

2020

## Factors That Hinder African American Students From Graduating From 4-Year Predominantly White Institutions

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Laura Marie Dougé

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Factors That Hinder African American Students From Graduating From 4-Year  
Predominantly White Institutions

by

Laura Marie Dougé

MS, Walden University, 2013

BA, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

September 2020

## Abstract

Although graduation rates at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States have increased in the last decade, the problem investigated through this study was that African American students do not graduate at the same rate of their White counterparts from 4-year Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore issues that hinder African American junior and senior students from graduating from a 4-year PWI. The theoretical framework for this study examined Karkouti's theory that African American students' success is impacted by an environment that promotes positive learning, cross-racial interactions, and one that is positively associated with students' educational outcomes. The research questions were used to gauge (a) the academic and social experiences of junior and senior African American students enrolled at a 4-year PWI in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States and (b) how satisfied junior and senior African American students are with the available programs and services that are designed to support academic success. Data were collected from one-on-one interviews with 10 African American students who were juniors and seniors at a 4-year PWI. Data were analyzed using open coding with thematic analysis and member checking. Themes were diversity awareness, stereotypes, social organizations, family support, and financial aid. To address the challenges that the study results showed, a 3-day professional development plan was developed to improve cultural competence among faculty and administrators. Based on the findings, positive social change can occur by offering more academic and social support for African American students, increasing minority faculty at PWIs, and offering more diversity workshops to help faculty and administrators understand the minority student experience.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this body of work to all students of color who may have encountered some sort of challenge along the pathway of pursuit toward obtaining your college degree. I know at times it may seem as if your voice is not heard or that your individual needs have been overlooked. May this study help close some of those academic achievement gaps that exist. “Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” — Barack Obama

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

African American students who attend 4-year predominately White institutions (PWIs) tend to have lower graduation rates than their White counterparts. Research has shown that graduation rates at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States have increased in the last decade, but the gap between academic success for African American students at 4-year PWIs continues to widen (New, 2016). Between 2003 and 2013, graduation rates improved by nearly 70%; however, at one third of the colleges that improved overall graduation rates, the rates of African American students decreased or remained stagnant (New, 2016). The local site for this study was Mid-Atlantic University (pseudonym) located in the southeastern region of Pennsylvania. Mid-Atlantic University is a 4-year nonprofit PWI that serves a population of approximately 3,200 undergraduate students where 12% of students identify as African American (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Most recent data reported from the NCES showed that 36% of African American students graduated with a bachelor's degree within 4 years from Mid-Atlantic University compared to the 63% of their non-Hispanic White counterparts (NCES, 2017). The lack of faculty of color diminishes African American students' sense of belonging at PWIs, which has an impact on their persistence toward graduation (Benitez, James, Joshua, Perfetti, & Vick, 2017). Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) showed that cross-racial interactions have a greater effect on African American students' sense of belonging than other students who feel that interacting with others outside of their race does not impact their idea of acceptance.

Adams (2014) examined why African American students have difficulty persisting and graduating due to common factors such as academic underperformance, feelings of alienation, finances, or discrimination. When considering academics and interpersonal interactions that impact persistence and retention among African American students, there are minimal resources that provide innovative ideas and suggestions to address the problem (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). Efforts have focused on increasing diversity in enrollment, but when it comes to retention of these students, effective teaching and classroom intervention strategies are lacking (Holland, 2016). To address this problem, institutions that serve a population of African American students should understand the importance of college access and success, varied motivational factors, and a framework that supports these students seeking a college degree (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). To provide recent data from Mid-Atlantic University about enrollment demographics, minority students who receive financial aid, student persistence, success, and any additional pertinent information, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, the NCES, and the university's Office of Student Success and Retention were valuable resources.

### **Rationale**

When issues surrounding racial inequality in education are brought up, two common questions often follow: "Is that still happening? Are things getting better?" (Tatum, 2017, p. 46). A quick glance across college campuses, classrooms, or cafeterias would appear to indicate yes, but there is still a long way to go. In 1997, Tatum explored how racial and ethnic division impact the academic success of African American

students. Twenty years later, Tatum (2017) conducted another study to determine whether this divide still exists and whether conversation about racial bias in higher education had moved from dialogue to action. The results from that study showed that most White respondents reported rarely feeling excluded in their educational environment in comparison to the respondents of color who reported that they often feel excluded in their collegiate educational setting (Tatum, 2017). Although the White respondents reported fewer negative experiences with bias, there were some who agreed that they have more advantages than students of other races (Tatum, 2017). Despite the differences in experiences among racial groups, most millennials (almost 94%) have reported witnessing instances of bias on their campus (Tatum, 2017). In former president Barack Obama's commencement address in 2016 at Howard University, he highlighted the fact that opportunities for African Americans have expanded since his college graduation in 1983 (Tatum, 2017). However, African American students not graduating from 4-year PWIs at the same rate as their White counterparts. According to Tatum (2017),

when schools and communities are truly integrated, with real opportunities for students of different racial backgrounds to take the same classes, participate in clubs and sports together, and collaborate on projects, they make more friends across racial lines and express more positive views than other students do. (p. 54)

With educational advancement being the primary strategy for contributing to society and gaining access to a better life, leaders in higher education should focus more attention on reforming success efforts for all students rather than determining who is culpable for this crisis (White & Ali-Khan, 2013).

The purpose of the current qualitative study was to understand the everyday college experiences of African American juniors and seniors at Mid-Atlantic University who are not persisting toward graduation, and to explore the factors that may contribute to this achievement gap. To address this problem, I focused on Mid-Atlantic University, a PWI in southeastern Pennsylvania. The study was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach that included interviews to provide evidence for this preexisting phenomenon. Innovative leaders who play a significant role in higher education may use this information to implement ideas and suggestions to close this achievement gap at Mid-Atlantic University.

### **Review of the Broader Problem**

This study addressed the academic and social experiences of African American juniors and seniors at a 4-year PWI. The findings may reveal the factors that have contributed to the college completion gap that exists among African American students based on their academic and social experiences. This study also addressed beneficial services and resources at 4-year PWIs, as well as areas for improvement to help all students complete their degree program. Access to postsecondary education has been linked to social mobility and socioeconomic (SES) benefits; however, racial and ethnic minorities have been at a disadvantage when it comes to social mobility as a result of being underrepresented in higher education (Karkouti, 2016). Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) pointed out that

a widely held notion is that the discrepancy between rates of academic performance and college retention between Black and White students at PWIs



stems from lack of academic preparation, which has bolstered initiatives aimed at preparing and supporting Black students at PWIs. Other researchers, however, have challenged the notion that inadequate academic preparation is the primary reason for low academic achievement and persistence rates among Black students at PWIs. (p. 311)

The cultural climate of the institution regulates social interactions between faculty, staff, and students, which establishes a diverse educational environment and provides students with opportunities for cross-racial engagement (Karkouti, 2016). Through exploration of the experiences of African American students enrolled at a 4-year PWI and the cultural climate of the institution, this study addressed the challenges faced by these students, which is the first step to helping them succeed.

