challenges in PWIs. Edmondson (2019) has additionally affirmed the importance of psychological safety on learning and in direct connection to belonging, which appears to be a key predictor of student success and sense of group cohesion. Understanding college students' sense of belonging and psychological safety can help university faculty and educational leaders design supports and relevant policies for at-risk students to promote retention, graduation rates and overall student success.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs***

In order to understand sense of belonging in college students it is necessary to build a theoretical framework. Most theories evaluating student sense of belonging blend individual factors (i.e., preferences, personality alignment) and external or organizational factors, such as campus environment, student-faculty ratio and opportunities for campus activities (i.e., Tinto, 1993, Strayhorn, 2019). Maslow (1943) identified five essential human physical and psychological/emotional needs or desires that make up what is now referenced as hierarchy of needs. These are physiological requirements (i.e., food, shelter), safety, love and belonging, esteem needs and self-actualization. This is frequently visualized in a triangle hierarchy with the most essential needs forming the foundation and higher-level (i.e., emotional, psychological) needs being achieved only after lower, more foundational needs have been accomplished.

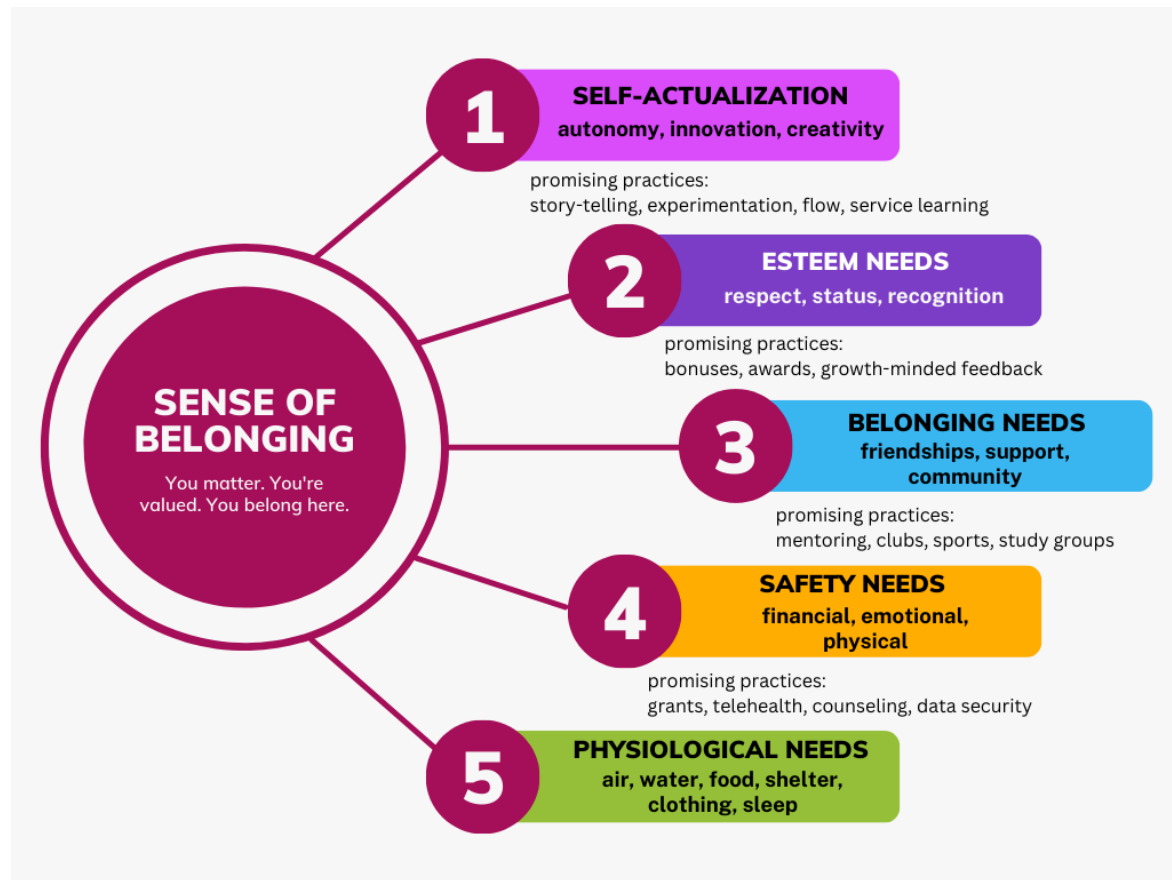
Without physical safety, a sense of belonging cannot be met with integrity as the lower foundational needs facilitate the opportunities for higher needs along the hierarchy. Once belonging has been realized, esteem or self-actualization needs could then follow. Concerning education, learning, and the present study, Maslow stressed that when one or more needs or desires were unmet, motivation to learn and perform tasks was subsequently diminished as well (Maslow, 1943). The relevance to academic performance is significant as trauma and maladjustment reside when essential human needs (i.e., belonging, psychological safety) remain unmet. This affirms the importance of both objective and subjective needs as prerequisites to optimal human functioning. When each of these needs are in place, humans can thrive, learn, and develop.

### *Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging*

Building upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Tinto (1993) and Strayhorn (2019) expanded upon sense of belonging as a distinct factor in promoting student academic success. Because human beings are social beings, the need for connection and belonging is significant to optimal development and educational success. When belonging is absent, individuals feel disconnected from their environment and face significant social pressure, anxiety, and lack of motivation or drive to succeed, meet one's goals, and fully develop. This is especially true when college students are leaving the familiarity of home for the first time as they enter the university experience full-time. According to Strayhorn (2019):

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

When belonging is present and internalized, students become avid participants in the community and find significant value in the campus life and culture of the institution. According to Strayhorn (2023), the sense of belonging model shares much of Maslow's (1943) self-actualization language and can also help inform one's understanding of belonging as both individual and organizational. Sense of belonging does not happen in a vacuum.



Graphic used with permission (Strayhorn, 2019; 2023)

Especially for marginalized or at risk students, the value in being able to internalize a sense of belonging within the context of community can provide a buffer against environmental stressors that might otherwise lead to attrition and dropout (Strayhorn, 2023; Tinto, 1993). Though various stressors are common for all students in higher education, the additional environmental stressors among students of color can explain greater inequities and the need for additional measures to support students of color in PWIs (Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). McNair et al. (2022) proposed that higher education should undergo a “paradigm shift” to move the higher education culture to overcome implicit biases and negative stereotypes that disproportionately influence students of color (pp. 92-93). Educational

leaders can take steps to advance the culture within higher education and PWIs through deliberate supports and relationship-building to promote greater diversity, equity, and inclusion for students of color more at-risk of attrition and dropout (Felten & Lambert, 2020; McNair et al., 2022). Increasingly, universities have added the critical “belonging” component to many of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officers on campuses to to promote student success and wellbeing, with belonging as a critical factor in student success and retention (Lu, 2023).

### ***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***

Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs, the work of Tinto (1993) on understanding factors influencing student attrition, and the work of Strayhorn (2019) on sense of belonging all highlight the reality of student perceptions of belonging and fitting in with a particular culture as being a largely personal and subjective experience. However, despite being a subjective experience, belonging may also include shared experiences among groups that surpass a single qualifier such as gender, race, or religion. The concept of intersectionality in Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) helps identify where multiple facets of identity can influence one’s sense of belonging among college students. For instance, being a male person of color may be an entirely different experience from being a female person of color in a faith-based PWI institution, especially if the male is an athlete (also a facet of identity) and has close access to friends, supportive faculty, and coach mentors. Students may have different experiences when multiple ‘intersections’ align, such as in person of color who also identifies as LGBTQ+ in a faith-based PWI where binary sexual identity and heteronormativity is expected. Each of these qualifiers adds a layer of complexity to understanding one’s role in the mainstream culture and ‘fitting in’ with the norms, unwritten rules, and expectations of that culture, including faith-based PWIs.

Critical race theory (CRT) developed initially as a legal theory in the United States, which expanded upon critical theory to focus specifically on race as an essential social construct that defines one's sense of belonging or identity in the social environment as one's "experience of racial oppression within normative standards of whiteness" (Kim, 2016, p. 42). Originally proposed by Harvard Law Professor Derrick Bell (1980), Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been developed throughout the social sciences (including education) and proposed that interest convergence and racial inequality have still been promoted and to some degree sustained amidst advances in social developments toward greater racial equity (i.e., Landmark case law, affirmative action). Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) highlighted the importance of intersectionality and how race is but one factor in social identity that is experienced by other factors, such as sex, gender identity, age, disability, education, and socioeconomic status (SES).

Further developed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), CRT is important as a theoretical construct because in defining identity, race is more than simply another categorical variable, such as gender, disability, or religion. Racial identity becomes one's lens through which the world is viewed and remains part of one's overall narrative and frame of life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The cultural history of slavery, racism, and systemic discrimination in the United States provides focused attention to systems and experiences of people of color within a predominantly white culture or social space through the lens of CRT, aided by the use of stories and narrative approaches. CRT has continued to gain popularity in academia and has developed beyond simply Black/White racial distinctions to include other persons of color (i.e., Native American, Latinx) and those who may otherwise experience social inequality and discrimination within the mainstream culture (Kim, 2016).



Within a few years, the applications of CRT to the field of education, sociology, psychology, and the broader social sciences were increasingly studied and written on (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2022). According to Kim (2016), “CRT scholarship is fundamentally grounded in the distinctive experiences of people of color while challenging taken-for-granted ideas about accepting the experiences of Whites as the norm” (p. 43). This is observed through common interactions among well-meaning people who illustrate personal biases, blind spots, or are unaware of micro-aggressions, backhanded compliments, and other statements that could be potentially offensive to people of color as part of common language and communication (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) note that even well-meaning statements about race neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and simple meritocracy can be inherently racist. This is addressed in CRT, giving voice to the unique experiences of the individuals and marginalized groups whose voices are represented. Kim (2016) notes that colorblindness “assumes a universal or a standard way of being, which is usually grounded in the cultural values and norms of the dominant culture” (p. 44). Common biases and blind spots are often expressed in daily conversation and dialogue that have a negative impact on those who have faced discrimination (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). Interest convergence (Crenshaw, 1989; Livermore, 2022) affirms that policies may be enacted, which appear to be beneficial or benevolent towards people of color yet may tacitly be sought to simply improve the image of an institution or society. In taking steps to address racism or appear to support people of color, institutions may harbor ulterior motives that primarily serve the organization (i.e., recruitment goals) and are less than heartfelt in application (Brittanica, 2022). CRT provides a counterpoint to positivism and the striving for *one single truth* by soliciting and inviting the stories and narratives of those most affected in society or who feel disenfranchised,

making this theory relevant to qualitative, narrative inquiry studies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These features make CRT as a theoretical contribution particularly useful in seeking to understand the unique narrative experiences of students of color in a predominately white, private faith-based institution of higher education.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study highlighted the stories of nine (n = 9) students, former students, and alumni of color at a faith-based predominately white institution (PWI). The focus of this narrative inquiry was to understand perceived sense of belonging as a student of color in a predominately white space. This included factors from lived experiences that have promoted or been perceived as barriers to academic success. This study utilized a narrative research design in order to successfully highlight these stories, using storytelling that engaged the social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives within which participant experiences were reported (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Kim, 2016). There was evidence to support best practices following the opportunity to hear directly from affected stakeholders (i.e., students, former students, alumni) to encourage educational leaders in applying feedback to promote a more equitable campus community.

### **Research Questions**

This researcher sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) *How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?*
- (2) *How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*

## **Operational Definitions**

*Intersectionality* provides an “essential perspective on how different parts of our identity intersect to shape who we are as individuals” (Livermore, 2022, p. 35). Crenshaw (1989) described the connection or intersection of identities that provide unique cultural barriers and were often nuanced (i.e., being both female in a male-dominated world, and a person of color in a majority white culture or being a person of color “and” identifying as a sexual minority, etc.). Being both female and a person of color are intersections of identity (Suarez et al., 2022).

*Psychological safety* is based on constructivism and heightens exploration, teamwork, and both psychological (i.e., cognitive) and emotional (i.e., affective) engagement in support of learning (Edmondson, 2019). When psychological safety is perceived, people perform within established norms and expectations (including learning). Where psychological safety is lacking, people lack motivation to perform, take healthy risks, and develop fully within the team or culture of the institution (Edmondson, 2019). Lack of psychological safety can negatively affect learning (Medina, 2008).

*Predominantly White Institution (PWI)* refers to an institution in which the majority of students, and especially those in positions of power (i.e., faculty, staff, administration/leadership) are predominantly White, specifically majority White males.

*Sense of belonging*, according to Strayhorn (2019), “In terms of college... refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study**

The key assumptions of this study are as follows:

1. Research participants willingly shared their experiences and perspectives of being a student of color (or former student) in a faith-based PWI.
2. The narrative inquiry approach to this study provided fruitful data adding to the body of knowledge informing evidence-based practice to support students of color in the faith-based PWI.
3. The selection criteria of the sample were appropriate to the study and assured that the participants have experienced similar phenomena of being a person of color in the faith-based PWI.

The present study sought to understand how a student's sense of belonging among students of color may inform educational leaders supporting students of color in a private, faith-based university. One of the significant challenges of narrative research is the lack of generalizability of the findings (Kim, 2016). While findings from the study may be applicable to other similar private faith-based colleges, or students of color at other institutions of higher learning, the results cannot be assumed to be immediately relevant or generalizable outside the identified faith-based PWI. The small number of participants may also be seen as a limitation; however, by limiting the participants to nine ( $n = 9$ ), ensured each participant's story could be told with authenticity. Narrative inquiry research focuses on the cases presented and provides the storied experiences of participants while relying on a careful representation of participant narratives (Kim, 2016). Despite significant research on sense of belonging in PWIs, there continues to be a lack of research at the identified PWI.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Documentation**

The literature presented in this review is drawn primarily from the ProQuest database and relevant educational publications and descriptive databases (i.e., NCES). Keywords used either individually or in conjunction included: higher education demographic trends, sense of belonging, students of color, psychological safety, student success, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, and educational best practices. Leading texts in educational leadership and student success were also consulted from leading authors in educational leadership from reputable scholarly publishers, such as Jossey-Bass, Routledge, Wiley, and Johns Hopkins Press. To highlight the importance of current and relevant reference support in making evidence-based inquiries, a majority of supportive references were sought with a publishing date within the last five years unless there were reasoned justification to use older source material.

### **Demographic Changes and Challenges to Higher Education**

Changing demographics and current trends highlight the need to better support first-generation students, students of color, and students at-risk of leaving college before earning an undergraduate degree (Grawe, 2018). This review of the literature will synthesize and analyze research findings and conclusions drawn from published works and peer-reviewed studies on changing demographics and trends, college students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and psychological safety (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 2019). The present chapter will highlight future challenges for higher education to guide leaders in developing practices that promote greater equity, sense of belonging and psychological safety to better support undergraduate students of color.

The information presented in this literature review begins with the need for higher education to consider present gaps in providing an equitable education to all students, including supporting students of color who may not feel a sense of belonging on college campuses, leading to withdrawal and discontinuation of university studies (Strayhorn, 2019). Democracy and a commitment to serving disadvantaged students will become increasingly important to society as well as to colleges that will face decreasing student enrollments among middle-class, college educated potential students (Blumenstyk, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2010, Tinto, 1993). Demographic trends suggest many universities in the Midwest will face a yearly 5% (or greater) drop in enrollment based on a shrinking birthrate and migration towards the Southern states (Grawe, 2018). Jeffrey Selingo (2013), Editor at Large at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, observes that too many universities have been slow to innovate and adapt to changing demographic changes, financial challenges, and evolving technology (p. 58). Studying demographic trends helps educational leaders understand the challenges facing the higher educational institutions, especially in understanding what factors might help colleges recruit and retain students from an ever-shrinking pool of potential candidates.

Students from lower socio-economic status (SES) households (under \$50,000 for a family of four) are less likely to attend four-year universities at a rate of 30%, compared to 73% of students coming from high income households (Grawe, 2018, p. 24). Grawe (2018) noted that students who come to college with at least one parent who has attained a college degree has a doubled chance of obtaining higher education, though not necessarily degree completion. First generation college students often fail to meet even basic college readiness benchmarks (i.e., ACT assessments for English, reading, math, and science), let alone all four and are frequently unprepared for college-level scholarly work (Blumenstyk, 2015, p. 40). Despite often arriving to

college academically under-prepared, first-generation college students frequently take remedial courses; however, these supportive courses are largely unsuccessful in supporting student graduation rates and become “dead ends” for many students (“Bridge to Nowhere” report by Complete College America, cited in Blumenstyk, 2015, p. 40).

McGee (2015) projected students of color would represent over half of high school graduates by 2023, many coming from lower socioeconomic status (SES) schools, that often produce students who are traditionally unprepared for college (p. 36). Adjusted high school graduation data from the 2018-2019 school year did not support McGee’s (2015) projection, citing an almost 10 percentage point gap between White student graduation rates (89%) over African-American graduation rates (80%), highlighting continued disparities in high school graduation rates (NCES, 2023). State investment in public education supported the commitment to students of limited means by helping keep public higher education tuition costs low. Universities are increasingly adjusting to limited grant funding, increased tuition costs for higher SES students (who can afford higher tuition costs), and by increasing student debt to fund education to help meet increasing tuition costs (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). This often places students from lower SES households at a distinct disadvantage, which often adversely affects many students of color disproportionately. McGee (2015) suggested that:

Diversity defines the new marketplace for higher education...universities that do not figure out how to enroll and retain the rising number of students of color not only will find it increasingly difficult to meet their enrollment goals but also will put themselves at risk of becoming little more than social anachronisms. (pp. 36-37)

Grawe (2018) has suggested that many students from lower SES backgrounds, first generation students, and students of color may not willingly invest in higher education without

seeing the immediate value, which will also lead to decreasing student enrollments, especially at PWIs (p. 100). Increased costs and decreasing enrollments will place an emphasis on both recruitment and retention, which requires support and strategies that promote student success among students of color (Strayhorn, 2019; Grawe, 2018).