The literature review begins with an overview of the achievement gap that exists in higher education among African American students enrolled at PWIs. I also reviewed the motivational factors that contribute to first-generation African American students' desire to excel beyond the expectations of society. African American males tend to have the lowest retention and completion rates among minority students in college (Brower, 2015). Studies that focused on ways to solve this problem were reviewed. Closing the academic achievement gap may result in an increase in enrollment and retention; therefore, I reviewed literature that focused on this particular goal and outcome. Another factor that can hinder the success of African Americans in college is racial discrimination; therefore, I reviewed literature that addressed racial inequality in higher

education. I also reviewed studies that focused on creating an inclusive learning environment for African American students at PWIs.

Information shared throughout my literature review was retrieved from peer-reviewed scholarly journals in EBSCOhost using search terms such as *Black students attending predominantly White institutions*, *diversity in higher education*, *African American male college student retention*, *inequality in higher education*, and *Black college student experience*. Higher education journals such as *Review of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of African American Males in Higher Education*, and *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, as well as the NCES provided literature and statistics for this study. I also reviewed dissertations that focused on African American student retention at PWIs.

### **Definition of Terms**

For this study, the following definitions of terms were used:

*Attrition*: A reduction in numbers prior to program completion, typically used as a performance indicator (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Stürmer, 2015).

*Continuing-generation*: College students who are enrolled in postsecondary education and have at least one parent with some postsecondary education experience (Redford & Mulvaney-Hoyer, 2017).

*Discrimination*: Unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of others (Matthew, 2017).

*Diversity*: Multiculturalism, or the acceptance of people of different ethnicities, races, cultures, religions, sexual orientation, economic backgrounds, and personal beliefs (Srinivasan, 2017).

*First-generation*: College students whose parents did not participate in any postsecondary education (Schelbe, Swanbrow-Becker, Spinelli, & McCray, 2019).

*Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU)*: Historically Black colleges and universities are institutions that were established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating Black Americans. These institutions were founded and developed in an environment of legal segregation and provide access to higher education (NCES, 2017).

*Mentor*: A person who performs as an advisor, coach, counselor, role model, or sponsor in contributing to the development of the mentee personally or professionally (Edwards & Ross, 2018).

*Microaggressions*: Everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that can be intentional or unintentional targeting a person based on their marginalized group membership (Harrison, 2016).

*Phenomenological research*: The exploration of participants' understanding and lived experiences to uncover a phenomenon (P. Ellis, 2016).

*Predominantly White institution (PWI)*: Colleges and universities in which at least 50% of the students are White (Brown & Dancy, n.d.).

*Race-based microaggressions*: Unconscious actions of White superiority that can constitute a verification of Black inferiority (Harrison, 2016).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study addressed a local problem by focusing on information shared from African American juniors and seniors enrolled at Mid-Atlantic University along with comparative data reflecting college graduation rates of African American students at this institution. Research indicated that there are several factors related to African American students' opportunities for college success (R. D. Cox, 2016). Lower SES students are less likely to pay for college and have access to a robust college-preparatory curriculum during high school; therefore, college success outcomes are specifically attributed to SES and academic background (R. D. Cox, 2016). As colleges and universities become more diversified, there is an obligation for the college or university to ensure that the necessary accommodations and services are available to promote success for students from various backgrounds. College completion rates for African American students has a long-standing, controversial history in the United States that sparked the attention of researchers after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (McDonough, 2015). Although college access has increased for African American students, many embark on their collegiate experience lacking the tools and resources that will support persistence beyond their first year (Rowley & Wright, 2011). After nearly half a century of focusing on improving race relations, there still appears to be academic discrepancies among specific groups of students (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Colleges and universities across the United States should strive to work collaboratively to improve all areas encompassing diversity for the betterment of the institution and success of all students enrolled.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are the academic and social experiences of junior and senior African American students at Mid-Atlantic University that affect their retention?
2. How satisfied are African American juniors and seniors with the programs and services available at Mid-Atlantic University that are designed to support academic success and student retention?

### **Review of the Literature**

African American students have been underrepresented in comparison to the total enrollment at PWIs in the United States. According to Karkouti (2016), African American students' success is impacted by an environment that promotes positive learning, cross-racial interactions, and educational outcomes. In recent years, protests and social action have reemerged among African American students attending PWIs to challenge the campus culture and push for a more racially diverse and inclusive learning environment (Leath & Chavous, 2017). The changing climate surrounding racial issues and downturns in the U.S. economy has impacted higher education's commitment to students of color (Karkouti, 2016). Karkouti explained that to improve African American students' educational experience, enhance their learning outcomes, increase their retention rates, and promote racially inclusive environments, higher education institutions must first consider cross-racial interactions. The first component of student engagement is student involvement, and the second is resources and efforts an institution puts into

creating and maintaining a nurturing environment that promotes student involvement (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Critical race theory (CRT) provided the conceptual framework for this study because CRT explores and analyzes the experiences of students of color, which can inform cross-cultural inclusivity practices in a number of ways. CRT was appropriate for this study because it present practical techniques that can be used by academic advisors and other higher education administrators when working with students of color at PWIs (see J. A. Lee, 2018). Self-reflection is necessary to analyze how racialized experiences can impact a person's interactions with students and societal views. According to J. A. Lee (2018), CRT serves as a theoretical framework through which a person can understand the way advising interactions and practices with students of color offer help or exert harm. Furthermore, CRT is useful for providing postsecondary practitioners with language to explore issues of racism and White supremacy. For the present study, CRT was applicable because it challenges the status quo and examines race in a myriad of contexts such as the many ideologies and norms embedded in educational institutions (see Robertson, 2017).

According to Karkouti (2016), some factors that impact African American students' educational experiences at PWIs are the following:

- the historical plight of African American students,
- the influence that federal policies and statues have on educational access and equity,

- HBCU's efforts to expand educational opportunities for socially oppressed groups,
- campus racial climates, and
- the role of higher education practitioners in improving diversity on campus.

CRT has been used to normalize and analyze racialized experiences in research and practice while challenging traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and discourses on race, gender, and class (J. A. Lee, 2018). In using CRT for the current study, I analyzed the experiences of African American students to promote inclusionary practices that could increase their retention and graduation rates at PWIs.

### **Achievement Gap in Higher Education**

College completion rates vary by race and ethnicity with African American students earning credentials at a lower rate than non-Hispanic White students according to a 2017 report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (as cited in Tate, 2017). African-centered researchers have highlighted the institutional factors that contribute to the weaker academic outcomes of African American students at PWIs. Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard, and McClain (2016) explained that given that most Black students are entering historically White educational spaces, it is vital to examine the characteristics of these spaces and analyze how they influence the academic, social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual development of Black collegians.

African American students attending PWIs are often transitioning from racially segregated neighborhoods and high schools. As a result, their racial minority status takes on particular significance in understanding their postsecondary success (Keels, 2013).

Persistence toward graduation involves other factors than the academic challenge. Some African Americans attending PWIs have reported feelings of social isolation, personal dissatisfaction, financial burden, or stress, and often view their environment more negatively than their White counterparts (Keels, 2013). Keels (2013) concluded that there is a gender gap in degree attainment among Black students once sociodemographic factors are considered. To reduce this academic achievement gap, institutions should examine the role of race and culture in perpetuating different outcomes for various students (Garcia & Ramirez, 2015).

A significant factor that has played a key role in predicting long-term academic success for African American students is the SAT and ACT exams, which are taken prior to college acceptance. At some colleges and universities, these standardized tests are optional, but many institutions still require a minimum score to satisfy the school's undergraduate admission requirements. Throughout the history of the SAT and ACT, African American students' scores have been the lowest among all racial groups, with an ACT average of 17 for African American students compared to a 22 for non-Hispanic White students, and an SAT average of 860 for African American students compared to 1061 for non-Hispanic White students (Toldson & McGee, 2014).

The disparity in these numbers has raised concerns regarding the prediction of long-term academic success for African American students. Manufacturers of these standardized tests, family members of African American students, and African American community members have been grappling with research suggesting that the ACT and SAT scores cannot predict the success of an African American student in college, nor



will it help to improve the existing academic achievement gap (Toldson & McGee, 2014). Many prestigious universities and high-quality state institutions routinely accept students who have performed well in high school but do not have a high SAT or ACT test score (Toldson & McGee, 2014). This suggests that although the priority for African American families should be to teach their students good study habits and the benefits of earning good grades throughout high school, African American families should continue to advocate for learning experiences at the secondary level that are consistent with a college-preparatory curriculum (Toldson & McGee, 2014).

### **First-Generation African American Students' Success**

For first-generation students, the journey toward obtaining a college degree can be more challenging than for those who come from a family of college graduates. First-generation students have been known to enroll in college at lower rates than continuing-generation students and display different patterns of persistence and degree attainment (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Research has shown that students who come from low SES backgrounds and minorities face a number of challenges in the pursuit of a college degree (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Comparisons of second-generation and first-generation college students have indicated disparities in college preparation, students' employment status while enrolled, and overall academic performance (Jury et al., 2017). In more competitive academic majors such as civil engineering or biochemistry, first-generation students have experienced less fit, difficulty maintaining mastery progress, and lower ability to master tasks compared to continuing-generation students who are more self-motivated and academically prepared (Jury et al., 2017).

Blackwell and Pinder (2014) explored ways that first-generation minority students were motivated to overcome their family educational histories. Blackwell and Pinder found that all of the first-generation students were self-motivated by their inner drive rather than encouragement from a family member who had attended college. The emotional path to college varied for each participant, which reflected a number of motivational factors and challenges. Using data that confirmed the differences in experiences of first-generation college, Blackwell and Pinder developed a theoretical model that could be applied to first-generation college students' situations and to other students in similar circumstances.

Redford and Mulvaney-Hoyer (2017) examined college readiness and college retention for first-year students by comparing first-generation and continuing-generation groups. Redford and Mulvaney-Hoyer found that first-generation students were just as likely to return to school after their first year as their continuing-generation peers. However, among students who were not college ready, continuing-generation students were more likely to return to school after their first year than first-generation students. Furthermore, Redford and Mulvaney-Hoyer found that first-generation students take out student loans more often and in higher amounts than their continuing-generation peers in their first year. First-generation students also indicated that their reasons for not completing their postsecondary program resulted from not being able to afford paying for school and change in family status (Redford & Mulvaney-Hoyer, 2017).

As incidents of overt racism and discrimination occur on college campuses across the country, understanding how students experience microaggressions has sparked an

interest among higher education leaders (J. M. Ellis, Powell, Demetriou, Huerta-Bapat, & Panter, 2018). Although the effects of microaggressions on racial-ethnic minority students' psychological and academic outcomes are well understood, there has not been sufficient research to explore microaggressions experienced by students whose identity is informed by their socioeconomic background, such as first-generation college students (J. M. Ellis et al., 2018).

### **Racial Inequality in Higher Education**

Universities are experiencing increased pressure to embrace the needs of society by meeting the demands of increasingly diverse students and engaging in the application of knowledge and research that encompasses solving societal problems (George-Mwangi, Thelamour, Ezeofor, & Carpenter, 2018). Racial inequality has been a long-standing issue that has divided Americans for many years, but racial discrimination, terrorism, and death have been in the spotlight when traditional mainstream media outlets ignore the concerns and violence against marginalized people (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Although the increase in African American college student enrollment appears on the surface to herald a movement toward equality in higher education, the variances among college students' performance reveals that formidable challenges remain for American colleges and universities in the quest for equality (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 2017). Angelo (2015) examined when and why presidents stopped talking about racial inequality in their speeches and stopped focusing on the matter in higher education. Despite the election of the first African American president, discussion about racial inequality was

absent from presidential speeches, which suggests why it may have been absent from the public agenda (Angelo, 2015).

Although incidents of racial inequality in college entry and completion have been documented over the years, little is known about racial disparities in the development of general collegiate skills that correlate with students' academic experiences and strategies for addressing observed disparities (Roksa et al., 2016). Discussions about race and education in presidential speeches began to decrease after the 1980 and 1984 elections (Angelo, 2015). In an effort to appeal to the majority White voting population, Democrats could not address educational inequality and distance themselves from Republicans (Angelo, 2015).

Although enrollment in colleges and universities are equal among African American and Non-Hispanic White students, the average African American college student attends a less prestigious college or university than their Non-Hispanic White peer which is a reflection of racial inequality that does persist in American society (Angelo, 2015). This is a significant disparity to be addressed since college prestige often times impacts a student's future earning potential. According to Angelo (2015), attempts to address these disparities have been unsuccessful. American public school students are assigned to schools based on their home address. Therefore, *de facto* and legal segregation led to a divided primary and secondary school system (p.226). It is the segregation in primary and secondary education that has led to inequalities in higher education.