Selingo (2013) noted that the number of students who are able and willing to pay for tuition is decreasing as students are looking for less expensive alternatives to a traditional university education, such as digital badges, online (often open source) programs, and other alternatives for career readiness. These challenges are not restricted to state universities that have lower tuition and more government funding; it also includes many Ivy League universities that combine high tuition with high aid and student debt. This leaves many first-generation students and students of color at higher risk of attrition with higher overall debt, whether or not they earn a college degree (Jack, 2019). Deliberate focus on student learning and engagement (i.e., belonging, psychological safety) is essential to success and innovation that will lead to serving both students of color and universities alike in accomplishing their shared goals for graduation and academic success (Kim & Maloney, 2020).

### ***The Fifth Wave of American Higher Education and the New American University***

The *fifth wave of higher education* will be remembered as a model of greater inclusion and diversity and known by ‘who it includes and supports’ in achieving the goals of higher education and be decreasingly less concerned about rigorous enrollment standards at the exclusion of those most in need of a university education (Crow & Debars, 2020). Traditional universities have often used enrollment criteria that promote a system of enrolling the most qualified, based on test scores (i.e., SAT, ACT) and high school grade point averages (GPA). However, despite inequality in college admissions criteria, the greatest predictor of college



graduation is family income and zip code (Crow & Debars, 2020). Persistent lack of access to higher education among those most disadvantaged has contributed to “exacerbating social inequality and diminishing our national potential for innovation, economic adaptability, and socioeconomic mobility” (Crow & Debars, 2020, p. vii). While higher education has been considered a great equalizer in promoting greater advancement and opportunities after graduation, these opportunities have not been enjoyed across groups (Lynn & Dixon, 2022). The New American University model is framed around increasing access and inclusion for all students, especially for those most at risk of traditionally being unable to complete a college education. The assumption of supports, sense of belonging, and increasing levels of access and graduation rates among traditionally underrepresented groups is highlighted in this model.

The New American University model builds upon the success of previous educational eras that have built upon the country’s first higher educational institutions (i.e., Harvard, Princeton, Yale) that led the way to the second wave universities (Crow & Debars, 2020). The second wave includes many state university systems that expanded upon the success of the country’s first residential colleges (i.e., University of Georgia, University of Michigan), followed by the third wave of universities that were considered “land grant” universities funded by the Morrill Act of 1862 (i.e., Michigan State University, Penn State University). Several land grant universities were also designated as “historically Black colleges and universities” (HBCUs), such as Alabama A&M University, Howard University, and West Virginia State University (Crow & Debars, 2020). The fourth wave universities moved from traditional degree-granting universities to becoming world class research universities, which by nature also included many first, second, and third wave universities. As the fourth wave universities matured and developed into becoming clear global leaders in producing top scholars and researchers, social inequality and

lack of access for the most disadvantaged became the impetus for consideration in the “fifth wave” of world-class, research-driven universities that were purposeful in including access to those traditionally left out of fourth wave universities, especially people of color, first generation college students, and those from lower-socioeconomic (SES) levels (Crow & Debars, 2020).

Crow and Debars (2020) proposed that institutional ‘will and vision’ can advance the potential for higher education (i.e., fifth wave universities or “New American University”) to become a driver of reducing social inequality and providing access for those most unlikely to complete a world-class university degree. This assumes that universities will change policies and procedures to become more innovative and support greater representation to support “four aspirational imperatives, being 1) student focused, 2) solutions-oriented, 3) connected to market needs, and 4) built to maximize public value” (p. 22). The goal of fifth wave universities is to provide opportunities for learning and academic success regardless of socio-economic status (SES) or other barriers. Proctor et al. (2016) found that 24% of African-American students lived in poverty, and 41% of African-American low-income students required additional supportive services to support academic success and perseverance. Universities must be prepared to support students and their success in higher education through creative approaches to education grounded in equity and scaffolding to meet student needs (Palmer et al., 2014; Shyne, 2021; Strayhorn, 2010; Upcraft et al., 2005). The financial incentives of attending a fifth wave university also demand that education is flexible to facilitate students working to help support one’s studies and limiting student debt through affordable education and limiting the amount of debt students take on in completing their degrees. By definition:

The New American University model reconceptualizes the American research university as a complex and adaptive comprehensive knowledge enterprise committed to discovery,

creativity, and innovation, accessible to the demographically broadest possible student body, socioeconomically as well as intellectually, and directly responsive to the needs of the nation and society more broadly. (Crow & Debars, 2020, p. 29)

The central role of diversity, equity, and inclusion is clear in the New American University model in which access to all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups is central to addressing the social inequities and maximizing graduation rates for all students (Crow & Debars, 2020).

### ***Christian Higher Education in Cultural Discourse***

Decreasing demand for faith-based higher education has caused over 65% of Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU)-affiliated institutions to report fewer full-time students between 2014 and 2018 (IPEDs, 2022). In a September 2020 *Christianity Today* article, the fall in undergraduate enrollment among faith-based, Evangelical Christian colleges has been described as a “crisis” that has caused many private faith-based colleges to close (i.e., Morthland College, Marylhurst University, Mount Ida College, Ohio Valley University, Lincoln College, Grace University) (Adams, 2020). Those who remain continue to strive for additional funding (i.e., development, private donors) to remain viable since they rely on student tuition for up to 80% of budgetary needs (Adams, 2020). Similarly, many theological seminaries (graduate institutions for biblical higher education) have likewise seen declines in enrollment and significant budget challenges, resulting in many downsizings or selling their campuses altogether (i.e., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Fuller Theological Seminary, Dallas Theological Seminary). Declining birthrates and changing demographics (especially in the Midwest) are impacting higher education nationally, combined with more expensive tuition in comparison to public universities, and fewer students desiring a religious-based higher education. This has created challenges for educational leaders in faith-

based institutions (White, 2022). The ongoing decline in membership among evangelical churches has subsequently reflected declines in Christian higher education (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). This has pushed private universities to reevaluate their strategies for searching for potential students willing to pay more for tuition among a smaller potential student base (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). The downward trends in private faith-based higher education suggests that part of the problem is also due to some students of color seeking public (i.e., more racial and culturally diverse) universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to experience greater diversity and representation (Palmer et al., 2014). These trends are exacerbated by fewer people attending church since the COVID-19 pandemic and a questioning of the priority of particular faith perspectives as essential to either weekly church attendance or denominational affiliation in line with one's need to attend (and pay more for) a Christian, private higher education (Barna, 2020).

Some Christian higher educational institutions have been able to stave off the declines in enrollments seen in other smaller institutions and even thrive through innovation and expanding their online degree offerings (i.e., Liberty University, Grand Canyon University), offering high demand degree majors and through robust graduate and doctoral programs (i.e., STEM, business, leadership, social sciences). Consistent enrollment has been achieved through flexible online and graduate programs in several universities that despite demographic trends continue to maintain enrollment and growth. An example of a Christian university that has grown in opposition to declining national trends is Liberty University (VA), boasting record enrollment in 2022 with over 15,500 on campus students and over 115,000 online students (Napier, 2022).

Liberty University, a Baptist university based in Virginia has largely espoused conservative Republican political leanings and has continued to show consistent enrollment

growth since 2015. Liberty University has come under fire as an anti-diversity institution following (then) President Jerry Falwell Jr's advocated arming of students under Virginia's conceal carry law, suggesting students shoot Muslims if they come on campus. Falwell Jr. was quoted as saying in a chapel message, "teach them [Muslims] a lesson if they ever show(ed) up here" and "end those Muslims before they walk(ed) in" (Associated Press, 5 Dec. 2015). The university hosted former President Donald Trump as both chapel (2016) and commencement speaker (2012) at Liberty University, drawing attention to the institution's cultural norms as a conservative-leaning faith-based Christian university.

Liberty University also received media attention when Falwell Jr. was found to have participated in an extramarital affair between his wife and a younger man. Shortly thereafter, Falwell posted a picture on Instagram with his pants open beside a young pregnant female (Musto, 2021). President Falwell Jr. later received medical attention after falling down a flight of stairs intoxicated (following several reports that he had also showed up to work on campus intoxicated), and then claimed he was owed \$10.5 million after the university released him from his role as president (Musto, 2021). Despite these high visibility, negative publicity events, the school continued to show enrollment growth through flexible programming and aggressive recruiting practices, maintaining approximately 300 recruiters and a Google advertising budget of \$16.8 million in 2018 (Burton, 2018).

Despite record enrollment, high profits, and conservative religious (or at least political) overtones at Liberty University, some have questioned the university's stance on promoting greater equity and inclusion in alignment with New Testament biblical teachings. According to a June 2020 Slate.com article, Graham (2020) recounts the story of former Director of Diversity, LeeQuan McLauren within the Office of Equity and Inclusion at Liberty University, who

oversaw diversity efforts and left “following years of frustration” (para 2). McLauren indicated his frustrations following his “Black Lives Matter” tweet (with supportive Scripture passages) that was removed by administration, that he was required to oversee a cultural event featuring conservative media personality Candice Owen, and had to respond to the infamous tweet of President Falwell Jr. sharing a photo referencing the racist photo of Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam as a mocking gesture to the Governor’s face mask policy during the COVID-19 pandemic (which Falwell Jr. in response admitted his post was racist and issued an apology). McLauren left his position at Liberty University along with several employees of color and filed a lawsuit against Liberty University (Graham, 2020). In the lawsuit filed by McLauren against Liberty University, he alleged that in his role within the Office of Equity and Inclusion that he was told to publicly “profess an understanding that God hates LGBTQIA+ people” and when he refused to profess this, he was accused of “having a ‘secret agenda’ for LGBTQIA+ students” on campus (McIntosh, 2021).

### ***Challenges for Students of Color in Faith-Based PWIs: Can We Talk About Race?***

Discussions on systemic racism, racial equity, and social justice are often difficult conversation points in faith-based predominately White institutions (Ash et al., 2017). Predominately White Evangelical churches have often implicitly advanced cultural expectations of “whiteness” (i.e., worship style, preaching style, lack of social justice participation) and normalized predominately White congregations at the expense of reaching across racial barriers and striving towards greater racial integration (Ash et al., 2017). Jun et al. (2018) proposed that Christian PWIs in particular maintain systemic racist practices and have a historical alignment with racially exclusionary practices “in their efforts to remain distinctively Christian, have found a way to remain distinctively White” (p. 73). While Christian universities in the South have

rightly been challenged for overtly racist policies (i.e., exclusionary admissions policies, Bob Jones formerly forbidding interracial dating and marriage), Christian universities in the North have frequently failed to take steps to create environments that are conducive to supporting students of color, such as lack of significant representation in faculty and administration of people of color (Jun et al., 2018).

Having a social justice conscience has been wrongly labeled as a lack of focus on evangelism, and potentially aligned with being labeled a 'liberal,' and subsequently seen in a negative light (Ash et al., 2017). Similarly in Christian higher education, efforts to address racial inequalities are often seen in opposition to right orthodoxy, with a focus on evangelism instead of focusing on social issues or challenging White normativity (Ash et al., 2017; Romero & Liou, 2023). Among White Evangelical higher education leaders at Christian universities, highlighting more of an individual focus on right behavior and avoiding the personal sins of racism comes at the expense of observing and acknowledging systems that include more than personal attitudes and behaviors (Ash et al., 2017). Notably, White evangelical students often report intersectionality between being "Evangelical," "Conservative," and "born-again," and can acknowledge when these identities seem at odds with the mainstream culture, including in noting a disconnect with their more progressive peers at many public universities (Riggers-Piehl et al., 2021). Many White evangelical students may feel a sense of comfort and compatibility in a more conservative (often assumed political), faith-based PWI that more closely aligns with one's personal worldview (Riggers-Piehl et al., 2021).

Identifying two themes around "faith that hurts" versus "faith that helps," Ash et al. (2017) identified in their qualitative study that educational leaders at midwestern Christian PWIs who had an interest in promoting antiracism efforts feared being labeled "liberal" or "Democrat,"

and were more likely to face negative repercussions at their institutions. The risk of focusing more on social justice implied that these leaders were not concerned (enough) about evangelism, or perhaps ‘going liberal’ and were to be placed under scrutiny. Jun et al. (2018) have surmised that “various ideologies and expressions of White superiority are at the foundation of Christian higher education in the United States” (p. 75). The challenge in response to such claims would be evidence of equitable retention and graduation rates of students of color, and subsequent evidence of faculty and administrators of color who are thriving and serving in Christian PWIs in the South and North alike. Despite the public statements among many Christian higher education leaders to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as part of their core values as faith-based institutions of higher learning, this is often met with opposition and appears to have moved the needle only marginally, if at all (Poppinga, Larson, & Shady, 2019; Jun et al., 2018).

Christian higher education administrators who felt supported in antiracism efforts, identified “faith that helps” and found biblical support for antiracism policies and in addressing systemic issues and acknowledging the importance for people of faith to also be concerned with social justice as a reflection of their faith (Ash et al., 2017). Similarly, they often also experienced opposition despite being able to make progress in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their schools (Ash et al., 2017). It seems that even where there is explicit support for promoting greater equity, there remains tacit resistance and challenges despite best efforts.

### **College Students’ Sense of Belonging**

For many students of color, the risk of not completing a college degree often rests on whether one feels connected to other students, to the faculty and staff of an institution, and to the degree to which one feels valued and connected to their college (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 200). Tinto’s (1993) model of student persistence frames one’s understanding of student sense of



belonging and suggests that when students perceive that they belong (i.e., emotionally connected, supported), they tend to persist when facing discouragement or potential barriers. Thomas (2019) expanded Tinto's (1987) theoretical framework to the United Kingdom contextual framework and showed that similar patterns emerge among students of color in predominately White institutions. When students engage meaningfully with other students and faculty, they are more likely to persist in higher education (Arum & Roska, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Strayhorn (2010), building upon Tinto's (1993) research has identified African-American college students are more likely to attend two-year institutions, less-selective four-year institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), yet many PWIs serve students of color and must be committed to helping all students succeed. When students feel safe and like they belong in whatever space they inhabit, they will be more likely to pursue a college education and advance in their studies (Tinto, 1993). McGee (2015) has placed the future direction of higher education and institutional ability to grow amidst declining enrollment directly on how well institutions embrace diversity and supporting at-risk students, including students of color. Sense of belonging and supporting students most at risk of dropout has significant policy implications for educational leaders committed to student retention, equity, and academic success.

A systematic review of existing literature found several core components of sense of belonging as a basic human need, based on Maslow's hierarchy (1962) that informs this study. Sense of belonging is highly contextual and is significant in motivating behavior, including learning (Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) found sense of belonging is influenced by one's identity in multiple settings and must continue to be satisfied as conditions change (p. 30). This means that sense of belonging is fluid and can increase or decrease over time or when situations change. College administrators should consider how

deliberate inputs support student success, given the present and projected demographic changes noted above, and the research method used must accommodate contextual factors inherent in understanding sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

The relationship between sense of belonging among students of color and graduation rates in higher education has been well documented. Strayhorn (2010) examined the relationship between resilience, academic self-efficacy, and success (i.e., GPA, retention, sense of belonging) among students of color in a predominately White institution. Strayhorn (2010) cited “affective variables” (i.e., self-efficacy) and considered race and socioeconomic status (SES) as factors in contrast to literature focused on resilience connected to “maladaptive behaviors, such as substance abuse, sexual abuse, and premature adolescent pregnancy” as significant to understanding belonging (p. 51). Resilience factors that supported sense of belonging could encourage students of color to focus on strengths instead of deficits or challenges due to psychosocial factors beyond an incoming student’s control. Strayhorn (2010) suggests focusing on resiliency and self-efficacy with sense of belonging is useful to both individuals and educational leaders who can change policies to help promote student success.

Shaw and Bynoe (2022) examined student sense of belonging and psychological safety during a pilot study at a faith-based PWI to predict grade point average (GPA) as a measure of academic success. Using multiple regression ( $n = 39$ ), the authors examined the relationship between sense of belonging, psychological safety and grade point average (GPA) to predict what relationship existed in a pilot study at a faith-based PWI. The authors were unable to find a direct relationship when comparing belonging and psychological safety to GPA; however, through secondary analysis examining specific questions related to belonging and psychological safety, there were three (out of 18) questions on sense of belonging that showed significance. Specific

measures of student sense of belonging and specific measures of psychological safety could predict GPA, especially concerning questions related to “feeling accepted, feeling like they fit in, and felt included” and that “nobody would undermine one’s efforts, feeling one can ask others for help, and feeling that one’s unique skills and talents are valued and utilized” (Shaw & Bynoe, 2022, p. 47). The authors suggested further research with a larger sample to promote greater generalizability and integrating more qualitative or mixed-methodology future studies to better understand the experiences of students of color in faith-based PWIs.