Minimal conversation about inequality in higher education does not take away from the fact that it still exists. In 2015 at the University of Columbia after being targets of racial slurs, several African American students formed a group called Concerned Student 1950 referencing the year the university admitted its first African American student. These students set out to protest against the administration's response to reported incidences of racism displayed on campus. After gaining national concern, the campus's chancellor and the system's president both resigned (Supiano, 2015). Despite the many protests and awareness being raised on racial inequality in higher education, enrollment is still polarized. At selective institutions, Non-Hispanic White students are overrepresented while African American students are overrepresented at less-selective institutions (Supiano, 2015). At colleges and universities in the top 3 tiers of selectivity, Non-Hispanic White students account for 75% of freshmen enrollment whereas just 7% of freshmen at these institutions are African American (Supiano, 2015).

In the era in which we are today, integration as a solution to racial inequality in higher education is rarely promoted (Angelo, 2015). Strides have been made over the years, but this is proof that an important shift in the criteria and priorities to promote racial equality in higher education starting with leadership on down needs to be reassessed. If higher education continues to evolve and all racial/ethnic groups receive an equal educational opportunity this could lead to a reduction in racial economic disparity as more fruitful future research is conducted (Kim, 2015).

### **African American Male Student Retention**

There is a disproportionately low number of African American males enrolled in higher education comparable to other groups and statistics have shown that those who do enroll in college are less likely to persist than White peers and African American females (Brower, 2015). Retention is the primary way that student achievement is measured and because of this, colleges and universities face increased scrutiny related to student retention, persistence, and graduation metrics (Bingham & Solverson, 2016). Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions have had equity issues that are markedly different however the student cohort that faces similar challenges on both types of campuses is African American males (Fernandez, Davis, & Jenkins, 2017).

According to Jackson & Hui (2017), Black students at PWIs face a variety of challenges in their college involvement. For Black men, they must deal with negative assumptions, such as hypermasculinity and perpetual criminality that meet at the intersection of their race and gender (p. 464). Interestingly enough, much of the research on African American males in higher education is written from a deficit model, portraying them as at-risk or endangered individuals (Hilton & Ray, 2015). Over the years, researchers have identified 3 major problems that arise for African American men prior to their entry into higher education: lack of quality teachers in K-12 education, overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs, and a lack of African American male students as well as other students of color in advanced placement (AP) courses at the secondary education level (Hilton & Ray, 2015). Barriers

encountered by this cohort of students are plentiful, higher suspension rates, society misconceptions, pre-conceived expectations, expulsions, and higher special education placement than their peers (Graham & Nevarez, 2017).

In a 2002 study that examined whether race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) combined impact college outcomes, it was determined that more academic preparation prior to college is necessary to improve minority success, particularly for Black men enrolled at PWIs. In a recent study done at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCA&T), an HBCU in Greensboro, North Carolina, low retention and completion rates for this population were examined (Fernandez, Davis, & Jenkins, 2017). This being one of the most critical issues in higher education, implementing a new advising model and high impact practices that could benefit African American males was the primary focus. Another recent study highlighted the socio-political, economic, and educational challenges faced by African American men in every sphere of their lives to hone in on a closer look at their experiences in higher education. This study also captured a number of campus climate and diversity-related issues that these undergraduate African American male students encountered (Parker, Puig, Johnson, & Anthony, 2016).

Far more than any other group in higher education, there have been peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and national reports researching the success of African American men in college yet still only about one-third of this population enrolled in college end up graduating (Travers, 2017). A recent article explained that some African American males viewed their setbacks or failures to be indicative of who they are instead of what they do

which then impacts their engagement and pursuit of a college degree because they feel as if they will not succeed (Travers, 2017). In contrast to those students, there are some who desire to go against the stereotype by being more concerned about earning good grades rather than the importance of learning and growing as a college student which impacts their success academically and socially (Travers, 2017). Similar barriers to success that many African American males have identified throughout their collegiate experience have been the lack of understanding financial resources available to them, lack of role models or mentorship, and the ability to manage work and life outside of their academics (Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014). Two integral components for academic success among African American males are academic advisement and mentorship which will give rise to social justice. In a 2014 study, conducted at one public and one private 4-year institution in the southeastern region of the United States, a group of African American males were asked how their respective schools can assist with the retention of their particular student cohort. Responses from this group included implementing learning support groups, strengthening faculty-student relationships, and extracurricular activities that connect them better to the learning community (Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014).

When schools place focus on transformational leadership, social justice can be recognized through the education and empowerment of diverse populations, elimination of inequities, and by closing achievement gaps (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). During the 2016-2017 academic year at NCA&T it was reported that the number of African American males placed on academic warning and probation decreased by 36.4% from the



previous 2015-2016 academic year since the implementation of a shared academic advising model (Fernandez, Davis, & Jenkins, 2017). This confirms the belief that a majority of marginalized groups seem to glean such a great deal from campus wide support that promotes lifelong learning and empowers students to make sound academic, professional, and personal decisions (Fernandez, Davis, & Jenkins, 2017).

### **Support at the High School Level Impacting African American College Students' Success**

Historically, research has treated African American youth as a monolithic group demonstrating below standard achievement on traditional measurements of academic performance (i.e. standardized tests, grades, college enrollment rates) in comparison to US averages across all levels of education (Hudley, 2016). A contributing factor for a college student's success can be their level of support throughout high school. Supportive relationships are constantly linked to positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). A recent 2016 study explored variations of how students from 58 high schools in the United States perceived caring, equity, and high expectations by student race, school diversity, and socioeconomic context (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). For students to feel a sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy, supportive relationships with teachers and administrators are needed to predict students' academic engagement and social-emotional well-being (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). This combination can help prepare students academically and socially at the collegiate level.

According to Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2016), students' perceptions of differential treatment, exclusion, and discrimination by teachers and other adults in school appear to play a role in poor outcomes among youth of color in school. For example, perceived discrimination has been linked with mental health problems, including anti-social behavior, depression, and low self-esteem (p.1177). Using a multilevel approach, this particular study examined cross-level interactions of school diversity and how SES is associated with race and student reports of support (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). As an end result, perceptions of caring and equitable treatments among African American students was more negative in comparison to their Non-Hispanic White peers in the more diverse, lower income schools (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). In order to shift to more positive trajectories at the college level, motivation, preparation, and support should be implemented in the high schools with a more diverse student population. Negative interactions in high school may potentially be detrimental for a student's academic and social development in college. With racial disparities being more attenuated in diverse schools, improving the perceptions of school support for African American students in these schools remains a priority (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016).

Other factors that can impact African American students' success as they transition from high school to college are personal identities and social expectations. There was a study conducted at 3 different types of PWIs, a Midwestern public university, a Midwestern private university, and a Southwestern public university. At each institution there were 2 focus groups comprised of 5 to 7 African American student

participants. For each group, 5 questions were asked that discussed race using a concept called relational dialectics that seeks to understand the nature of intercultural communication (Ingeno, 2013). Using the data collected from the questions, there were categories used for coding that highlighted contradictions between one's personal identity and social expectations that each participant felt (Ingeno, 2013). Coming from a high school environment where the students of color felt connected with their peers, teachers, and community, now having to transition to a predominantly White learning environment, at times made them feel uncomfortable with being themselves. The participants recalled situations like fear of speaking out in class because they worried about sounding different from their White peers (Ingeno, 2013). Another challenge was speaking openly to their peers about their culture because they did not want to perpetuate stereotypes (Ingeno, 2013). One final tension that the researcher recognized was the pull between the students' past and future because they felt loyalty to their family and community but also desired a future of achievement that they did not experience prior to attending college. Many of the participants felt that their long-term success would cause their family and hometown friends to view them as traitors for pursuing a college education (Ingeno, 2013).

### **African American Students Underrepresented at Highly Selective Institutions**

The type of institution a student chooses to attend plays a significant role in their academic success and completion, therefore college enrollment can be a predictor for academic preparation and ability to succeed. According to Smith (2016), a new analysis from the Center for American Progress shows Black and Latino students are

underrepresented in the country's most selective public research universities. As many as 193,000 Black and Latino students would have enrolled in these selective colleges in 2014 if student representation was proportional, according to the report (Intro section, para. 1). The high level of academic research and selective admissions process at elite institutions tends to produce stronger academic outcomes which may hinder the school's ability to remedy academic deficiencies that could increase success rates for students from all backgrounds.

In recent years at Cornell University, a series of protests have been held as a result of racial incidents and lack of an inclusive campus environment. In light of these protests, increasing the presence of underrepresented African American students has been a priority. At Cornell University, underrepresented African American students have been defined as Black Americans who have more than two generations in this country (Jaschik, 2017). Like many other institutions in the United States, Cornell University counts students for race and ethnicity being U.S. citizens or permanent residents, and not international students (Jaschik, 2017). The reported incidences of racial inequality at Ivy League Colleges have prompted African American student leaders to team up and combat acts of injustice. In order to dissuade the concepts of racism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and engaged citizenship, the acknowledgment and understanding of White privilege in the academia is a starting point for many PWIs (Lovell, 2015). Collegiate advocacy and leadership can help improve the incidences of discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotypes that exist on predominantly White college campuses.

## **Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment for African American Students at PWIs**

When students embark on their collegiate journey, this educational experience should prepare them with courses, faculty, administrators, and resources that will help them succeed in a multicultural community. An inclusive learning environment that promotes diversity can help to foster a more equitable society. Issues of diversity have plagued higher education for many years and now as colleges and universities are becoming more diverse than ever before, students are speaking out about matters surrounding diversity and inclusion, feelings of discrimination while enrolled in college, and suggestions to approve the climate of diversity and inclusion on their campuses (Drape, Anderson, Church, Jain, Slabach, & Amaral, 2017). Since the 1960s and 1970s, higher education campuses have seen an influx in numbers of diverse learners including adult learners who have returned seeking degree completion for career growth (Fenwick, 2015). In the 1980s and 1990s, the demographic makeup of college students continued to become more diverse leading to the change in common language and awareness of both multiculturalism and learner-centered practices (Fenwick, 2015). As a result, better support systems for all learners were implemented as more focus from administrators and faculty was placed on diverse student populations (Fenwick, 2015).

Recent protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement on college campuses and the 2015 protest at the University of Missouri have placed focus on PWIs maintaining unwelcoming campus environments (Harrison, 2016). Disappointments over the years with college and university climates, the outrage of White repression, and

terrorism of Black leaders and community organizations have led students to speak out more and demand the creation of Black Studies departments and other reforms within higher education (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). The lack of conviction, preparedness on the part of university administrators to acknowledge diversity issues, and inclusivity at many PWIs across the country prompted one researcher to examine the impact that Black music-oriented spaces can have on creating an inclusive learning environment on predominantly White campuses (Harrison, 2016). “I show how Black college-radio, as a student-authored inclusion initiative, both cultivated and sustained a sense of belonging for Black students at PWIs” (Harrison, 2016, p. 135). In this study, Harrison recognizes a series of historical racial incidences and race-based microaggressions that have been mirrored on predominantly White college campuses impacting students of color’s sense of belonging and self-esteem. By implementing Black college-radio as a student support network, students of color were able to author their own means of supporting one another and alleviate feelings of isolation while creating a sense of community among Black students and their peers (Harrison, 2016).

Educators should make it a priority to develop a habit of conducting self-reflections regarding their own understanding and integration of race and culture into their pedagogy (Garcia & Ramirez, 2015). In one related study, a critical race and sociocultural theory was used to examine how teaching implications align with the changing demographics in schools. Discrepancies in educational outcomes were noted for various students groups who were on the lower end of the performance scale compared to primarily Non-Hispanic White and various Asian American students who were on the

higher end (Garcia & Ramirez, 2015). Among these groups were African American, Native American, certain Asian American (i.e., Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, Samoan, Thai, and other Southeast Asian students), and Latino students. Based on these academic performance outcomes, concerns were raised about the lack of preparedness educators may have to teach in diverse schools. Five elements that fostered positive outcomes for all students were:

- A visionary leader
- Teachers' effective practices
- Intensive academic support
- The acknowledgement of race
- Parental and community engagement (Garcia & Ramirez, 2015, p. 100)

African American students' graduation rates are lower at PWIs because they view the campus as hostile, alienating, and culturally insensitive (Karkouti, 2016). For African American students, finding others who look like themselves on a predominantly White campus can be complex. At one particular selective PWI on the west coast, African American students shared that finding African American friends presented obstacles and required strategy (Borr, 2017). Some altered their campus placements and time commitments to be present in areas predominantly occupied by African American students, while others lacked motivation to form these friendships (Borr, 2017).