Shyne (2021) in her qualitative study, highlighted the importance of Christian private colleges hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color as representative of students of color on campus and ensuring that institutional diversity reflects the diversity of the student body. Students reported a lack of faculty and staff diversity among students of color as directly impacting their sense of belonging on PWI campuses (Shyne, 2021). Of particular importance to the present study, when students of color understood and felt comfortable using academic resources and had faculty and staff of color they could confide in on campus, they were more successful, felt less isolated, and experienced greater sense of belonging (Shyne, 2021). When students of color see faculty and administrators who look like them and can relate to challenges in educational persistence, sense of belonging is increased and educational success and graduation rates increase (Shyne, 2021; Strayhorn, 2010).

Christian colleges and universities are not alone in lacking faculty of color to provide greater representation to an increasingly diverse student body, as the nation’s top universities struggle to overcome systemic racism, lower rates of hiring faculty of color, and difficulties in promoting a diverse faculty to tenure positions (Gasman, 2022). In 2019, universities in the United States struggled to increase faculty diversity, despite vocal support for having a diverse

faculty, demonstrated a constant struggle in finding qualified candidates when making hiring decisions (Gasman, 2022). In 2017, of full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty, 41% were White men; 35% were White women; 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander men; 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander women; and there were 3% each representing Black men, Black women, Hispanic men, and Hispanic women (NCES, 2022). These numbers are in contrast to increasing numbers of students of color, in all racial and demographic qualifiers, with some of the nation's most prestigious universities showing the most significant enrollment increases in recruiting students of color (Gasman, 2022). For instance, New York University, Columbia University (New York), and Stanford University report 66% students of color (NCES, 2022). UCLA and UC-Berkeley report 73% students of color within the student body, and even Northwestern University and the University of Chicago (both in Illinois) report a student body of 55% students of color (NCES, 2022). Despite the success in recruiting students of color and increasing the diversity in composition of the student body, universities have continued to struggle to hire and retain faculty of color to represent the more diverse student body (Gasman, 2022).

Qualitative research has also helped bridge the gap in understanding the experiences of students of color in PWIs, given that sense of belonging is largely subjective and a reflection of one's lived experiences. Adams and McBrayer (2020) interviewed six ( $n = 6$ ) first-generation students of color to learn about their lived experiences in a phenomenological qualitative study to understand sense of belonging in a PWI. The importance of earning a college degree and the opportunities that accompany a degree (i.e., financial, career advancement) were considerations among those interviewed in working toward a better quality of life and increased income. Safety concerns (i.e., physical, psychological) were also cited as factors impacting sense of belonging and were highly contextual and fluid among participants. Equity, diversity, and providing

ongoing supports to first-generation students were noted as essential for educational leaders interested in helping first-generation students of color feel they belong and support educational success (Adams & McBrayer, 2020).

While interpersonal relationships are important factors when discussing student sense of belonging, administrators should also consider residential spaces as essential to understanding sense of belonging (Garvey et al., 2020). Using an explanatory mixed-method design, Garvey et al. (2020) found students experienced greater sense of belonging through deliberate social interactions in their residential settings, especially when two or more minority statuses were identified (i.e., women, person of color, sexual minority, immigrant). A mixed-methods approach helped the authors confirm the quantitative results through expanded narration and detail to better understand the perceptions and experiences of students. The authors noted the vital role residential assistants (RAs) play in fostering positive sense of belonging in shared living spaces, especially for students of color and first-generation college students who may feel culture shock in the new environment of university life on campus.

### **Psychological Safety**

Learning happens best in environments where students feel safe and able to take in new information in a non-threatening atmosphere (Clark, 2020). Felten and Lambert (2020) have cited the centrality of relationship-rich education as one of the most significant factors in college student success, especially those who have been cited as at risk of attrition, such as first-generation college students, students of color, and those who come from lower socioeconomic status environments. This creates the safety and relationship supports necessary to provide students the space to engage in meaningful conversations and ask critically-timed questions when feeling unsure how to proceed in higher education, as well as navigate those unknowns in a

new environment, such as higher education campuses. Hostile or stressful environments that stimulate anxiety, fear, apprehension, or trigger an amygdala response (i.e., fight, flight, freeze) will hamper new learning (Clark, 2020; Medina, 2008).

In academic or team settings, when mistrust, feelings of disengagement, fear, or lack of psychological safety are present, active engagement of the material often is replaced with silence (Edmondson, 2019). Educators may misunderstand silence for understanding content, yet students who lack feelings of safety may simply not return to class or drop out altogether. Whereas sense of belonging heightens exploration, learning and full engagement, psychological safety supports similar outcomes and contextual factors to promote learning and student success (Edmondson, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). According to a Lumina Foundation and Gallop study entitled, *Balancing Act: The Tradeoffs and Challenges Facing Black Students in Higher Education* (Gallop, 2023), Black students experience greater discrimination (21%) compared to all other students (15%), and report feeling disrespected and “physically or psychologically unsafe” (p. 2) more than other students of color and Caucasian students. In addition, schools that had the lowest percentages of student body racial diversity scored the highest in perceived levels of discrimination, and lowest levels of reported psychological safety (Gallop, 2023).

College campuses (including PWIs) are microcosms of the larger culture and share many of the diversities (and disparities) represented in society (McNair et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Traditional college age students may also be more tolerant towards diversity (i.e., students of color, different ethnicities, LGBTQ+), which is not always consistent with the values of older faculty, staff and administrators in many universities, creating a potential disconnect between students and educators (McNair et al., 2022). Mwangi et al. (2018) found through a mixed method study, which began with qualitative interviews and

followed up with a larger survey of African-American college students, similar perceived injustices being expressed in society through recent movements (i.e., Black Lives Matter, Police “use of force” injustices) mirrored the perceptions of injustices experienced on college campuses. The authors highlighted the experience of ‘being Black on campus,’ as well as strategies to help understand how getting involved in constructive advocacy efforts might empower students of color to develop resilience, sense of belonging, and psychological safety both on and off campus (Mwangi et al., 2018). The authors also recommend supporting available campus resources to empower and support students who are experiencing racism or other racial injustices to take appropriate action when warranted. The importance for supporting mentoring, coaching, and deliberate connections between students of color and educators in an open and psychologically and emotionally safe atmosphere has been shown to be essential in supporting student success (Felten & Lambert, 2022).

## **Summary**

This writer has sought to identify how understanding the lived experiences and the literature on sense of belonging and psychological safety can better support students of color at-risk of leaving college before earning an undergraduate degree. The literature review summarized research findings and conclusions drawn from published works and peer-reviewed studies on changing demographics, including within Christian higher education, college students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) as an essential component of learning and development, and psychological safety. Several considerations from the evidence-base support best practices in promoting sense of belonging and psychological safety among students of color in PWIs. This work should inform educational best practices to guide leaders in developing policies and procedures that promote equity, sense of belonging, and psychological safety.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes this study's qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to better understand students' sense of belonging among undergraduate students of color at a faith-based PWI within a bounded context (Kim, 2016). Participant stories tell a unique perspective and thereby this narrative inquiry becomes the evidence in a clear and iterative manner from the voice of students themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Hearing directly from participants allows stories to unfold to describe, explain, and explore phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The contextual framework of narrative inquiry gives participants a voice directly in one's own words and provides detail and clarity on the topic being studied (Kim, 2016). Creswell (2013) has noted that narrative investigative methods allow the evaluation of a program or case, which in the words of participants will detail the understanding of one's own experiences in a specific setting or context. In this case students will be invited to share their experiences as students of color in a faith-based predominately White institution.

#### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study is qualitative. Yin (2018) recommends that using multiple case studies within a qualitative narrative inquiry model should be intentional and solicit a representative sample of cases to provide a more complete understanding of a phenomenon until saturation is achieved. Stake (2006) suggests between four to ten cases to support inquiry feasibility and saturation in identifying potential themes in addressing the relevance to the topic. The present sample of nine participants ( $n = 9$ ) meets this standard. The multiple case study narrative inquiry design included one on one recorded interviews. Documentation from recorded interviews was transcribed in verbatim transcripts. This methodology permitted the researcher to gather relevant information and data to understand the context of student perceived sense of



belonging and psychological safety among students of color to parse out themes, assertions, and patterns (Creswell, 2013). This chapter divides into the following sections: problem statement, research questions, research design, research techniques, and ethical assurances.

## **Problem Statement**

Students of color who attend PWIs graduate at a lower rate than their peers. Of those who are first-generation college students, they are especially less likely to report feeling psychologically safe or have a significant sense of belonging in contrast to their majority peers (Strayhorn, 2019). Educational leaders must understand how changing demographics reflect the necessity of fulfilling their mission by supporting students who may not feel they belong on college campuses. McGee (2015) asserts that a college's ability to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (i.e., serving students of color) may well provide the key to a university's success, given the enrollment decline and present demographic challenges facing higher education. After reviewing preliminary literature on the subject of sense of belonging and psychological safety, a gap remains in how sense of belonging differs (if at all) among faith-based PWIs. Though there are studies affirming a gap between sense of belonging and psychological safety among students of color at PWIs (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; McGee, 2015; Shyne, 2021; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2019), there are no known studies to date focusing on the target population at the identified faith-based, private university that remains the focus of this study. Shyne (2021) studied perspectives on academic support services among African-American and Hispanic-American students at the identified PWI; however, sense of belonging was only one factor identified in her study, which did not directly address the primary questions of this present study as it focused on support services in particular. Strayhorn's (2010) previous quantitative study of the relationship between resilience, academic self-efficacy and success (i.e., GPA,

retention, sense of belonging), “affective variables” (i.e., self-efficacy), race and socioeconomic status (SES) may be most relevant for informing the present proposed study. While interesting, several of Strayhorn’s (2010) “affective variables” (i.e., SES) remain outside the focus of this proposed study.

## **Research Questions**

This researcher will attempt to answer the following questions:

- (1) *How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?*
- (2) *How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*

## **Research Design**

Within qualitative narrative inquiry design, this researcher seeks to understand how participants make sense out of their lived experiences and provide a detailed final product that is richly descriptive (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research methods are by nature uniquely exploratory and descriptive, and highlight the lived experiences and stories of participants, in this case undergraduate students of color in a faith-based PWI (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry is qualitative in nature and rooted in storytelling, and necessarily considers one’s lived experiences within the context of social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which the participant lives and purposefully engages (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Sheperis et al., 2017). This is particularly fitting for describing factors within the micro and macro cultures that students of color function, both in the larger society and on the college campus. According to Kim (2016), storytelling is a collaborative dialogue between participant

and researcher, and involves the act of “restorying” to bring significant events to light in developing a cohesive narrative. Multiple data sources can be used to achieve the goals of narrative research; however, recorded participant interviews were the primary source of data for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

The context of this study was within a small private, faith-based Christian university, also identified as a predominately white institution (PWI) that is regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association, and nationally accredited by the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), who accredits traditional Bible Colleges and theological training colleges and universities. Voluntary sampling was utilized to obtain the sample size for this study of nine ( $n = 9$ ) participants. The small sample size ensured that each participant’s narrative was detailed in depth and with accuracy, while also allowing for representation and potential themes in the shared stories (Stake, 2006). The researcher recruited participants who are students of color, alumni, or former students. Participants were invited to share their experiences through individual recorded interviews. Recruitment stopped once there was a representative sample among current students, former students, and alumni of color.

It is noteworthy to highlight the potential for sampling bias, because it is inferred that those who volunteered may also have had strong feelings and opinions on the topic being studied, and subsequently, their responses may not be representative of the entire student population, including other students of color in the identified PWI. This potential bias was potentially mitigated by including alumni (graduates) and former students who are no longer associated with the PWI. Positive and negative experiences were shared to provide insights into

both areas of strength and challenges of being a student of color in the identified faith-based PWI.

The specific instruments used to operationalize the research process were open-ended semi-structured interviews. Due to the narrative nature of storytelling and encouraging the detailed lived experiences of students of color, open-ended interviews were most conducive to creating a safe environment for sharing one's lived experiences and stories (Kim, 2016). Recorded interviews provided raw data to allow the researcher to highlight significant events, perceptions, and narratives in one's own words.

Participant perceptions as a foundational source of knowledge is key to the use of interviews within narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016). Narration occurred initially, allowing participants to share their lived experiences with minimal interruptions from the researcher. Active listening and careful verbal probes were used to engage in more in-depth clarifying questions and ensure understanding of participant lived experiences and perceptions (Kim, 2016). Within this model of narrative inquiry, the researcher was an active co-creator and not simply a passive listener by soliciting feedback for clarification and communicating understanding of stories relayed, to ensure a proper conveying in the participant's own words.

To ensure adequate data was collected, participants completed open-ended interviews with field notes taken during the recorded interviews, and transcripts of the interviews being typed after the interviews were completed to ensure an accurate record of participant storytelling (Creswell, 2013). Open-ended interviews were reported and included in written transcripts (Kim, 2016). Participants were invited to share their experiences of being a student (or former student or alumni). Recorded and transcribed responses were analyzed to address the research questions. Use of narrative inquiry provided rich data to give participants opportunities to tell their stories

with as much nuance and rich detail as possible while creating the environment for an accurate reflection of lived experiences as a student of color in the identified faith-based PWI (Kim, 2016).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis consisted of summarizing and retelling participant stories using Polkinghorne's narrative analysis, which creates a distinction between an analysis of narratives and narrative analysis (1995; cited in Kim, 2016, pp. 195-196). This data technique creates the opportunity to consider how stories are embedded within a greater order or classification within social or organizational structures, while also allowing concepts as uniquely described by the participant independently as lived experiences (Kim, 2016). This distinction facilitates an ongoing narrative that embeds one's experiences within a greater plot and blends potentially disconnected data points into a coherent summary to avoid redundant or repetitive data points. This winnowing of potentially redundant data points can also create the possibility for researcher bias or selective omission. The risk of researcher bias was minimized by active listening and paraphrasing during the interview to reflect back on important points as confirmed and shared by participants (Creswell, 2013). The goal was to relay participant stories in one's own words to best convey meaning. Data interpretation and inductive coding of essential points of relevance to the research questions occurred concurrently, although interpretation of the data and significant themes were developed after the interviews concluded (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2021).

Inductive coding is ideal in open-ended interviews, where participants can tell one's own story in one's own words, and then code themes based on these words (Saldana, 2021). A second thematic narrative analysis involved deductive coding to review essential data points from the participant's lived experiences and stories following the first round of inductive coding.

Repetitive ideas were highlighted and noted, and similar themes or details between individual participants are documented (Saldana, 2021). Themes were reported to note similar patterns and systematically presented in the results of this study. The researcher relayed patterns and themes from the data taken from participant stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

### **Trustworthiness**

Polkinghorne (2007) recommends several traits to promote trustworthiness in qualitative narrative inquiry, including the researcher adopting an open listening stance and engaging in focused listening. This helps summarize participant stories in the participant's own words. Active storytelling and listening, and the researcher's own use of probing and clarifying questions can also elicit multiple engagements between researcher and participants to ensure shared understanding of meaning through the participant's own language and words (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cook & Bryan, 2022). Each participant was treated as a separate case and included in the discussion to discern common experiences and details that could be beneficial for reflection on educational best practices.

Reliability relates to the replication and consistency of a study, which is less essential in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). Kim (2016) notes that because narrative inquiry focuses on the lived experiences of participants from their own perspective, replication and consistency is often not possible in this form of research. The concept of trustworthiness is more appropriate to narrative inquiry to ensure that participant stories are dependable, credible, confirmable, and transferable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). One method of ensuring accurate reporting is the recording of interview data through the use of audio recording and written transcripts for consistency. Because the story and lived experiences of participants are the focus of narrative inquiry, the accurate retelling of the narrative is vital for accuracy and consistency.

Dependable narrative data provides knowledge through human interaction where trust and rapport are established between the interviewee and researcher (Kvale, 1996). Generating knowledge through narrative inquiry assumes a level of mutual understanding and respect for one's perceptions and experiences from the honest reflections of the participants in a study, willing to share from a position of expectation that one's story will be heard, validated as unique, and trustworthy (Kim, 2016). Interviewees also have the understanding that their stories matter and will add to the ongoing research that has the potential to support organizational or systemic change (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Credible narrative data ensures that interviewees' accounts are built upon "trustworthy relationships (rapport) between the researcher and the research participants" (Kim, 2016, p. 162). The tendency for interviewees to share a version of one's experiences that one believes the researcher wants to hear can preclude the true lived experiences as it is. Having an open atmosphere where narrative accounts can be truthfully expressed and honored without judgment or concern for reprisal offers the context for deep sharing and active engagement.

Confirmability ensures that narrative data is accurate, from the participant's own perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Concerning the evaluation of one's cultural identity, expressing oneself within the context of acculturation and enculturation provides the opportunity to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of norms, as well as the dynamic tension at play within one's present or past environment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 157). Narrative accounts of lived experiences are confirmable when shared, recorded, and reviewed back with the interviewee who has the opportunity to clarify and share further information or perspective where appropriate.

Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is a goal of qualitative research, as opposed to generalizability, which dominates quantitative methods in social sciences research and lessens the importance of causality. Qualitative narratives are explanatory in nature and provide authentic data that is transferable to the degree that interviewees' stories from one's lived experiences are both authentic and adequate (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provide the additional perspective that narrative research is wakeful and moves beyond the "boundaries of reductionistic and formalistic modes of inquiry, is in a state of development" (p. 184) to facilitate ongoing reflection, further research, or potential action.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Ethical assurances were ensured through confidentiality of participants, anonymity, informed consent, and authorization through the University of Michigan (UM IRB "Exempt" HUM00234521 4/28/2023) and the identified PWI's Institutional Review Boards. All names and personally identifying information were removed from transcripts and participant artifacts. Participants were invited to create a pseudonym with which they would be identified in the document. Consent forms were obtained in compliance with the IRBs granting approval for this study. The necessary and appropriate documentation for the IRB will be kept in the researcher's password-protected computer folder. A sample consent letter and IRB approval notification are included in the appendices.

Because of the open-ended nature of this inquiry and the desire to hear from participants in their own words about their experiences, the risk of harm from this study was low. Ensuring anonymity and listening to all narrative data (and conducting interviews with participant self-chosen pseudonyms) helped participants share their experiences freely in their own words. While



the risk was low, the potential for recalling or sharing potentially painful experiences could have been somewhat distressing or disturbing for some participants. Participants were only encouraged to share what they were comfortable sharing and were reminded that all information would be kept confidential, and their identities would not be disclosed at any time in the study. Gender neutral language was also used in reporting participant feedback to further support participant anonymity.

To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in narrative information, the researcher took recorded interviews, field notes, and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews and shared these written transcriptions with participants to confirm accuracy. Participants were invited to review transcripts as accurate, which was then integrated into the research document. This additional layer of participant review of their own words ensured that information derived from participants' stories and experiences accurately reflected their lived accounts and provided an appropriate context for reflection and summarization (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

## **Summary**

This chapter explained this study's qualitative narrative inquiry case study methodology. This chapter was divided into the following sections: problem statement, research questions, research design, and research techniques. Data collection, sources and techniques, data analysis techniques, and research ethics were also reviewed in this chapter, and highlighted how qualitative narrative inquiry appropriately addressed the research questions and was the best methodology to solicit appropriate feedback in the participants' own words for analysis and informing educational best practices.

## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand the lived experiences of students of color at a faith-based PWI. Inductive qualitative research “involves the reduction of information that has been collected by organizing it with the help of a coding scheme into significant patterns and themes” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 233). Interviewing participants directly allows the opportunity to “collaborate as cofacilitators to measure sense of belonging, equity and diversity issues, or student success behaviors,” when considering strategies for data collection and analysis (Heiser & Levy, 2022, p. 225). Codes were developed in response to the two research questions and eight ancillary questions (Appendix B: Interview Protocol) to isolate areas of common experience that could be reduced to the following overarching themes.

Through in-depth interviews, data were collected and analyzed to understand the following research questions:

- (1) How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?***
- (2) How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?***

The eight ancillary questions (Appendix B: Interview Protocol) that helped frame the open-ended recorded interviews were both inductively and deductively analyzed for potential codes, based on participant experiences. There were six major themes or patterns that emerged from coding that directly addressed the two research questions as participant stories unfolded.

Through multiple readings of the transcriptions, the participant data came to light in telling the “story line” and “big ideas” that were gleaned directly from the participants’ lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The similarities between participant experiences also helped to provide a level of saturation in common themes that provided authenticity in participants’ own words in response to the questions. At times, participant responses to each of the themes were more optimistic or positive, while in other cases the feedback was more constructive or negative. In all examples, supportive data were presented with evidence in participant’s own words to provide context to lived experiences.

### **Description of the Setting and Participants**

The faith-based PWI is associated with a Protestant Christian, (Evangelical Dispensational), predominantly White fellowship of churches that has member churches throughout North America, and with mission churches on several continents. The faith-based PWI is host to approximately 350 on-campus students who study a variety of majors, and several NCCAA sports and club activities. The university also offers undergraduate degrees online and has four online graduate degrees in addition to the on-campus degrees. The campus is located in an urban setting and geographically situated within a residential neighborhood. The faith-based PWI also has online programs and graduate studies, which were excluded from this study to focus on traditional (i.e., on-campus) participant experiences that might be different from online or graduate students.

The sample included nine ( $n = 9$ ) current and former students of the identified faith-based PWI who agreed to participate in this study. Participants included on-campus undergraduate students and former undergraduate students, including one recent graduate and one student who

transferred to another institution. To help protect participant anonymity, self-chosen pseudonyms and gender-neutral pronouns were used purposely.

## **Findings**

Once interviews were completed, inductive and deductive coding resulted in six themes that represented both strengths and challenges as observed as expressed by the participants. The six themes included the following:

Theme #1	Feeling Different
Theme #2	Faith & History
Theme #3	Caring Faculty & Staff
Theme #4	Connection & Belonging
Theme #5	Representation
Theme #6	Crucial Conversations & Support

Each of these six themes will be discussed in reference to the two primary research questions and stemming from interviews with participants. Each of these themes will be supported by direct participant quotes, highlighting the experiences of participants themselves in more of a narrative, story-telling manner (Saldana, 2021).

### ***Research Question 1***

Research Question 1 asked: How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI?

#### ***Emergent Theme 1: Feeling Different***

One of the strongest themes that most consistently resonated with all participants (n = 9) was the feeling of being different on campus. Participant experiences were somewhat varied based on personal factors, including whether one was an athlete, first-generation college student, immigrant or native, or already having had friends on campus when they arrived.

Leo shared, “I feel like I have a different college experience than most people just because I am a person of color” noting, “I grew up in a place where I was just, the majority, so I didn’t have to think of like, the color of my skin waking up, until I got here. So it’s been a different experience, for sure.”

Bob, in sharing about feeling different noted, “I felt more at home if I don’t say anything, I’m Black, like, if I’m just quiet, I’m Black, like there’s no difference right away; you don’t notice it.” Grace, who identified as ‘minority, not-White,’ reported feeling like attending the faith-based PWI was overall positive despite feeling different from the majority, given the smaller size of the PWI and shared, “I think overall it was good. Really, I don’t regret it at all. I learned a lot, grew a lot, and overall it was good.” Later they shared more about feeling ‘tokenized’ and while still overall a positive experience, felt different from other students.

Elise also shared an overall positive experience despite feeling different, saying, “being here, it’s definitely like, there are ups and downs... being in a small university, you have the opportunity to be involved with people and to grow closer to people than a bigger university.”

Elise also shared,

“I would say that sometimes it does get hard being at a PWI here just because most of my friend groups. I’m the only person of color and so it gets kind of hard to like relate to them about certain things that happen in the world regarding people of color. They do their best at like trying to understand like, what I’m feeling and like, what I’m going through, but at certain points it does get like ‘you don’t understand.’”

Sharing their experiences as an incoming student, several students expressed the experience of feeling different than their majority-culture peers, or even as “outsiders” to the campus despite being enrolled students. Elise in talking about their experience, said “I would say an outsider is someone like me who didn’t come from that background and um, like I came from

a non-denominational [church] because I didn't like fully understand all of the denominations.”

Edna shared that,

“All in all, I did have a good experience as a student. As a minority student, it was tough...because I never wanted to be a stereotypical black person to people. And what I mean by stereotype is we're automatically perceived as ghetto or rambunctious, or uneducated, not able to hold our own in intellectual conversations. So, it comes to that as well too... almost like you have to prove yourself, like this is college, is higher education you know? So, you want people to know that you're meant to be there just as much as they are.”

In expanding upon their feeling different as a student of color, Edna continued,

“I will always remember being one or two minorities in classes out of 15 Caucasian students. And having conversations on race or diversity, whenever those would be brought up, it was hard to hear some of the comments that were made, because it wasn't always... It seemed like it was almost in a place of naivety. Like they didn't quite understand other people's backgrounds but their own. But at the same time, when they tell you that they love you or they care for you and then you hear and really get to know them, and then hear some of their comments that they made, whether politically, socioeconomically, sociology-wise, you can really understand that there is a definite dividing factor involved. You aren't just like them, and they aren't just like you and they don't think like you.”

Darius expressed this feeling of difference in the following way:

“It's been kind of rocky. It wasn't easy when I first got here. When I first arrived on campus, like it was a bunch of frowned up faces and you know, like kind of like the looks like 'what is he doing here?' type of thing. I could say it's a bit of racism because you like, I wouldn't be treated or given the same leeway as a white student.”

Darius also noted,

“One of the things I have learned having been an athlete, is there are differences among black athletes. The black athletes get treated different from white athletes. The white athletes get treated with more leniency than black athletes. The black athletes don't get much of a leash with the white athletes. In being on a team, the white athletes can make more of a mistake than the black athletes. One or two bad mistakes the black athlete is coming out of the game and that's treated unfair because if I'm putting in the work and doing what I have to do to get the team to a win, I should have at least a little bit more leniency.”

Jacelyn in talking about feeling different expressed particular confusion over the perceived

'homeschool culture' saying,

“Homeschool culture is huge here. I as an African-American Christian never, I don’t think ever have known anyone who’s homeschooled until I came to [PWI]. A lot of people here think that being homeschooled is something that is just prevalent among the Christian community, but it’s I would say, more prevalent among the European Christian community because in the African-American Christian community, it’s not to say it’s not other cultures, because I can’t speak for those, but from what I know in my experience as an African-American, it’s not something that is prevalent...I don’t understand it, or hear people talking about being homeschooled, or I hear my friends talking about how they’re going to homeschool their kids, and just like, what is it with this homeschool thing?”

Leo who identified as both a person of color and an international student said,

“I was involved in leadership roles, so I was used to being seen most of the time. And then coming here where I was like... just – not seen, just feeling so invisible. I guess, to a point was very shocking to me. I was like, ‘what is happening?’ kind of thing. And like, when people actually talk to me most of the time, it just feels like it’s not genuine, like we just talking to you for the sake of talking. So at first, like my first year, I would try to get to know people. But was like, ‘I don’t think this is what they’ve been doing for the sake of knowing me, they’re just doing this to say, ‘Oh yeah, I talked to the international kid’ or something. I don’t know.”

Speaking to perceived cultural differences at the PWI and feeling different, Leo shared,

“I feel like people here, it’s just odd to them to see someone who’s like international or who looks or is different from them. I feel like they’re not very, I feel like maybe it’s because most of them are homeschooled, maybe that’s why. I feel like that’s the sense I get always, like ‘oh, I never interacted with someone like this.’”

Regarding different reasons students have for coming to college and feeling different, Thomas indicated,

“You’re going to have a different goal if you came to be a missionary versus if you came here like, ‘hey, I just came here to further my athletic career.’ You know, it’s going to be a little bit different. You’re going to relate more to those people that have, like a common goal versus somebody that’s just here to try to pursue a career in athletics or just getting their degree or whatever, you know? That’s because with the more you like who you relate to things like that.”

In a similar thought, Liam said campus life was a more comfortable experience despite feeling different,

“I want to say that it was a little awkward, because I came here not knowing anyone on the sports team, so that’s all anyone ever looked at me. Like, ‘Oh yeah, they play sports here.’ As weeks went on in the first semester, a lot of faculty and students became more talkative towards me, knowing my name and everything, so I felt like what was a real good spot. I thought, “Okay, yeah, maybe I do kind of belong here.”

Similarly, Bob shared that being a student of color was significant, but also being a ‘non-athlete’ created additional feelings of being different or alone, including among other students of color. Bob shared, “No, I did not make any friends with any student of color here because it did not occur to me, because... I don’t know.” Later, Bob relayed feeling closer to the Caucasian students citing, “that’s what I had in my disposal,” and concerning other students of color,

“You see them around, but you don’t really see them around, if that makes sense. Like, they just... they are here for one thing basically, you know they’re here for sports in school. They’re not involved in campus life or anything like that because they don’t have a medium to be involved right? So, I did not get to see or be friends or necessarily make friendships.”

Elise said the transition to college as a freshman as especially difficult, “It was kind of hard my freshman year because they’re [students of color] all upperclassmen and because I was a freshman, I never really saw them, and they were always like busy doing stuff and like getting ready for like whatever.” Edna also affirmed feeling different on campus, noting, “many people come from sheltered pasts, and they weren’t exposed to the harshness of life... so we see life differently than other people do.”

Likewise, Jacelyn shared the observation that “many textbook authors and classes were primarily from majority culture perspectives.” In talking specifically about their observations, Jacelyn shared,

“We actually have to have people who are of different cultures...people cater to their culture, and their events here cater to European culture. Our classes cater to European cultures; even our literatures. We don’t have a lot of literature that is from people of minority culture... Opening up room for other cultures to see themselves represented in



events and literature classes. Obviously, we'd have to have people that are diverse but first you gotta get those people." [Theme #5 – Representation]

The experience of perceived tokenism was also shared in what was perceived as an attempt to demonstrate greater on-campus diversity for marketing purposes. Grace relayed feeling different on account of their minority status.

"I think they were making a promotional thing, and they wanted a picture of a bunch of people holding hands or like having their fists in a circle or something, and so they kind of went through and just randomly picked out like, you know, five 'non-white' people that they could find. So it was very... it's fine. I don't mind doing it, but there was no follow up and I don't actually know what project they were working on. It was more like, 'oh, you meet our criteria. Here, quick, we need you to just take a picture...I don't know if they knew my name, but it was like 'we just need you for a picture.'"

Feeling different can also apply to ethnicity as well as race. Bob shared,

"I have interesting experiences because I'm different obviously. I'm African and everything so coming to the [PWI], I thought I would have the same experience...I expected people to be more outgoing, to be more accepting, and like more welcoming and making people feel comfortable and belonging and stuff, but not really... I've been afraid to speak in my accent or try to code switch, because code switching takes a lot out of me, which is like changing how you talk to different people, so I don't care to have conversations, laugh, talk about life, talk about school, what I like or if I belong here, and God forbid you have a different opinion. Oh my goodness, 'you're black and you think differently, you're not Christian,' like you're an alien."

Bob (who transferred to another institution after two years) noted that differences are not only limited to racial identity but include having perspectives that are perceived as different from the majority cultural norms,

"it's not a place to come if you just have a different opinion. It doesn't even stop by skin color, like have a different opinion on a different perspective...we don't want to be all thinking alike. That's not a fun place to be... Because I know God made us different, like, just look at how the world is first, and just stick that in. I really want this institution to be a place where students of color come and thrive and have good reviews.

### *Emergent Theme 2: Faith and History*

The overtly faith-based character of the PWI is evident from marketing to campus signage, and expressly stated in the mission statement and core values. The diverse backgrounds of participants and their own faith history clearly reflected their alignment or challenges with the faith expression and experiences on campus. Students are expected to align with the institutional faith statement as well as sign a student code of conduct that guides behavior on and off campus. One of the requirements of the code of conduct is to regularly attend a local church while attending the university and also attend weekly chapel services on campus during the school year.

Among several of the participants there was a positive affirmation of faith and a deepening of one's spirituality through attending the faith-based PWI. Darius said regarding faith expression that,

“I feel that this is a positive for me. I feel like it's (faith) grown. It was strong before, but learning about the Bible is fun because it's just so much that even back in their times like even now today it still happens; it's just repeating history... trusting God more and you know seeing everything come together and that's been a good part of being here. I say my faith has grown. I feel like where they're faith-based some other people, they don't live up to that because, you know, like in the Bible said everybody's 'one' basically. There is no color; you're one of God's children so like even with that being said, and with that being taught and implemented into the school I still feel people don't live up to what they're trying to implement.”

Edna shared that their experience as a student and having to be deliberate to separate personal faith with what was perceived as collective faith shared by others,

“impacted me in a good way because I was surrounded by Scripture... so it made me intentional on my prayer life with God... At the same time too... Not all Christians think the same. You know there is another term called 'White Christianity' in the black community and that can be very harming to minorities as well... Perfectionism. You gotta be perfect: 'no sin' basically. I feel like it's basically like a Pharisee, rules, regulations,

like maybe you think that you may be better than they are, or you talk down to them, or hide behind your religion and don't really take into consideration how other people may feel. Somebody who is centered around right Christianity may look at somebody covered in tattoos and piercings, but they love God. And that harms people and that turns people away from God and Christ. Many students here have struggled, leaving their faith because the people hurt them. So I learned to put my faith and trust into God instead of people, because I know people can hurt you, and their thoughts and opinions can hurt you.

Liam said in reference to faith development,

“I’ve definitely grown a little bit. I notice I’ve started writing down different Bible verses and memorizing a little bit of stuff and going to chapels more. That kind of helped to put me in that little setting, right? I’m not going to say I’m all the way there “full on Christian” but I definitely took some steps towards it though and opening my faith up.”

Elise said about their faith,

“I don’t think that my faith has changed at all. I do think I’ve learned more about the way that I do stuff with God and like I’ve definitely learned like things about the Bible that I didn’t know before. Because, I would have called myself like when I first came here a ‘new believer’ because I’d only been following Jesus for a couple of years maybe, and even then it was just like I went to [youth ministry], so then it was just like the little stuff like reading your Bible and learning to pray, but here it’s so much bigger.”

Thomas in sharing about spiritual growth remarked,

“I knew things about the Bible. I knew things about God. I knew like, how my faith was, but I think I like really dug into everything, like, I learned about the ‘ins and outs’ or I’m learning things and kind of regrouping myself as a person and...I feel better, like I feel great a lot actually when I’m here in chapels, or like with the Christian mission week... My faith has definitely grown. That makes it special because I was at a point of my life where I was kind of questioning a lot of things. My grandfather passed away, probably about two years ago, so it kind of shook my faith for sure. So coming here was, I know...it was going to be new. I know it’s going to be challenging, but I had to like, get into that uncomfortable state.”

Jacelyn shared that they experienced a bit of culture shock in reference to worship style that was different from what they grew up within their home church.