The fact that graduation rates from African American students have lagged behind Non-Hispanic White students is a representation that most campuses are organized for students who come in knowing how to navigate them and with supports to fall back on

when things go wrong (Patel, 2018). One way to help create a more inclusive learning environment for African American students at PWIs so that all students are equally supported would be to form a Diversity and Inclusion office on campus. In an era of gotcha politics and extreme polarization, more equitable and socially cohesive learning environments in higher education can be beneficial (Patel, 2018). When there is an office on campus that prioritizes the needs of certain student populations, this does not mean that other students are exempt from the services offered, instead it serves a better representation of the institution signaling that all students from various backgrounds with unique learning styles are welcome and supported. If a goal is to help more African American students graduate, a Diversity and Inclusion office on campus should be a space where they feel empowered, comfortable, and supported (Patel, 2018). Another way to help create a more inclusive learning environment at PWIs would be to recognize not only the diverse student population, but faculty and administrators as well.

### **African American Female Students and Leadership Roles at PWIs**

Studies have shown that African American female students enrolled at PWIs often times encounter challenges when looking to assume a leadership role on campus. In 2013, a study conducted at a large, public PWI located in a rural area within the Northeast region of the United States analyzed interactions with interpersonal oppression among African American female students. The researcher interviewed 12 students where the criteria for participation required students to self-identify as Black women and as a leader (Domingue, 2015). At this institution, there are a total of 22,000 undergraduate students, 4.1% of these students identify as African American and in terms of gender



women make up 62% of the population (Domingue, 2015). During the interviews, all participants in the study expressed challenges in being an African American female college student leader at a PWI. The interviews asked them to describe their experiences and instances of oppression while taking on their leadership role. From the participants' reports of interpersonal interactions with oppression, the study highlighted four major themes:

- Stereotyping
- Microaggressions
- Racialized and Gendered Self-Presentation
- Expectations, and Voicing and Silencing (Domingue, 2015, p. 461)

Many of these participants shared their experiences being stereotyped as loud, confrontational, angry, emasculating, and difficult to work with which was a projection from their Non-Hispanic White peers (Domingue, 2015). Another stereotype that the participants encountered were that of a 'Black Mama' which was described as their Non-Hispanic White peers depicting them as a disciplinarian in their intended leadership role, that often categorized her as scolding someone or being an 'angry Black woman' who is 'unhappy' (Domingue, 2015).

According to Domingue (2015), related to the Black Mama or Mammy is the Strong Black Woman. In these depictions, there is an expectation for black women leaders to nurture others and demonstrate resiliency over trying circumstances, often at the cost of their own personal needs. Although some might interpret the description of "strong" as a positive quality or as an

impression of emotional health, it is important to note that this characteristic somewhat dehumanizes Black women by failing to consider their feelings and emotional needs beyond their leadership (p.462).

Although this study was conducted at only one PWI in the Northeastern region of the United States, the purpose of this study, which was to explore the experiences that African American female college student leaders face as they exercise their leadership capabilities on predominantly White college campuses, does inform the existing discourse centered around creating an inclusive environment for all students at PWIs. Throughout the post-secondary journey for many African American women, unfulfilled promises have been commonly experienced with them constantly having to prove their worth, intelligence, and scholarship (Phelps-Ward, Allen, & Howard, 2017). Although African American female administrators, faculty, staff, and students are valued within the underrepresented community they do not feel the same sense of value from the institution overall on a predominantly White campus (Phelps-Ward, Allen, & Howard, 2017).

In a 2014 study, essays from African American female faculty members were analyzed depicting their personal experiences as scholars and social change agents. Many reported similar instances of racism, sexism, isolation, perceptions of hostility, and being undervalued (Phelps-Ward, Allen, & Howard, 2017). These experiences of marginality among African American faculty and staff members have extended to the African American female undergraduate experiences at PWIs. When examining unfulfilled promises on college campuses marketing materials and other methods of advertisement have been the primary representation.

According to Phelps-Ward, Allen, & Howard (2017), these neglected promises manifest in college pamphlets depicting smiling faces of students from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, in the words spoken by orientation leaders who make blanket characterizations of faculty and staff as ‘friendly’ and ‘approachable’, on posters promoting clubs and organizations that encourage “all” who are interested to join or apply, and in the mission statements of colleges and universities across the country (p.54).

Further critical examinations have moved the needle forward to begin acknowledging the disparities among African American female college students and their peers, understand the factors that contribute to these collegiate experiences and challenges, and support African American female collegians.

### **Faculty of Color at PWIs**

The underrepresentation of faculty of color in higher education, particularly at PWIs, leads to discussion that explores broader societal discourse upon the landscape of the representation of African American faculty in academia (Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, & Jackson, 2015). Throughout the century between 1971 and 1986, the percentage of African American faculty decreased from 8.1 to 6.9%, this percentage continued to decrease into the 1990s and even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Carrol, 2017). Although there has been progression for racial and cultural minorities, racism still remains a prevalent and lived reality for many people of color, especially within higher education (Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, & Jackson, 2015). Over the past decade, the field of education has represented one of the most segregated professions of employment where 77% of full-

time faculty members have been White (Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, & Jackson, 2015). Researchers at University of Missouri examined gaps in faculty pay at 40 United States public universities across six fields, biology, chemistry, economics, English, sociology and educational leadership and policy confirming that Black and Hispanic faculty earned lower salaries compared to White faculty, \$10,000 to \$15,000 less annually (Cox, Matthews & Associates, 2017).

Students on these campuses deserve to feel a presence from leaders who can be mentors and role models by providing a relatable perspective of justice and equality inside and outside of the classroom. Increasing faculty diversity has been a long-standing priority on many college campuses but in light of recent student protests over racial relations, the issue has become more urgent (Flaherty, 2015). Hiring more diverse faculty members on campuses has presented a challenge because African American students remain underrepresented in a variety of Ph.D. programs and even beyond that, getting more Black students to stay in academe after they earn their Ph.Ds. (Flaherty, 2015). In a recent article, one African American doctoral student shared her experience with information regarding additional funding to continue her graduate program which not openly released to her in the same manner it was to her White peers. She explained, “they had faculty looking out for them, making sure they received ample funding or been asked to participate in future research. At times, the funding was in excess of what they needed. Some had been guaranteed funding for four years prior to their admission” (Harris-Hasan, 2014, p.58). Instances such as this have made it difficult for many students of color to complete their doctoral program. At some colleges and universities, words such

as diversity and equity are beneficial for marketing and enrollment purposes, but if institutions are not genuinely committed to improving these areas, students of color may continue to feel like they are helping to meet a diversity quota rather than receive an equitable education.