“They sing a lot of contemporary Christian here, or they sing songs that I see are more contemporary Christian radio songs, not necessarily congregational songs. Also, a lot of their songs, if not most are from European Christian artists. I grew up on Gospel or soulful music. I come from a church culture where we do things like ‘praise breaks’ and, yeah, they don’t do that here. That’s all I’m telling you. I’m very Pentecostal and [PWI] is very much the opposite of that. I feel like even for African-American Christians, we’re generally more exuberant in their worship than they are here... Yeah, the chapels here and

a lot of students and people, like faculty and staff, like, they sit there and stand. Then for me coming, that was very awkward because I was like, I don't judge people's worship, but like coming in, I was like 'this is a very dead chapel.'

Grace shared a story from homecoming in what was supposed to be a time to encourage and welcome alumni back to campus, but also created a sense of several students feeling disconnected from the campus community. This was especially true among students who had no prior family or legacy connections to the institution, or those who did not attend one of the churches associated with the denominational affiliation of the university. Grace shared,

“I think it might be a good metaphor but for homecoming this year, I know that someone or several different people put out a timeline and they went through the [academic building] and they put up a timeline of some of the major events of [PWI's] history, when it moved, and different building expansions. It also had some of the faculty that have worked here from when they were students or grandparents or family members of current students. They're kind of highlighted in the yearbook pictures there were posted, and I think that's the interesting part of it as well. It almost reminded me of the level of tiers, almost like you're more or less of a first-class citizen if you've had our student if you've had grandparents that have come to [PWI] or grandparents and then parents and/or cousins, or whatever. Then you know if you're a majority white student that kind of fits the similar mold and then kind of everyone else... a bunch of different students... just because they had been here put their name in the year they started at [PWI] on sticky notes and some of those sticky notes were falling off because they just didn't stick too well to the wall. So it's interesting, you have this is 'so and so's Grandma' and these are all the different family tree relations, and then on the other side of the wall you just had a bunch of 'take it off the ground' so I think the timeline itself is kind of cool but maybe just as a metaphor of 'this is what's important to them.'”

Grace seemed to be saying that they felt they were excluded from the history of the school as those students whose parents attended the university were celebrated, while as a first generation student, the homecoming felt isolating and othering. Grace and other students added their names to the hallway 'wall of fame' among those who also did not have family legacy or history in the school (using sticky notes) as a way to feel more included, but many of the sticky notes did not stick to the wall and subsequently ended up on the floor. Grace this caused them to feel excluded

from the homecoming experience and different based on honoring those who had a multigenerational legacy in the institution.

Scholarships and institutional values and preferences for some students over others were also noted in feeling that intergenerational family history aligned with denominational history left some feeling isolated or left out of additional benefits, such as scholarships. Grace indicated the perception that students from the denominational affiliation as getting preferential treatment, citing, “If someone had a parent alumnus, which again is fairly common, but then like [denomination] missionaries, or like a pastor of the [denomination], so even that was kind of, you get this bigger scholarship if you’re from one of these.” The feeling that the denomination possibly provides a sense of connection for many majority students, but not to participants who identified as students of color, was highlighted in several of the interviews.

Elise shared about their experience of the faith history and culture on campus,

“I think the culture, the people here that like have the background in the [denomination], it’s definitely like, I don’t know how to describe it. It’s just like people that have that background in that’s all they know and that’s all they are willing to know, anything like word for it. I think that that’s all they really care about basically and then they like the classes here. They kind of like teach off of that and so it’s kind of hard for people that didn’t come from [denomination] background...I still don’t fully understand like what it is, but I’m trying to understand so that I can be more loving to the people that come from that background, but it’s only like the people that come from there, like they know each other and they talk to each other, and they only seem to be comfortable with each other... it can be a bit hard because the speakers that we have in chapel, they sometimes come from the [denomination] and so like that’s what they teach off of, and so I think like an outsider as just someone who’s trying to understand but doesn’t fully get it. I feel stupid for even asking questions like that or that kind of stuff.”

Jacelyn said that “I’ve grown, even though I disagree with a lot of theological things here. There are some things I agree with, but that’s beside the point.” Later, Jacelyn also noted, “Another thing I notice about [PWI] culture is a lot of people think that European Christian culture is the only way of Christian culture.”

Liam talked about the stress experienced in a theology class concerning faith expression, and that even the experience of talking about one's faith history or background can seem isolating or that "one is supposed to have things figured out already or understand the common language." Yet, the faculty member seemed supportive. Liam shared,

"I know in one class, I had to write my own testimony, and I kind of explained like, okay, I, like, I'm not a full Christian. I don't know that much. I don't think my testimony has been done or happened yet, and the teacher was like, very open about that.

### *Emergent Theme 3: Faculty and Staff*

One of the consistent themes presented by participants was the importance of caring faculty, staff, and administration participants came into contact with, though this was not always a consistently positive experience. When positive, engaging faculty and staff were noted as one of the most significant positive influences in supporting student sense of belonging.

Elise indicated that faculty relationships were a positive influence in their connections on campus, despite the perceived power imbalance. Elise said, "I think my relationship with faculty and staff has been pretty good. I definitely try to talk to staff and try to have a relationship with them, but it's harder for me because in my mind, they're an authoritative figure." Concerning faculty relationships, Elise also noted a particular faculty relationship was:

"a big influence in my life and helped me through a lot of the emotional stuff I was going through last year... They've been really nice to me ever since I first came here with just being involved in campus...I don't think I've had any negative experiences here. I think everyone has been so welcoming and very kind and loving. I don't think there has been a single time where I've thought like 'oh, this professor is not good, or this person is not a good person.'"

Elise also indicated that they were part of a campus-sponsored task force to support healthy campus culture, which was perceived as a very positive interaction between staff and students.

Elise noted,

“I was able to be part of a task force and it was just about like the school and like where we were going and that the next couple years, and it was a great way for me as a student to see like the leaders being vulnerable and understanding what students are going through and it was a great opportunity they gave me and another student... we were able to like not be afraid or like ashamed to say what the problems were with the university or like, lack thereof, and I think that was a great way to show leadership because it was them being vulnerable with the people they are trying to lead.”

Bob shared they felt more connected to faculty in their major, saying it was, “a different world within the [PWI], it was kind of a school within a school” in which they found greater sense of belonging and connection. Bob shared, “Dr. X and Prof. Y were really, really big and towards the end, I had really good conversation. Professor “Z” as well because I had questions about events we learned in history, and why White people didn’t want to talk about race.” Bob also said, “I was able to have good conversations where I was not afraid to be wrong and they weren’t afraid to be wrong and like that’s where I started to grow and see that I do belong.” Bob also shared, “I could laugh, cry, joke” but it “unfortunately” was not enough to persist as a student, sharing the feelings of being isolated and misunderstood on campus. Bob later noted, “thank you so much for doing this study, as well because, okay, because there’s research but not in this way, so it’s like you’re taking your time out and doing that.”

In discussing faculty interactions, Liam said,

“I noticed about a lot of faculty here, they’re very upbeat right? No matter if you’re having a down day, they’re always in a good mood, so it kind of puts a good vibe around the school and around the area I’ll say that. And, like my first couple of weeks here, I said ‘I came here by myself.’ No one knew who I was but here, faculty call you by your full name when you never introduced yourself.”

Liam continued, “they were always looking to help me do something. So, I noticed that if I need anything, I can definitely go to them and like talk to them.”

Thomas shared that despite not having “too many professors yet, since this is my first semester here,” that “everybody has been helpful to me” concerning faculty and staff. Notably, Thomas shared a personal connection with the [PWI] president, sharing that even “President X interacts with us.” Thomas noted,

“I’ve been to two previous schools before coming here and you barely see the president, so seeing him quite often, like seeing him in the cafeteria... he’ll actually stop, having a conversation with you. I’m seeing him in the gym, like he’s actually playing sometimes too! That’s cool...He said he was good back in the day. I know it’s a little different now, but you can tell he has a brain for the game.”

Similarly, Liam shared about the administration, “I know the President actually met my parents at a sports outing, so like he sat there and talked to them and made sure they were all right and made sure I was all right...that makes me feel safe and secure here.”

Leo shared about “Professor X” who has “been so nice. She checks up on me a lot and she invited me to her church... and sent me videos of the service. I really like, I’ve appreciated that!”

The personal approach of caring for students and student success was noted in particular as a benefit of being in a small faith-based institution. Cardi relayed appreciation for having genuine conversations with faculty, mentioning “Dr. X,” “Dr. Y,” and “Administrator A,” saying

“I love ‘Administrator A!’ I like that they’re so open to everybody, like, coming to their house or like having fun... they congratulated us and said how fun it was to watch us [athletics] and they’re happy we go to [PWI] and a lot of positive things. I appreciate that.”

Cardi additionally shared, “Dr. X’ has kind of gone above and beyond... he shows that he cares just about your well-being as a person. He checks on me mentally too as well. That’s a big aspect for me.” Similarly, Cardi indicated more about a professor of color on campus,



“I don’t know her name, which is ironic because I talked to her literally every time I’m here because she always asked if I’m okay? How’s my day going? And, like, what I’m doing, like I’m waiting for class or whatever. And then tell me ‘Have a good day.’ So, I appreciate that. I don’t even know her name but, yeah.”

Cardi additionally noted that “Administrator B” thoughtfully asking how they were doing, and even talking about race on campus. Cardi said, “I’m like maybe a black person at [PWI] they actually care about. I had a meeting with them too, as well to like, get my opinions on things.”

When less than positive, interactions were perceived not necessarily hurtful but simply not caring enough to create a more supportive environment or seeing each student as unique. In one instance, Grace said that they were repeatedly called the name of a similar-looking person of color, saying the other student “who looked not the same as me but looked similar, and we would always get mixed up, so people would always come up to me and think I was the other person and they probably did that to them as well.”

Edna described what they called, “black tax” that referred to having to work harder due to their minority status to belong and feel that they are accepted and an ideal student,

“They will still meet you with love the best way that they knew possible so my interactions with them, it wasn’t bad but also at the same time as an African-American student, I felt it’s a term called the ‘black tax.’ You feel like you have to compensate because you are a minority. Because you are black, so my experiences may be different than other minority students because I would always interact with professors, or try to get to know them, or work harder in their classrooms so that they saw that I was there and present. So I feel like that may have also played a role in how they responded to me.”

At another point, Grace shared a story of culturally insensitive humor in the classroom, which created a scenario and they felt that this humor was tolerated because of the long tenure of the professor and “would not have been acceptable if the professor had been female or a minority.” Grace noted,

“some of the jokes just fell a little bit off color and kind of not culturally appropriate, but it was kind of marked up acceptable because it was like ‘oh, that’s just who they are’ and there were kind of allowed to make them... I don’t know if anyone else could, like, get away with it or at least have it be okay to the degree that it was.”

Darius in talking about classroom experiences with faculty shared,

“So like saying that I got an assignment due for a class with any professor that’s not of color you, that professor you know would go into detail with the white student and tell him like, hey, this is what needs to be done, and then verse me, ‘Oh well, you should have been in class or you should have paid attention or something,’ like basically just pushing off the fact that I’m asking about something or inquiring about something or just curious to know more about the assignment.”

Describing the feeling of being placed more at arms-length than one’s dominant culture counterparts, Darius said, “I feel like the professor is somebody that should be able to help you, especially when it comes to schoolwork... that’s what I’m here for.” Cardi relayed a situation in class that caused them to feel different and that the professor could have used a different, less offensive example,

“I don’t think it was intentional. One time we were in class, and I think [they] were just trying to make jokes, like, no harm intended, but it would be like certain jokes back in the day like for example, people had like dreads. They started having dreads, that would be pictures of like more brown skinned person, and they’d be like ‘those are dirty, you’re not supposed to have dreads, dreads are gross.’ And then it was like, the next time we went to class, the professor had pictures of Barbie Dolls and... said this is how it should be in society...but the people who were colored, we kind of, we were sitting together, kind of like, what? And, then our other peers were laughing, like it was a joke, like it was funny to them, but it was kind of, caught me off guard.”

Leo shared an experience in a class where, “we were talking about culture and one student made this comment, that I guess hurt me and then like, the professor did nothing about it and just like laughed along and went along with it.” Leo then expanded on the specifics of the classroom interaction and concluded that, “I was the only person of color in that class, and it felt very awkward. And that just made me see the professor in a different light in that sense, even

though it probably wasn't the professor's fault." In clarifying the hurtful comment, Leo noted that the comment was made by a fellow student and not a faculty member, but the desire had been that the professor would object or intervene to speak into why this was hurtful or not funny instead of laughing along.

Thomas appreciated that faculty and staff reached out and appeared to desire genuine conversations with students, saying that [staff/faculty] should,

"talk to the students. Actually get ideas from students. It's cool to come up with ideas as a faculty of course. Of course that's great, but also to get opinions from students. Like the surveys, okay, that's not always going to work. I'd rather a faculty member came up to me directly and just ask me a question about this...I'll respond better, more, it is more genuine, and it shows you care rather than 'oh, you're taking the survey, just to fill this out. Anybody can do that just to get it done. When you're talking to a person, that's different."

Thomas also expressed appreciation for being invited to participate and for facilitating this study, sharing, "This is actually my first time doing anything like this, so I want to say thank you...I appreciate [you] wanting to know how we feel and what we do go through."

Similarly, Liam who shared many positive interactions with faculty, staff, and administration also relayed an incident involving student discipline, and felt that through this interaction, they were treated fairly and shown grace. They did not go into further detail and said, "I don't want to speak too much on what happened, but" and then alluded to something that required community life intervention due to a lifestyle infraction. Liam indicated that, "they didn't take it lightly, but at the same time realized like everybody makes mistakes" and said that "was definitely a turning point, where like, okay, even if I do something wrong, I'm not going to be looked at as like, 'oh yeah, they're just a trouble-maker."

Leo shared, “the reason why I personally don’t like [PWI] as much is because of the students, not the faculty or like leadership. I feel like that to me, they [faculty/staff] do an amazing job and you cannot change students, so I don’t know.”

Liam said that “being an athlete, like you kind of have that on your back anyway, like the label overhead of ‘they’re only here to play sports’ or ‘they’re kind of troublemakers.’ Those people are not to be around” but noted “I may have committed some bad acts, but that doesn’t define who I am or why I’m here.”

Bob in talking through the transfer to a larger public institution, shared,

“Before you leave [PWI], you have an exit interview. Administrators asked me the same question you asked me about what should we do? I was mad at the question. I think when the person first asked me, I was angry because I’m like, ‘you don’t know? What the heck?’ You don’t know? You actually don’t know? What’s going on? What’s your problem? Like, you don’t have the self-awareness to see that there’s a problem? And that’s what... I had a problem.”

Among the participants, the acknowledgment that genuine conversations were beneficial and that this study was being conducted indicated a step in the right direction to creating positive sense of belonging and creating a safe space for genuine dialogue on campus.

### ***Research Question 2***

Research Question 2 asked: How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention? The themes that emerged are represented as “connection and belonging,” “representation,” and an ability to have “crucial conversations and support.”

### ***Emergent Theme 4: Connection and Belonging***

The concept of belonging addresses the feeling that the student perceives “social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling

cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). Grace shared their experience of belonging and feeling connected through friendships on campus, citing, “I think the important part for me were the friends I had. So, I could easily see how it would be different based on what fun groups people had. With the friends I had, I think that made a big difference.”

Elise similarly also highlighted the friendships they made in college,

“I honestly have never felt like I belonged like anywhere else, and I think the university has done a great job at like making sure everyone feels included and making sure everyone has a place here. I’ve never felt like I didn’t have a place here, and I think they do try to make sure that everyone knows that they are welcomed here, and I do appreciate that about them. Like the events that we have here. It’s not just like for one group or the other, it’s for everyone unless they do like men and women separate outings, then that’s different...I just love the community I have here, and I love the people that I’m friends with here and I love that I’ve always felt welcomed here.”

Elise also shared the role of student leadership on campus that helped to build camaraderie and deepen friendships and leadership skills:

“I think with the student leadership, it’s been great my two years here. I think the students have done a good job of like helping students get more involved in events and getting people to come out of their comfort zone and just do stuff that they normally wouldn’t do. I have loved being able to see like my friend be put in a position where they get to lead the other students. I’ve been put in a position now where I’m leading people with my job so that’s been great to see myself even have to be in a position of having to like delegate...that’s been great to see keeping myself growing.”

Elise shared that some of the cultural events have been positively received to recognize other cultures on campus, build shared understanding between leadership and students, and also as a strategy for student body growth. Elise affirmed that,

I would try to do more culturally accepting events just like we’ve had a cultural potluck before and that was really fun and cool to see like what other people from different cultures like to eat, what they like to drink, and I think if we did more things like that, then a lot of people would be more forthcoming about talking like natural issues in the world. Where we can be able to speak freely and like not being afraid to speak freely. I

think just letting leaders like be vulnerable and like also students not like dehumanizing the leaders and just seeing them from that leadership standpoint and just like being able to see them as a human and understanding like humans make mistakes and so I think both parties being vulnerable with each other and then having those culturally-sensitive events that would help our university grow more. That would be a goal to keep growing.”

As the university underwent a name change and went from ‘college’ to ‘university’ status, there were questions about the identity of the campus and how this would impact institutional culture. Grace indicated that, “I remember when (the name) was changed and I remember that friends were talking about how we came back that fall and it just kind of felt disingenuous.” They indicated that some of the unaddressed challenges they hoped would be approached with a plan for growth, greater diversity, and different attitudes, noting that, “university status that didn’t match with our current experience, so I think there was some marketing and some other things that really tried to promote it as a big university, and it just felt disingenuous.”

When talking about feeling connected and describing connectedness and sense of belonging, Darius shared,

“No, I didn’t really feel that I belonged, and then you know, going into the cafeteria, going into Chapel, you know, like I’m the minority so you kind of feel the vibe like you’re being watched or you’re not welcome somewhere.”

When asked for more clarification, Darius additionally stated,

“I feel like that’s really not going to happen because I’m one of the probably eight black students that’s on campus, so belonging, I would say I’m not like one of the them. So it’s kind of like you know it would never be like that because, you know, the color of my skin.”

The experience of being alone and away from home for the first time was also potentially lonely and the opportunity to engage on campus could also be a respite from previous home life challenges. Darius relayed,

“I knew two people before I came here because they had the reason I came to [PWI] and found out about [PWI] because they played basketball here. You know, they put in some connections for me outside of those two people, no friends, no family, and you know you’re basically starting from scratch so mentally like at the end of my first year here you know, you considered a Freshman. I have to enter at the end of my freshman year. I had to make a choice whether I was going to go or stay. And I was just like, you know, nothing is waiting for me back home, so I rather might as well stay and make some connections here.”

Liam said that factors beyond school alone were also challenging in adjusting to campus culture, stating that,

“Home life comes into play with education, so stuff got hard at home and then I started getting behind at school, and then you have this standard to live up to, especially at this school, so that’s how I felt. And, I just feel that I didn’t belong at one point. At least in my head, it made me feel like, ‘Oh yeah, I had to be a Christian. I have to know all these things about like Christianity, and the history of it, while keeping up with my major itself and having to pick, which one is more important because I have to pass and then on top of that, I have to still play sports, or having to keep up that certain GPA and that expectation for that, realizing that I represent a whole school, so they’re all kind of like pushed how I felt out the window.”

Jacelyn in speaking of connection and belonging, noted, “I would reach out to a lot of minority students who just come here to take their classes and that’s it. They don’t get involved because they don’t feel like it’s their place to be involved.” And in sharing what could potentially be different shared,

“I would have more classes like elective classes, even just on the history that a lot of minorities have faced, because a lot of people here are very ignorant of stuff like that... I would make it a point to celebrate things like black history month, Asian, whatever, but a lot of things would be cultural.”

Thomas shared connection and belonging specifically to being an ‘athlete status’ that went beyond simply campus culture, almost a culture within a culture that created belonging within and outside the campus culture. This also created different types of challenges outside of sports and on campus and inside the classroom. Thomas shared,

“We are more than just athletes. I definitely think that should be said, as well as more than ‘just athletes’ because I think that’s another thing. If you’re a person of color: ‘why are you here?’ So yeah, I learned that too, that our whole group is like athletes and we’re people of color. So it’s like we’re all here for the same thing, so that’s kind of what we bonded over and we don’t really bond over the classroom type things. So that’s what makes us be by ourselves when everybody does have classes together and things like that. But they kind of put us in a group and just assume automatically we are like associated with each other all the time, which I mean is true, but they don’t know that, they just assume that.”

Edna also further described challenges with other students in seeking belonging and community on campus. They described,

My interactions with students were all across the board. I’ve had so many interactions that somehow have been good or worse than others. I remember being in a class and it was just my friends and I, and another student. So it was three black students and one other (white) student in the class waiting for class to start. Jokingly, the Caucasian student said, ‘oh look at me. I’m the minority now in the class.’ You could take that as a joke, but it was very, I would say racially insensitive to say something like that because you don’t truly know what a minority feels like, and that may have been his attempt of breaking the ice, and I get that, but it was just very naïve and like I said, insensitive to hear a comment like that. Or, I’ve had times where I would constantly get talked over as a freshman or sophomore in certain spaces, and I didn’t feel like my voice was heard, or you would try to express to your Caucasian friends how you feel, and they don’t always understand it. Because many people think that racial inequality just doesn’t exist, that it’s not real. So when you come to them and talk to them and try to express yourself, and then you don’t get the response that you want, you kind of shut yourself out from that, and along the way, I just learned how to not fully give myself to all the students, and I feel that’s the same for many of the black students on campus. You don’t feel like you can be authentically yourself and accepted all the time.”

Cardi in talking about being a student athlete remarked, “I mean because with [sport], we’re always with each other all the time like trips, especially even with let’s say the men’s team



or something and it's more people of color. We still kind of gravitate towards them more and we're with each other a lot, so we don't really know anything different but each other." Jacelyn also affirmed near the end of our interview, "I love my school, despite all the things that I don't like about it. I do love my school because I think you should take pride in the school that you attend."

### *Emergent Theme 5: Representation*

The question of both faculty and staff representation arose among all participants (n = 9) independently as a factor for consideration. Having a diverse workforce that represents the makeup of the (more diverse) student body helps convey a shared sense of belonging, understanding, and support.

Darius reported,

"I would invite different churches, and invite Hispanics, Blacks, and any other cultures out there to come in and speak at the school and set up like, if they have a business or even had never heard about our school, I would invite them to campus. I would also hire more Black staff as well, hire more diverse staff. You actually have someone older or another figure of color who can understand any situation. Even being the same color, you might not understand everything, but it just feels good to have somebody you can go to."

Cardi shared,

"The only lady who does talk to me, checks up on me is another person who's African-American and it's just kind of comfortable for us because we, there's not a lot of us here already, so just to have, like, a teacher or some faculty members that we feel like we can go to in case some situations happen, or just on a comfortableness level, I feel like should be there for us."

In speaking of representation, Thomas noted that, "There's a certain level of comfort, obviously, you're talking to a person that now is the same color as you, so they can relate a little bit, you know, regardless of age difference, they could really just, because you know." Thomas also said, "I wouldn't just hire you because you're African-American. You know, I wouldn't want you to

not have like the same [qualifications], and if you happen to be African-American too, that's a bonus."

Thomas also shared, "there is a professor who's African-American. I cannot tell you her name, but oh yeah, every time I see her she speaks to me. She always has a smile on her face too. She stands as well and asks me if I'm okay. She's always welcoming. That's a big thing to me."

Similarly, Grace shared that, "most professors are white males" and further observed,

"I mean this respectfully, but sometimes our board is mostly white males from [denomination]. I wonder how much of it they really see or understand, so again, I think we would encourage them just to listen and be willing to hear some hard stories and hard feedback. I think it's hard to make policies that are beneficial to everyone if they're primarily hearing from or basing the policies based off of that kind of "model [denomination] student." I also think having a clear kind of leadership approach when one [AA professor] professor, after the event would have been beneficial to say you know that [PWI] doesn't tolerate that kind of racism or just those behaviors."

Elise noted that while very pleased overall with their experience at the university, still noted the importance of greater student and staff representation,

"Places will have a diverse community, or like a diverse lineup of staff, but then they don't have a diverse way of thinking and so they all just kind of think the same, and they all go along the same guidelines and I think that when you have a diverse lineup for staff, it should be like actually diverse and not everyone should think the same because if you think the same, then nothing's going to really change... they should try to have more diverse people in the classrooms. I definitely want to see that more coming from a person of color."

Liam reported that,

"even if you don't see that many people of color, just looking out into the school. So, I feel like once you start getting a couple more on campus, then maybe it'll be like, okay yeah. And, they start to add a little bit of diversity, a little bit of color here might attract more people of color... people on the outside can see that we're at least trying to influence people of color to come here too."

Liam said regarding representation in particular,

"Representation, I mean I would say that a lot of folks from the stuff like doesn't care what color you are. But as far as representation, I see like one or two black faculty

members, so I feel like even that part, like, that'll show a lot more, like, we have more people of color teaching us, or being the head of something will help us more personally. I haven't seen that many, like one or two... It would definitely help if you have more people of color teaching people of color. I feel like you have a better connection between the teacher and the student that might make them want to learn more and learn better as well because there'll be somebody who comes from the same stuff they do, so they may want to listen just a little bit more because of that [role model]."

Edna disclosed they were even being tempted to leave the university, but leaned on their faith to help persevere, noting that,

"I was definitely tempted to leave because I wanted to be in a space where I could see more people that looked like me and who understood me more, listen to the same music that I did, or would get my jokes and I would get their jokes and in their culture. At the end of the day, it's culture... I did not leave because I knew God placed me here and at the end of the day, I did not want my flesh to get in the way of his plans for me, so that is why I stayed... I know that if I couldn't get through here and graduate from here, the same energy could have perpetuated in my life and other areas."

In discussing the second research question, "*How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*" Edna immediately responded, "Representation, representation. That's what it is! Representation is so important." When asked to clarify and expand on whether this existed at the PWI, Edna responded,

"No, no, no, no! Not at all, and being taught by people that look like you or seeing people in jobs that you wanna be, so a little kid looking at a black fireman, that's important because of representation, 'I can do that too!' So that's the same sentiment as somebody in higher education. I want to see more people that look like me or the other students. We have Asian students, we have Hispanic students here. Representation in these spaces is so important to our higher educational career because many people are going to school for the first time and we don't always have people to walk us through what it was like, because they've never been through it themselves. Being a first generation college graduate, I did not have anyone in my family I could really talk to that understood what I was going through in my immediate family. Yeah, that was tough."

Similarly Bob shared interest in having an on-campus group supporting students of color, but said this would not happen as it was perceived as divisive, and experienced resistance from both students and administration in suggesting such a group, saying,

“When black students want to start a group, then white students are like ‘I want to start an all-white only group’ and people retaliate against the students of color and tell us “Why do you want to start a group with students of color? That’s not Christian, like we are all one in Christ.”

Bob expanded, saying that they were not denying the shared faith and spiritually being “one in Christ” but, “We need each other to rely on each other and to make sure we do not feel alone because being a minority in a predominately white space, not only are you treated differently, it’s subconscious but you are looked at differently.”

In regard to representation, Leo shared the goal should be, “a good balance because it will not feel as diverse if it was just the students and not the faculty because people, students look up to their faculty and if you don’t – people are more comfortable with people that look like them I guess.” At the same time, Leo also shared considerable concerns about greater representation and the PWI hiring more diverse faculty members. Leo stated,

“it would be nice to have a more diverse faculty but the students here are not used to diversity. So, if you have diverse professors, I don’t think the students here would be open to that at all. I feel like that gives us a very, very small number of diverse people here and then there’s the majority of, I don’t know what the correct term is, but just white people.”

Jacelyn also questioned whether faculty and staff of color would *want* to work at the [PWI] noting the importance for more representation, “in chapels, classes, authors, from professors of color, but obviously they have to want to work here.” When asked if this is a place professors of color would want to work and could make a difference, Jacelyn responded, “probably not, just

from what I've seen with previous professors of color and what I observe with professors of color here already." When asked to share more, Jacelyn responded,

"Okay, to be a professor of color in a space where it's predominately White, a lot of the students don't respond well when you try to advocate for them coming out of their 'shells' of White homeschool, like, whatever it is. European Christian culture I've seen, and I don't necessarily know how well it goes like with other professors because I'm not on that level. I will say just being in a leadership position, I was the only student of color and every other [leader] was White. This was hard for me in times where I remember we had a Black student who was a male and one of the RA's said in our meeting, they brought up that one of the students here felt threatened by this particular student. Then the other RA's jumped on that same bandwagon of like, 'yeah, I don't know how I feel about this student.' And, I just shot that down because I'm kind of really over the whole 'feeling threatened by an African-American male who's just minding his own business' drama. So, it kind of can be a lot of weight to have to be the advocate, and we shouldn't have to be if that makes sense?"

Bob specifically referenced the importance of representation relaying,

"Oh my goodness! Representation, representation, representation. It's really important. I talked to Professor "X", well, 'she's Black, She's Black, she's Black! She will make sure I'm like, okay. Having Professor "X", she wasn't my professor. I like her, like, my hair can do that?! You know? Like, the little things, like, that don't seem like a big deal to most people. [But, it's] very important because we all value different things so having the professor that looks like you is so inspiring. Like [Professor X] getting her PhD. I'm very impressed girl. We're going to graduate! Oh my goodness, like, it's extremely inspiring cause, like, I can only imagine the obstacles that person has had to go through... and climbed like, we're resilient and, like, we can talk and have a conversation. You can tell me your experience. I can feel inspired."

Bob also noted by name other professors of color, citing,

"you want to hire quality faculty like, Professor "X", you know, like her perspective is very important, you know, who talked about immigration and stuff." Yeah...I had Professor "X" and "Dr. X." Okay, I've had a couple of Black professors."

### *Emergent Theme 6: Crucial Conversations and Support*

Fostering critical thinking and engaging in crucial conversations was highlighted among all of the participants (n = 9) as important towards feeling a greater sense of belonging and psychological safety, or when absent to the lack of a sense of belonging and psychological

safety. For example, Grace expressed learning through critical discussion in one of their classes, “I know we talked about pay gaps, women in politics, and some of the current issues of the time, and you know, applying a biblical worldview and faith, but also having some of these real conversations.”

Concerning ongoing conversations on important “crucial conversations” and sensitive topics, students consistently reported reticence among faculty and leadership of the PWI to address issues around race, cultural ‘hot button’ topics and those issues that could be perceived as controversial.

Darius shared,

“I feel like it’s been going in one ear and out the other. Expressing like any concern or you know, just anything regarding the minority of black students. You know, the sense of belonging and stuff like that, so I feel that it is at a standstill right now, like man, nothing is being, like it’s still for the same way it did fall semester and prior, so I just feel like from a psychological standpoint it’s not really like [PWI] should be.”

Darius continued when talking about engaging in tough topics on campus and psychological safety,

“It all depends on what’s being talked about and it’s like the intense level of the topic so if we’re talking about something serious, I feel like it’s not a safe space because if you share your views as a student of color, it may be looked down upon or you know, open space to start our argument or try to disagree, but it’s all in that it is an opinion.”

And concerning recommendations for leaning into difficult conversations, Darius stated,

“but my main message for the leaders and the people in power is: Listen to the students. Just listen to the students. Maybe not good or bad, maybe something you are not trying to hear. If you listen to the students, you will find out a lot.”

Bob, an immigrant, noted that discussions on race and immigration often felt stifled, and felt like an outsider from majority students *and* other students of color on account of their immigrant status, saying,

“I also feel alienated and did not know also how to approach the other African-American students who were on campus, and didn’t want to assume that we’re having the same experience, so I had few friends who were students of color.”

Bob later shared,

“I remember [administration] saying, ‘we’ll have a plan for next fall.’ And I’m like, what’s the plan right now? Though like, I hear you right? Yeah, we do have a plan for next fall, and that’s great. Oh my goodness, great leadership, but because there’s a fire going on right? Like, there’s a fire. How are you going to put it out? One side is feeling like, oh wow, we’re regaining our power, reclaiming our school, blah, blah, blah, but what’s now, like, we are being left behind, you know, what I mean? Like, we don’t feel like anything’s happening. We are the ‘heart,’... They kept saying ‘we have a plan this next fall though we’re implementing the plan next fall.’”

Bob concluded with, “People who have the privilege are very blind to those who don’t.”

Edna shared in reference to psychological safety that,

“You have to be able to see color. You have to be able to see people. You have to start there. You have to see us, because it was what we were talking about with the ‘white noise’... ‘oh, I don’t see color, we’re all one in Christ.’ And it’s not just being on a predominantly white Christian campus because now you have Scripture involved and everything like that. We’re all one in the body of Christ and so and so, and that is just very culturally insensitive with everything people go through. You can’t just say that like it’s a clean slate. You can’t just hide behind Christianity and think that it’s going to resolve the issue... You can keep saying that, but there are some people in the family that feel like black sheep and are you not going to acknowledge the issue? I think it takes being intentional about who is allowed to be staff and faculty on campus, and for the people who are here on campus to want to be in those uncomfortable conversations. Know that when we talk about diversity, that we automatically don’t want to ‘white guilt’ or ‘white shame’ people... That’s not it at all. We just want to be understood for who we are and where we’re at.”

Elise echoed the comments of other students in acknowledging the difficulties with having genuine difficult conversations with others on campus, especially surrounding topics like race, ethnicity, poverty, and other ‘hot button’ topics, citing,

“I feel like a lot of people here don’t really like to talk about important things here, because of that aspect or problem. I think people are afraid of being uncomfortable and so they don’t want to go to those places where they have to be uncomfortable in order to hear the other person. I do think that the university tries to make spaces for those topics to be talked about, but I think the students come to those situations with not really an open mind and open heart. They come there like with what they have to say and they only want

people to hear like what they are experiencing. What is going on, like, they don't want to hear what the other people are going through, so you think that the university tries to have those conversations, but the students here don't always come as welcoming for those."

In sharing their perceptions of controversial topics that were problematic, especially for students, Elise shared,

"racism, the LGBTQ community, like people will talk about that but they won't really talk about, but with more hate than anything. I would also say sexism a little bit just because there have been issues here where they will put men on a pedestal and then like the women are just there. I definitely think those three topics have been a bigger problem here than any other place I have gone to, and the opportunity to talk about those things and have like actually fruitful conversations have been less."

Cardi in speaking to the topic of psychological safety and being able to disagree or present an alternative viewpoint expressed a basic openness to sharing different perspectives; however, also felt that their opinions and views would not be acknowledged as valid or acted upon,

"It's safe, but I know like when to know my choice of words... I think more so to talk about things that relate to me, not to other people so they might not, like, understand or ask questions that can come off as, like 'don't want to say ignorant in a sense' but like, that's showing me how you think. But it's not intentional; it's just kind of... they don't really know how to use their choice of words too, but I don't take it personally, so you have that temptation to maybe push back a little bit and just educate. Yeah, you get that urge, but then again who really wants to listen to it?"