To mirror the African American undergraduate student population of 8%, recently for the 2017-18 academic year, students at the University of Missouri at Columbia have called on administrators to increase the share of Black faculty members from 3% to 10% (Flaherty, 2015). Unsure of how realistic this goal could be for other PWIs, it is the accountability for diversity initiatives that is a small part of the solution. Since faculties at most PWIs will always be overwhelmingly White, institutional diversity efforts should include professional development opportunities that encourage all professors to become highly skilled at teaching diverse populations and fostering classroom environments where students from all racial groups feel included (Flaherty, 2015).

Engaging with students of color from a “colorblind perspective” also known as colorblind mentoring has become a known issue at many predominantly White institutions across the country (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). In a multisite case study this concept of colorblind mentoring was examined. Findings from this study revealed that White faculty members who mentored students of color on their campuses often engaged with their students using race-neutral, colorblind language that avoided but implied racial terminology (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). Relatability and cultural sensitivity were obvious traits that were lacking among these faculty members which allowed them to describe their students of color as academically inferior, less

prepared, and less interested in the curriculum (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). These cynical faculty perceptions may have an influence on how students of color perceive their academic abilities and potential to achieve academic success, which supports the lack of diversity and inclusivity in a predominantly White learning environment.

### **Implications**

While studies show that predominantly White institutions have met the mark by making the campus more inclusive and welcoming to all students, there are still institutions that must work toward making the learning environment more appealing to African American students by offering services that reflect efforts to not only recruit but retain African American students. A starting point would be collaboration with other institutions that have a student population demographic comparable to that of Mid-Atlantic University to understand how support services positively impact their African American students' success rates.

For this study, a professional development/training curriculum (Appendix A) was designed for faculty from all academic areas and administrators within Student Affairs at higher education institutions throughout the country. Education is important for all future citizens of our society which includes military, disabled, first-generation, and many other populations that are unique because of their background experiences and makeup. As leaders in higher education, a question that we must ask ourselves is, how do we embrace each individual student to make them feel like accepted and respected members of the learning community? Over a three-day training period, there will be a series of topics

covered which includes: The Minority Experience in Higher Education, Unique Characteristics of Minority Students, and Meeting Students Where They Are in the Classroom.

At the conclusion of the professional development/training program, role playing will be the final activity to assess how well each participant understood the information throughout the course of each day. This professional development/training program is one that can be facilitated through an institution's Office of Diversity or Office of Multicultural Affairs.

### **Summary**

Major themes referenced throughout the literature review were racial inequality in higher education, African American male student retention at PWIs, stereotypes and microaggressions that African American students are faced with on predominantly White college campuses, and the success rates for first-generation students as they compare to students' success rates who come from a family of college graduates. Every student's motivation for choosing to enroll in college is uniquely different and every path once enrolled has divergent outcomes. Many students who come from marginalized groups are at a disadvantage for reasons such as socioeconomic barriers, lack of available resources prior to attending college, and lack of peer counseling. To overcome these negative stereotypes, it is the responsibility of the institution to make all students enrolled feel supported regardless of their background by providing a safe and comfortable environment to thrive academically and socially.

Keels' (2013) study reported the social, academic, and personal experiences that some African Americans who have attended PWIs have had which contributed to the existing academic achievement gap. Blackwell and Pinder's (2014) study examined the challenges that students who are minorities, first-generation students, or come from low socioeconomic backgrounds face that hampers their success in college. Karkouti (2016) and Angelo (2015) conducted studies that revealed the racial inequalities carried over from historic times into 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education, thereby focusing on matters taking place on college campuses that stem from racial inequality and a glimpse into the future of higher education calling on further investigation. Fernandez, Davis, and Jenkins' (2017) study showed how some African American males viewed their setbacks or failures at PWIs and how these experiences have impacted their academic success. García and Ramirez's (2015) study explained the importance of keeping race and culture integration along with other diversity improvement initiatives as a priority for all institution types. Using a culturally responsive teaching approach will effectively address the ongoing achievement disparities between African American students; and their White counterparts that remain constant (García & Ramirez, 2015).

Section 2 includes the research design used for this study. A description of my role as the researcher implementing ethical procedures, participant selection, and instrumentation used for the study will be explained along with a thorough description of the data collection and data analysis plan used.



## Section 2: The Methodology

I used a qualitative basic interview approach to understand the everyday academic and social experiences of African American juniors and seniors at Mid-Atlantic University who are not persisting toward graduation. The population for this study is 600 African American students at Mid-Atlantic University. The sample for this study consisted of 12 African American students who are juniors and seniors at this 4-year PWI. The goal for this study was to add to the research on predicting the academic success of African American students enrolled at PWIs while finding ways for improvement that can increase college graduation rates for these students. The purpose of my coding was to reduce the data without losing the meaning of the original interview transcripts (see Clark & Vealé, 2018).

Allowing juniors and seniors to share experiences from their undergraduate journey may help to maximize faculty-to-student and peer-to-peer engagement, implement additional instructional tools based on the students' feedback, and build supportive relationships across campus. It is important for students to see themselves reflected in the faculty and curriculum to which they are exposed to create a sense of belonging and inclusiveness. Mid-Atlantic University may use the findings to improve the academic success of its African American student population while finding ways to increase graduation rates for these students.

## **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

### **Approach**

The interviews in this study focused on the students' personal and educational background prior to and during college, their level of college preparedness, and their motivational factors while enrolled at Mid-Atlantic University. Although the questions asked of each participant were the same, the exact wording and order in which they are asked varied based on the flow of the interview.

### **Description**

This qualitative approach included a basic interview aligned with the problem, purpose, and research questions to provide a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American students and factors that contribute to this problem. In phenomenological research, the participants' understanding and lived experiences are analyzed to uncover a phenomenon (P. Ellis, 2016). The problem was that African American students tend to have lower college graduation rates than their White counterparts at a 4-year PWI. After a series of interviews, analysis of the data revealed common academic and social challenges to better understand why African American students have lower graduation rates at PWIs. Phenomenology rather than case study was the research design used because a case study can sometimes generate more data from multiple sources, which can be overwhelming for a researcher making the reporting of a case study more complex due to the nature of this approach (see Baxter & Jack, 2008). Through a series of one-on-one interviews, this study focused on the lived experiences of participants about the phenomenon. Based on the literature, I asked

interview questions (see Appendix B) that pertained to the individual student's experiences in the classroom and to cross-racial interactions outside of the classroom while enrolled at a 4-year PWI. I also allowed participants to explain how each of these factors have influenced their progress toward graduation.