Thomas said,

"It's just a feeling. If it's a 'black and white situation' then it's just better to be quiet, stay to myself rather than speak about it, just to avoid any other conflicts. That's why I mean it's 'safe, but it's not the safest... It's not about talking, it's about are you actually going to listen and or even try to understand what I'm telling you? That's like where you have to like, things change. Will you apply what I am saying? Will you actually, oh wait, actually analyze what I'm saying?"

Similarly, Bob echoed that conversations which were problematic included,

"the LGBTQ community and abortion, [as] big, big dividing things right and like regardless of your skin color, like if you said anything contrary to what the Bible teachers



or the Bible classes, or you know like if you had a different opinion... I thought that for example abortion, right? I was like, 'it's not a black and white situation, like the problem is there's a lot that goes into it, right? Like there's the foster care system, there's when rape occurs, there's a lot of things that goes into it. If you know, I bring another angle, I was even afraid to voice my opinion because I was like going to get stoned. I was talking about race in class and I was talking about my experiences and most people... you look around and you see are not interested in it and I had to understand that they might not be interested because they don't go through it, so you kind of have to like, I understand that part, but it also hurt me because I'm like, okay, as a person of color, I go through these issues and I'm willing to share because it's really... (tearful). I'm tired. I'm, I'm just getting so angry cause I'm reliving it... It's really tough because I'm being vulnerable right? I am so angry about the letter situation. I'm sorry."

Several participants reported an incident that they perceived as racially motivated that resulted in a former professor of color, following an on-campus incident involving controversial 'hot button' topics (i.e., racism) being discussed on campus. This appeared to be a significant inflection point among several participants, who voiced this event specifically.

Grace noted,

"I think with the incident earlier this year with one of our faculty leaving... I was kind of waiting for the school to come out with a statement. I know they had mentioned that they were going to have discussions and how discussions were very important, and they wanted to make sure everyone had a chance to talk and have a conversation, which I think is good. I think that's important. But I kept waiting for the school to come out with the statement saying that they don't condone racism or bullying or just some of those behaviors at whatever level. Even a broad statement saying 'we don't condone or approve or want racism or hostility' but there was a lot of talk about how 'everyone is wanting Christ,' which is also true and you know we'll have these conversations and that was all good, but there wasn't a strong statement about 'this is the school's position on bullying behaviors and violence and race-targeted events' like I kept thinking it was going to come and it never did. So, I think that left me wondering, well then, what is the position if something big is going to happen? And maybe there isn't one. Maybe there is but it will never be clear. I think it started off great by saying, 'let's have a conversation' and then instead of using the conversation to come to a resolution, it was 'we're just going to talk about it until people forget' and there was no statement of 'this is what as an institution we believe and these are our values as far as racism and race and gender and all of that.'"

Grace again shared,

“I don’t know that the university supported [professor] or the leadership supported [professor]. Maybe they did and I just wasn’t aware of it? I know there’s a lot of talk around racism just in general, whether or not that’s what the incident was. I think the incident brought up a lot of questions on racism and race and gender and all that. I don’t think the leadership really were committed to listening, but then they listened and didn’t seem to follow up. They said, “oh, we’re going to listen to everyone but I don’t know who they listened to and when they did, there was no follow up of, ‘these are your concerns, we heard them, and here’s our plan.’ It was sort of, there was no statement on ‘this is what we believe’ or ‘this is where we want our organization to go... I don’t know how much of it started except that other students really pushed and said we want to have these conversations... It felt like the board and leadership took a ‘hands off’ approach rather than kind of setting good standards of just how we treat others.”

Bob advised administrators to,

“not be afraid to be wrong. That’s a big thing, like, that’s what I’ve noticed, oh the fear of saying the wrong thing doesn’t take us anywhere because doing the wrong thing because as you maneuver through, like, a new experience, obviously, you’re going to mess up right? But, that’s just room for growth, that’s just room for finding out new things, that’s just room for you to like, you know, ‘leaning into the discomfort’ that’s just opportunities to connect and build community.”

Bob also shared recommendations for educational leadership, “Respectful conversation, where people come together without feeling like ‘I already know the answer.’ I’m just doing this as a courtesy. I get paid so it is my job.” In regard having crucial conversations, Bob stated,

“I can be like, okay, let’s just have small groups right in chapel Thursdays. We have this small groups where we sing kumbaya, talk about the goodness of the Lord, right? We don’t talk about, which is good to talk about. Don’t get me wrong. ‘God is good all the time, amen!’ But, it’s also good to, you know, look at what’s real, what’s going on, like, not just for students of color per se, [but] for everyone because we’re all going through, like, heavy crap.”

Jacelyn similarly shared,

“I’m not scared to talk but I would say as far as being open space, [PWI] is not an open space. I’m gonna talk about them either way because I don’t care, but not every student is like that. Some students generally need to know they have a safe place to express themselves before opening up because not everybody is as open as I am. Even just looking back on incidents that we’ve had regarding race and culture here, and the amount of pushback that we got from students that don’t come from that struggle, that spoke from the place of their White privilege. Yeah, that’s all I have to say about that.”

Summary

The preceding chapter provided a review of this narrative inquiry qualitative study, which sought to understand the lived experiences of students of color and former students of color in a faith-based PWI. The study included nine (n = 9) participants. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, data was collected and analyzed to understand the research questions. From these research questions and the exploratory ancillary questions (Appendix B: Interview Protocol), primary and secondary coding developed six major themes, outlined in this chapter. The six themes identified were: 1) feeling different, 2) faith and history, 3) caring faculty and staff, 4) connection and belonging, 5) representation, and 6) crucial conversations and support. Findings suggest that participants were significantly emotionally attached to the faith-based PWI, both positively and at times negatively, citing reasons that were at times individual perceptions on feeling different and whether one belonged as an individual or in terms of group identity, and proposed recommendations for creating a healthier, more inclusive campus culture.

## Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

### Summary of the Study

#### Overview of the Problem

A substantial body of research documents that students of color continue to earn bachelor's degrees at a significantly lower rate than majority Caucasian peers (NCES, 2022). According to Reyes and Case (2011), minority graduate rates are also lower at Christian universities (18.8%) when compared to secular universities (30%). The racial and ethnic gaps continue to widen at the graduate level, with students of color earning proportionally fewer advanced degrees (NCES, 2022). There are multiple studies affirming a gap between educational outcomes and sense of belonging among students of color at PWIs (Romero & Liou, 2023; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Suarez et al., 2022; Thomas, 2019). Students of color who attend PWIs graduate at a lower rate than their majority-culture peers and are less likely to report feeling a significant sense of belonging or emotional attachment to the institution (Strayhorn, 2019).

#### Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative *narrative inquiry case study* was to understand the lived experiences of students of color and former students of color at a faith-based PWI and inform policy on retention and student success.

This researcher sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) *How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?***

*(2) How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*

## **Review of Methodology**

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology for understanding participant experiences, understanding evidence clearly and directly (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry assumes there are two modes of thought: the traditional logical and the experiential narrative, the latter of which draws upon deep subjective meaning (Bruner, 1986). Narrative inquiry was chosen for this study in order to allow for an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of students of color and former students of color at the faith-based PWI.

The study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews for data collection. Nine students (or former students) of color who attended the identified faith-based PWI were selected using convenience sampling and invited to participate. The faith-based PWI is both nationally accredited and regionally accredited, offering on-campus and online degree programs. All participants attended classes on-campus. Participants were identified by self-chosen pseudonyms and represented a diverse range of majors and extracurricular activities; however, their genders were not identified to further protect anonymity given the smaller size of the faith-based PWI. Similarly, gender neutral language was used in retelling the lived experiences of participants.

Data analysis included multiple coding cycles using a combination of descriptive qualifiers, highlighting attitudes, emotions, and motivations present in each person's story prior to considering patterns across narratives. Final coding allowed for reflection on the broader social constructs, which analyzed data through the analytical tools of broadening, burrowing,

storying, and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Codes were placed into logical categories and themes as they provided insight into the research questions.

## **Major Findings**

Six major themes were identified from the participants' stories, reflecting on their experiences as students (or former students) of the identified faith-based PWI. Themes were identified as follows: feeling different, faith and history, caring faculty and staff, connection and belonging, representation, and crucial conversations and support. In response to the first research question, *How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI?*, each participant's responses were understood through an understanding of Rogers' (1959) definition of self-concept. Rogers (1959) theorized that self-image, self-esteem, and one's ideal self were all essential components of self-concept. Participant descriptions in response to the research questions were deemed trustworthy and representative of lived experiences of participants themselves.

Regarding the second research question, *How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting a sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*, findings were mixed on each participant's perceived sense of belonging, psychological safety, and whether to persist in higher education at the faith-based PWI. Data were analyzed and interpreted through the lens of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which assumed that psychological needs (i.e. belonging, love, friendship) become a lens from which humans can flourish and experience motivation to learn and grow. Similarly, Strayhorn (2019, 2023) posited that perceived sense of belonging becomes a strong predictor of academic success and students finding tremendous value in the life and culture of the educational institution among students of color at PWIs. Edmondson (2019) similarly

theorized that psychological safety provides the structure and atmosphere for members of an institution (i.e., campus) to feel free to discuss potentially difficult topics without fear of reprisal and an openness to new ideas, innovation, and growth. Livermore (2022) has suggested that sense of belonging and psychological safety are both strong factors for healthy environments where learning and growth can flourish.

## **Discussion of Findings**

According to the previous literature, students of color often face challenges in academic success in PWIs and graduate at lower levels than their white peers (Kim & Maloney, 2020; Lynn & Dixson, 2022; Strayhorn, 2019, 2023). All participants in the study identified the unique challenges of being a student of color in the faith-based PWI, affirming consistency with the published research on potential barriers for students of color in PWIs in general. The feeling of being different was noted by all participants (n = 9) as well as the importance of representation, perceived as missing at the faith-based PWI (n = 9). Feeling different was identified by multiple factors including racial identity, in addition to immigration status, athlete or non-athlete status, and at times degree major (and often feeling connected to faculty). All the participants noted the positive connection with at least one faculty or staff member who had reached out or made an effort to connect. This was also true with one participant who discontinued their studies at the faith-based PWI and transferred to a state university. There is evidence to suggest that strategies that support all students will subsequently also support student success among students of color at PWIs (McGee, 2015; McDougal et al., 2018; Selingo, 2013; Shyne, 2021). However, because students of color face additional environmental stressors that often leads to greater inequities, additional supports may be necessary to support students of color in PWIs in particular (McNair et al, 2022; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). Recommendations

could include specific initiatives to support students of color that go beyond simply measures to support all students in a general sense, given the identified perceived barriers to feeling different at the faith-based PWI and perception that one is able to speak as a valuable stakeholder in the health of the institution and know that one's feedback will be taken seriously and seriously considered.

### ***Findings Related to Sense of Belonging and Psychological Safety***

Sense of belonging and psychological safety acknowledge that experiencing belonging and psychological safety is highly subjective and contextual (Edmondson, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). While sense of belonging is based on specific context and factors generally outside the student's control, there were factors that helped to mitigate feelings of isolation or loneliness, including but not limited to faith and being able to draw strength from God. Faith or religiosity has been identified as a factor in overall college student well-being, but few studies have specifically sought to understand sense of belonging at a faith-based university (Ryan et al., 2024). Several participants (n = 7) reported that they had grown in their faith and despite coming from a different theological denominational affiliation than the faith-based PWI, they still felt a sense of connection with God on campus or experienced spiritual growth. While every participant (n = 9) reported feeling different as a person of color at the faith-based PWI, all also reported positive experiences with peers or supportive faculty and staff.

Concerning psychological safety, the feeling that certain topics were off limits or that diverse perspectives would be represented was limited. Regarding topics such as theological perspectives, the idea that different theological perspectives in addition to the denominational distinctives of the faith-based PWI was generally presented by religion faculty respectfully. The belief that diverse ideas and perspectives were allowed in conversation was consistent among the



participants when it came to theological discussion. The expression of faith, such as during on-campus activities and required chapels, often differed in style from what participants were used to or preferred where students also felt different.

The challenge of psychological safety came more around ‘hot button’ topics such as social justice issues, race and ethnicity, immigration, and abortion. It was often assumed that there was simply one “right” answer and room for divergent perspectives was not given equal time or value. This was especially noted more so from other students (i.e., sheltered or homeschooled students who had not been exposed to diversity) and not necessarily to faculty or staff directly. Several participants reported that they do not speak up in classes or on campus because they felt their perspectives would not be fully accepted or acknowledged, especially by their majority culture peers.

In creating a campus culture where all students felt valued and affirmed, the belief that caring faculty, staff, and administrators was consistent with only a couple of exceptions noted. When possible, educational leaders should be aware of comments that might be perceived as insensitive. Being a single student of color in a classroom creates undue pressure on students to speak up and present an alternate view or speak regarding race or different life experiences, especially when they have not built trusting relationships with peers, or have had negative interactions in response to ‘hot button’ topics. As was stated by several participants, they chose to stay silent.

While administration was perceived as generally positive and supportive of students of color at the faith-based PWI, there was also a concern noted involving the departure of a faculty of color and the administration’s perceived support and communication of this incident to students. All participants (n = 9) reported a desire for greater representation and that while there

are increasing students representing diversity on campus, the faculty, staff, and administration was perceived as lacking people of color on the faculty and staff, and the administration. This was reported as a negative factor that directly influenced sense of belonging and psychological safety.

### ***Findings Related to Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality***

Critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality in particular (Crenshaw, 1989) helps identify where multiple facets of a person's identity intersect to create deep meaning and value. Perceived feelings of belonging to a particular group were identified based on gender identity, whether the participant was an athlete or not, whether one was native-born or an immigrant, and whether one lived on campus or was a commuter. Faith in God and worship style was also a factor in feeling connected or how one experienced being at the faith-based PWI. The feelings of being connected were often complex and multifaceted based on the self-identified criteria in which participants described their experiences as a student of color at faith-based PWI.

CRT initially developed as a legal theory in the United States to acknowledge the multifaceted experience of racial identity (including belonging and psychological safety) in the "experience of racial oppression within the normative standards of whiteness" (Kim, 2016, p. 42). CRT has been applied to the field of higher education as helpful to understanding the lived experiences of students in regard to racial identity, gender, socioeconomic status, and class, and acknowledging systems of power in higher education and the lack of representation of people of color among faculty and administrative roles within higher education (Lynn & Dixon, 2022; Mitchell Jr, Marie, & Steele, 2019). Educational outcomes in CRT and critical theory in particular often challenges the tacit notion that success or failure is based primarily on the individual student (i.e., "one's success or failure is solely one's responsibility"), creating systems

for understanding student success that goes beyond simply performing according to preconceived notions of what constitutes success. American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1959, cited in Kim, 2016) posited that schools had the vested interest to promote “social order and stability” (p. 37). This meant that social stratification was both acceptable and that differences in achievement were not only expected but acceptable and fair, thereby invalidating and minimizing frustration and resentment among the educational “losers” based on their own positive or negative performance (Kim, 2016). To label students who are not performing, struggling, or simply not fully integrating into campus norms as ‘deviant’ or ‘deficient’ misses the point and simply places potential students’ negative perceptions as their responsibility, and excuses people in established positions of power (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators) who have an opportunity to support students who may feel less connected or may not speak up when experiencing social disconnection.

Viewing data through the lens of CRT and intersectionality adds another finding to this study. Although several participants reported feeling connected to friends, faculty, and staff, there were also feelings of being different and at times (including among other students of color) and express certain views and perspectives that were important to them on campus, both in class and on campus with peers. This represents the perceived openness of having a different perspective that is viewed in a positive light or as a valued component of diversity, but also of racial or ethnic diversity but in sharing perspectives that are valued by others. Intersectionality also acknowledges that identity is multifaceted and encompasses not only race, but ethnicity, gender, ability or disability, religious identity, and other factors that are highly individual in nature (Romero & Liou, 2023).

Participants acknowledged the lack of representation and diversity among the faculty, staff, and administration at the faith-based PWI, highlighting perceived systems of power and white normativity affirmed by CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT highlights systemic racism as a factor in organizational or institutional power structures that transcend simply racist acts by individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Participants observed that while they often felt different because of their own identity as a person of color (or immigrant, or non-athlete), the lack of faculty and staff of color was noted as a negative factor in their sense of belonging and psychological safety. Often, racial conversations narrow in on specific racist acts and are met with “but I am not a racist” as if this were a binary “racist/non-racist” classification, without recognizing nuanced behaviors, perceived micro-aggressions, and cultural norms that tend to cause certain people to feel as “the other.” Tisby (2021) notes that systemic racism is simply an acknowledgement that the challenges a person faces based on their racial identity is to some degree structural and is not “merely due to their actions” in explaining under-representation among certain groups in positions of leadership or authority (p. 158). The absence of people of color in certain positions of power (i.e., faculty, administration) was perceived and reported by participants. The acknowledgement that being able to learn from and confide in a person who “looks like me” (Leo) is reassuring and affirming to participants of color who seek role models in positions of leadership and authority.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In planning this study, steps were taken to ensure validity of the data collected, though some limitations are present in the study’s design. Polkinghorne (2007) identifies two threats to validity in narrative inquiry, including discrepancies in participants’ experienced meaning and the narratives they report about these subjective meanings.

Truthfulness was also a potential limitation to narrative inquiry, and while honest recounting is assumed among participants, there is no ability to measure honesty or truthfulness among participants and their sharing of personal perceptions. To address potential truthfulness, participants were provided written transcripts of their semi-structured interviews to review for accuracy and make any recommendations or adjustments as appropriate. Participants acknowledged their recounting of their stories and perceptions were accurate as expressed in the interview transcripts.

Another significant limitation is the number of participants. While quantitative research seeks generalizability, qualitative research and narrative inquiry research in particular seeks trustworthy data based on a limited number of participants ( $n = 9$ ). This study took place in a specific faith-based PWI with a convenience sampling of participants (i.e., students of color). The small sample provided rich narrative in the words of participants themselves with as much detail as possible without compromising confidentiality until saturation of themes was identified (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Saldana, 2021). Narrative inquiry values quality and depth of participant stories over breadth and generalizability to others, including other students of color, acknowledging that participant perceptions may not align with others. However, generalizations are a possibility and readers (including other students, faculty, and staff at the faith-based PWI) may find descriptions that align with their own perceptions and experiences.

### ***Reflections on Validity***

Qualitative research has often been viewed as less scientific or less valid than quantitative research that strives for broader generalizability. This stems from the positivist epistemic philosophy that dominated the educational landscape well into the late 1990s (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry research is valid to the degree that participants have the opportunity to tell their

stories in their own words in a bounded context. The opportunity to share confidentially and within the range of the study's research questions provided an opportunity to tell their own stories and perspectives, in their own words, concerning their own lived experiences. By framing research questions around the experiences of participants themselves, I sought to understand the lived experiences of participants and provide both validation and *restorying* of their personal perceptions and narrative interpretations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016). Engaging in this study provided the time and space to hear directly from participants to tell their stories directly.

### **Conclusions**

This study revealed important data about students of color at a faith-based PWI, who shared experiences from their time on campus. Participants had both positive and negative experiences through relationships with faculty, staff, and administrators and often experienced the faith-based context of the PWI supportive towards their own faith journey. This experience was not solely positive as there were also instances of feeling different, including in the classroom or on campus. Peer relationships with other students often fostered an environment that felt emotionally distancing and psychologically unsafe at times. Belonging is subjectively experienced and can change quickly as circumstances change (Strayhorn, 2019). The departure of a faculty of color was noted by several participants as a significant negative event, including one participant in particular who left the faith-based PWI and experienced the campus culture as less supportive of students of color and more hostile to diversity on campus.

The need for greater representation was expressed by all participants (n = 9) who cited the lack of apparent diversity among faculty, staff, and administration. The opportunity for recruiting qualified faculty and staff of color can be an opportunity for promoting greater equity

and inclusion, and in providing acknowledgement of the importance of representation for students of color on campus.

## **Recommendations**

The findings from this study provided several recommendations for educational leaders in PWIs and the faith-based PWI in particular. The study's findings may be beneficial in decision-making processes when considering how to both recruit and support students of color in faith-based PWIs. While the identified faith-based PWI was the focus of the present study, there may be applications for other faith-based PWIs; however, this generalizability was not a goal of this study.

Specifically, some of the recommendations from this study include taking steps to directly support students of color on campus who may feel different, based on perceived campus norms and white normativity that can be a significant adjustment to students of color (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). This is also true in faith-based institutions where religious expression is culturally bounded and often expressed differently (i.e., Evangelical Protestant) than those among students of color (i.e., Gospel, expressive spirituality). Culture goes beyond campus norms and theological beliefs and influences all aspects of theology, biblical interpretation and the spiritual gifts (i.e., prophesy, tongues), music, and worship (Jun et al., 2018).

Greater equity should be motivation enough to ensure positive academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and psychological safety on campus. Tisby (2021) notes that building the case for “why” racial diversity is important and supporting the success of all stakeholders is vital to the mission of faith-based institutions. One way to move the needle is through cultural diversity training, engaging in crucial conversations with people from different backgrounds, and understanding elements of cultural intelligence (Livermore, 2015). Cultural intelligence (CQ) is

the “capability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures” and can be developed as with any other competence (Livermore, 2015, p. 4). The CQ model has four capabilities that can be developed with intentionality and work: CQ Drive (motivation), CQ Knowledge (Cultural differences), CQ Strategy (plan), and CQ Action (Behaviors). In each of the capabilities, educational leaders can support sharing why diversity is important to fulfilling the mission, which helps boost motivation to engage in the process of growth. CQ Knowledge can be bolstered by presenting information and deliberate celebration of various cultural aspects important to minoritized groups (i.e., MLK Day, Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth). These become visible signs that these important historical events are acknowledged and celebrated. CQ Strategy can be fostered through campus events and in courses dealing with ‘hot button’ topics, and purposely pursuing exploration of various topics from multiple perspectives and giving voice to differences. Engaging with others from different cultures (i.e., Missionary focus week) can also help build familiarity and open opportunities for conversation. CQ Action is built through guiding and supporting opportunities towards building genuine friendships with others different from oneself (Livermore, 2015).

Encouraging genuine relationships between students of color and other students, and faculty, staff, and administration is an important factor in supporting sense of belonging and psychological safety, where one has a personal connection on campus. Encouraging stronger connections and opportunities for engagement between students of color and other majority students is where several participants noted misunderstanding, frustration, and at times isolation. Acknowledging that one’s lived experiences from other students may be different, and working to create opportunities for dialogue is valuable in building interpersonal connections. When participants felt they could express themselves fully, they also noted feeling greater sense of



belonging and having the freedom to speak up. When psychological safety and an ability to bring diverse ideas was not internalized, students were more likely to remain silent and several questioned whether they wanted to persist at the faith-based PWI.

Representation was also noted by all participants (n = 9) as significant. Higher education leaders should consider how an increasingly diverse student body perceives the lack of representation among those in leadership roles, such as faculty, staff, and administration. One suggestion noted by Tisby (2021) is hiring more people of color in groups, as organizations strive for greater representation and racial equity. The potential for hiring people of color in single roles also presents the opportunity for “disappointment and even trauma” as being a single voice of color or risk being “used as a token of diversity” (Tisby, 2021, p. 133). This was also noted in participant feedback that the faith-based PWI might not be “ready” for more faculty and staff of color. This perception was based on primarily student readiness for different perspectives and a perceived lack of psychological safety around “hot button” topics like racism and racial justice, immigration, politics, and abortion.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To gain deeper insight into understanding student sense of belonging and psychological safety at a faith-based PWI, this study could be replicated with a sample that extends beyond the small sample size (n = 9) of the present study. This study could be replicated with focus groups and be implemented as part of a campus-wide conversation on enhancing sense of belonging and psychological safety. Further study from the perspective of faculty and staff of color at the faith-based PWI as well as other faith-based PWIs could help better understand best practices that have supported student success. Learning from faculty of color who have themselves previously been a student at a PWI could offer perspective on best practices.

Quantitative or mixed-methods studies are recommended, which would generate more generalizable results, applicable to other institutions. Quantitative studies could represent a larger geographical representation of participants from more diverse backgrounds and enhance validity across a larger segment of the higher educational landscape. From these data, broader implications could be drawn for educational leaders from which to support greater equity and inclusion, and ultimately sense of belonging for students of color at faith-based PWIs and foster a campus culture where all topics are psychologically safe for all students.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Faith-based institutions have a unique opportunity to build an environment that highlights the key distinctives of faith and learning, along with (generally) a more intimate ability to engage with students to support academic success. The core religious values of many faith-based PWIs provide the context for sharing the “why” of creating a more just, equitable world, and including all students in the work of being involved in justice, and in affirming all people as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Applying the lens of a Christian worldview to social justice issues can foster greater empathy, compassion, and understanding in an often fractured culture (and campus culture). Educational leaders can use this opportunity to ensure that all students feel psychological safety to freely engage in important topics within a space where one feels they belong and that their voice will be heard.

In conclusion, the first (and perhaps ongoing) step is listening and being open to feedback, hoping to learn from the experiences of students. I hope to integrate the results of this study to be a more equitable and supportive educational leader. I plan to support an atmosphere where all students feel they belong and where they perceive that all topics, especially ‘hot button’ topics are safe for discussion in a mutually respectful environment where differences are

honored. I also look forward to a time when the faculty, staff, and administration more closely represent the diversity of our student body by hiring and retaining more staff, faculty, and educational leaders of color in faith-based PWIs.

As Darius shared in their interview:

“My main message for the leaders and the people in power: Listen to the students. Just listen to the students. Maybe not good or bad, maybe something you are not trying to hear. If you listen to the students, you will find out a lot.”

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## Appendix A

### UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CONSENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

#### 1. KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS AND THIS STUDY

**Study title:** LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT A FAITH-BASED PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

**Principal Investigator:** Scott Shaw, EdD (candidate)

**Faculty Advisor:** Nathaniel McClain, EdD

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form contains information that will help you decide whether to join the study.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### 2. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative *narrative inquiry case study* is to understand the lived experiences of students of color at a faith-based predominately White institution (PWI) and ultimately inform policy on retention and student success.

#### 3. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

**3.1 Who can take part in this study?** Students, alumni, and former students of color will be invited to share their experiences in a faith-based predominately white institution (PWI).

#### 4. INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY PARTICIPATION

##### 4.1 What will happen to me in this study?

Participants will be invited to participate in a recorded open-ended interview to respond to the following research questions:

***(1) How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?***

***(2) How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?***

Interviews will take place on campus at the identified university, with participants being invited to create a pseudonym to protect identity in both recorded interview and written narrative of this study. Interview recordings will be deleted once transcripts are dictated and reviewed for precision and anonymity.

Participant data will be reported anonymously in this research project to support educational best practices.

#### **4.2 How much of my time will be needed to take part in this study?**

Participants will be asked to plan one hour to complete the interview. The principal interviewer will be available if participants have more to add following the formal interview.

### **5. INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY RISKS AND BENEFITS**

#### **5.1 What risks will I face by taking part in the study? What will the researchers do to protect me against these risks?**

Risk to participants are minimal, in that only information or detailing experiences in the participant's own words will be recorded. The open-ended questions will allow participants to parse what information they choose to share with the researcher.

The researchers will try to minimize these risks by maintaining confidentiality and inviting the use of a pseudonym in the interview, and then deleting the audio file once the interview has been transcribed to further protect confidentiality and anonymity. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

#### **5.2 How could I benefit if I take part in this study? How could others benefit?**

You may not receive any personal benefits from being in this study. However, others may benefit from the knowledge gained from this study in helping to inform educational best practices.

### **6. ENDING THE STUDY**



### **6.1 If I want to stop participating in the study, what should I do?**

You are free to leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty to you. If you decide to leave the study before it is finished, please tell one of the persons listed in Section 9. "Contact Information." If you choose to tell the researchers why you are leaving the study, your reasons may be kept as part of the study record. The researchers will keep the information collected about you for the research unless you ask us to delete it from our records. If the researchers have already used your information in a research analysis it will not be possible to remove your information.

## **7. FINANCIAL INFORMATION**

### **7.1 Will I be paid or given anything for taking part in this study? No**

#### **7.1.1 Will I need to pay anything to be part of the study? No**

## **8. PROTECTING AND SHARING RESEARCH INFORMATION**

### **8.1 How will the researchers protect my information?**

Participant interviews will use a pseudonym, and then be promptly transcribed to text. Once the transcripts are completed and checked for accuracy, audio files will be deleted. All data storage will be encrypted on password-protected computer files accessible only by the primary researcher.

### **8.2 Who will have access to my research records?**

There are reasons why information about you may be used or seen by the researchers or others during or after this study. This includes narrative data from the open-ended interview protected by a pseudonym.

### **8.3 What will happen to the information collected in this study?**

We will keep the information we collect about you during the research process until publication of the completed study. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be stored securely and separately from the research information we collected from you.

We will not keep your name or other information that can identify you directly.

The results of this study could be published in an article or presentation, but will not include any information that would let others know who you are.

#### **8.4 Will my information be used for future research or shared with others?**

We may use or share your research information for future research studies. If we share your information with other researchers it will be de-identified, which means that it will not contain your name or other information that can directly identify you. This research may be similar to this study or completely different. We will not ask for your additional informed consent for these studies.

### **9. CONTACT INFORMATION**

#### **Who can I contact about this study?**

Please contact the researchers listed below to:

- Obtain more information about the study
- Ask a question about the study procedures
- Report an illness, injury, or other problem (you may also need to tell your regular doctors)
- Leave the study before it is finished
- Express a concern about the study

**Principal Investigator: Scott Shaw, EdD (candidate)**

**Email: [scshaw@umich.edu](mailto:scshaw@umich.edu)**

**Phone: (616) 293-7366**

**Faculty Advisor: Nathaniel McClain, EdD**

**Email: [namcclai@umich.edu](mailto:namcclai@umich.edu)**

**Phone: N/A**

**If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:**

University of Michigan

Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS)

2800 Plymouth Road

Building 520, Room 1169 Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800

Telephone: 734-936-0933 or toll free (866) 936-0933

Fax: 734-936-1852

E-mail: [irbhsbs@umich.edu](mailto:irbhsbs@umich.edu)

You can also contact the University of Michigan Compliance Hotline at 1-866-990-0111.

## 10. YOUR CONSENT

### Consent/Assent to Participate in the Research Study

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I/We will give you a copy of this document for your records and I/we will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information in Section 9 provided above.

*I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.*

Print Legal Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): \_\_\_\_\_

IRB Approval: (Faith-Based PWI)

## LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT A FAITH-BASED PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

**Re: University of Michigan IRB Application: (HUM00234521)**

[IRB Application: Faith-Based PWI]

Mon, Apr 17, 2023, 1:18 PM

Dr. Shaw, I am pleased to inform you that your IRB application has been reviewed by Dr. Loverin, Dr. Sherstad, and Dr. Rumley. Your request has been unanimously approved.

Thank you for your valuable contributions to this important body of research.

**KIMBERLY PILIECI, PHD**  
PROVOST AND CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER  
[Faith-Based PWI – Name Redacted]

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

**Introduction:** Good morning/afternoon/evening. I am Scott Shaw, a doctoral candidate in educational leadership. I appreciate your consideration in being a part of this research study. Participation is voluntary and you can discontinue at any point if you choose.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative *narrative inquiry case study* is to understand the lived experiences of students of color at a faith-based predominately White institution (PWI) and ultimately inform policy on retention and student success.

**Study Title:** LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT A FAITH-BASED PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

**Instructions:** An interview protocol has been developed to learn about your experiences as a student of color at the identified predominantly White university. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions.

**Recording Instructions:** With your consent, I would like to record our conversation. This will enable me to accurately transcribe your statements and capture your sentiments. Rest assured your responses will be kept confidential. Researchers associated with this study will be the only people who can access this recording. Recordings will be destroyed once transcripts are completed to further protect your anonymity.

**Consent Forms:** Please review the consent form. Read and sign it if you agree to participate. After you submit this form to me, I will begin this interview session. Do you have any questions?

### Key Research Questions

- (1) *How do students of color describe their experiences on campus at a faith-based PWI private university?*
- (2) *How might the lived experiences and beliefs of students of color inform best practices for educational leaders, in promoting sense of belonging, psychological safety, and retention?*

<b>Ancillary Questions</b>	<b>Reflective Notes</b>
1. Please describe your experience as a student at the identified university.	
2. Please describe your experience of sense of belonging (i.e., feeling included, you are valued and belong) at the identified university.	
3. Please talk about your experience of psychological safety (i.e., space for open conversation, your views are important, and/or expressing disagreement).	
4. How has your faith or spirituality changed (if at all) since attending the identified university?	

<p>5. Please describe your experiences with faculty and staff on campus, and how has this influenced your learning?</p>	
<p>6. Please describe your experiences with university leadership as a student at the identified university.</p>	
<p>7. What suggestions or recommendations would you suggest for university leaders if you were in a leadership position?</p>	
<p>8. What other feedback would you like to share to help guide future policies, changes, or recommendations?</p>	

## Appendix C

### Sense of Belonging Visual Model

3 messages

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**Shaw, Scott** <sshaw@REDACTED.edu>

Sun, Nov 5, 2023 at 4:55 PM

To: terrell.strayhorn@gmail.com

Dr. Strayhorn - I am completing an EdD dissertation on "LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT A FAITH-BASED PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY" at the University of Michigan-Flint. Understandably, your writings have been foundational to my work and understanding of sense of belonging.

In looking for a visual model of your theory, I came across your article on Medium.com that you presented to Princeton University. I appreciated the colorful graphic that connects belonging to several of the stages from Maslow's theory and was wondering if I could use your image to highlight your theoretical contributions?

I expect my publication will be in ProQuest upon completion. Thank you for your consideration!

<https://medium.com/@terrell.strayhorn/sense-of-belonging-changing-institutions-not-just-individuals-6c66627e2060>

**SCOTT SHAW, PhD, D.Min.**

DEAN & PROFESSOR

**P:** (616) 530-7754 | **C:** (616) 293-7366

[Faith-Based PWI; Name Redacted]

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**Terrell Strayhorn** <terrell.strayhorn@gmail.com>

Tue, Nov 7, 2023 at 7:05 AM

To: "Shaw, Scott" <sshaw@REDACTED.edu>



Cc: Do Good Work Team <team@dogoodworkllc.org>

Hi Dr. Shaw-

It's great to hear from you! I'm both honored and humbled by your kind remarks. And it brings me joy to know that you've found my work informative and valuable.

You're referring to Figure 2, correct?

Yes you can use or incorporate the image in your project. The original source of the content (info) is my 2019 book on belonging (<https://bit.ly/SOB2ndEd>) or you can cite the Medium article.

Best-

TLS

**TERRELL STRAYHORN, PHD**

PROFESSOR. DEI EXPERT. CONSULTANT.

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