## **Participants**

### **Selection Criteria**

In qualitative research, biases must be eliminated along with recognizing the constraints of the interview process and the dangers of prejudging candidates or looking at superficialities (Mamlet, 2017). Selecting the participants was based on experience with the phenomenon under study and characteristics that were important for the study. I collaborated with the assistant dean of students who oversees the Office of Student Engagement (OSE) at Mid-Atlantic University to recruit 10 African American students who were juniors and seniors at the time of this study. My reason for working with this department to recruit participants was the interaction that administrators may have had with the students, which could have been valuable for participant selections. Some students visit the student support offices on campus more frequently than others, and the African American juniors and seniors at Mid-Atlantic University who were most identifiable with this department were the ones recruited to participate. When recommending students for this study, OSE was asked to look for students who could provide data to answer the research questions. When analyzing academic and social experiences, students who are actively involved on campus would be a strong pool of candidates to interview as well as those who tend to utilize academic support services on

campus whether they have benefited or not. Selection of participants was limited to those who could identify with academic and social challenges at a PWI. Because this office focuses on student retention, all suggestions and opinions were beneficial throughout the participant recruitment process. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer for how many participants should be used for interviews in qualitative studies because the researcher will take what they can get (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Gaining Access to Participants**

In a qualitative study, the researcher gains access to the participants' natural environment and is the main research instrument used to collect and analyze data while understanding that biases can influence the outcome of the research (Clark & Vealé, 2018). To gain access to participants for this study, I asked the site to sign a letter of cooperation granting me access to the participants as well as space if needed on the site's premises to conduct the interviews. Walden University's IRB provided a letter with approval #04-04-19-0325250 to conduct my research along with the study site's IRB. Initially, the desired number of participants for this study at Mid-Atlantic University was 12 African American students: six juniors and six seniors who were enrolled at this 4-year PWI. After several weeks of trying to recruit 12 participants, I ended up with 10 participants, nine females and one male, enrolled at Mid-Atlantic University. Ten students who had attended Mid-Atlantic University for 2 or more years were selected to provide an in-depth description of their experiences by recounting any academic, social, or financial barriers they were faced with, specific areas of improvement needed at the

university for all students to be successful, or resources available at the institution that contributed to their success and completion.

### **Methods of Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship**

In my initial letter emailed to each participant, I explained my background as a doctoral student who has a passion for learning more about access and equity for all students in higher education. The participants were informed that I had worked at the institution from 2014 to 2019 as the assistant director of multicultural admissions. In a qualitative study, the interviewer must identify important subjects to be explored in the interview (Seidman, 2013). I expressed how valuable participants' perspective as a current student of color who attends a 4-year PWI would be for this study. Participants were told in advance that a transcript of the interview would be shared with them for review, edits, and verification of accuracy. Lastly, the importance of the study and potential impact that it would have on higher education was explained to help participants understand the influence that their participation would have.

**Ethical considerations.** Confidentiality was at the forefront of the study to protect my role as the researcher along with the information shared by the participants. "Ethics pertains to morally good or correct practice and avoiding any harm that may emanate during the study" (Ngozwana, 2018, p. 25). To ensure that adequate and quality data were obtained to support this study, I conducted individual interviews with a small group of participants to achieve data saturation. Individual interviews helped to ensure data saturation regarding the experiences and perceptions shared by each participant. Data saturation is not about the numbers per se but rather about the depth of the data

(Fusch & Ness, 2015). Due to lack of acceptance, African American students are not always able to articulate feelings of alienation or marginalization to the individuals on campus whom they are surrounded by, which can leave them feeling disconnected from the campus community (Adams, 2014). Based on the research questions and conceptual framework, I concluded that a smaller group of students could best inform the study by sharing evidence from personal experience to describe the phenomenon of African American students graduating at lower rates than their White counterparts from PWIs.

**Informed consent.** In an introductory email sent to each participant, the topic of the study, research questions, and purpose of the study were stated. Attached to the email was an invitation letter and consent form. The participants were asked to read over each document carefully and encouraged to ask any questions prior to consenting. The invitation letter stated the value that the participants' input could add to a study exploring the academic and social experiences of African American juniors and seniors enrolled at a 4-year PWI. In the consent form, seven key areas were addressed that could impact each participant's decision to be interviewed. One section consisted of background information, which shared the purpose of the study and how the interviews would serve as a valuable component for data collection. The procedures section informed the participant of the anticipated length of time for the interview; the format of the interview, which included open-ended questions and answers; and follow up once the interview was completed.

Each participant received a copy of their interview transcript for review to ensure accuracy and credibility of the information shared. In the section that explained the

voluntary nature of the study, the participants were informed of their right to accept or decline the invitation or discontinue the interview at any time. In the final section that discussed privacy, participants were reminded that all responses would be confidential and their personal identity would not be disclosed at any time during the recorded interview or reported in the study. Participants were told that details that could potentially identify them, such as their institution, the location of the interview, or other personal information outside of the research project, would not be released under any circumstances. Once the participant carefully reviewed the invitation letter and consent form, their agreement to participate was returned electronically via email using the words “I consent.”

**Confidentiality.** To maintain confidentiality and trustworthiness, the information shared by the participants was not be released to anyone else. “Confidentiality and anonymity simply means that the setting and participants should not be identifiable in all reporting” (Ngozwana, 2018, p. 26). To uphold ethical integrity and respect the confidentiality of the participants, I ensured that all names and information referencing the institution or participant were not mentioned in the study.

**Protection from harm.** In a study involving interviews, focus groups, or other observational methods for data collection, there are potential risks and benefits. Participants in the current study were informed of the minimal risks that the interviews could pose, which depended on how their personal experiences impacted them as a student. Some questions could have been more personal than others, which could have

affected their level of comfort; however, they reserved the right not to answer certain questions.

## **Data Collection**

### **Interviews**

I asked open-ended questions that addressed each student's personal background, academic experiences, and social involvement to encourage detailed responses in a conversational format. The interview questions were structured in a way that gave balance, allowing the participants to tell their stories and provide an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences. Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people (Seidman, 2013).

For the individual interviews, an audio recorder was used to ensure accurate data. To ensure that key topics were covered during the interview, I used an interview guide with predetermined questions (see Appendix B) that aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), the use of probing questions and creating a state of epoché in a phenomenological study design will assist the researcher in the quest for data saturation.

### **Keeping Track of Data**

With permission from the participants, I recorded each interview to track the data and playback the interviews as needed for accurate transcriptions. I used Temi, an automatic transcription service available online, to transcribe data from the audio recording. The interviews were spread out over the course of one week. After each



interview, I stored the transcript on a flash drive that was locked away in my home office. I kept a notebook and Excel spreadsheet to log verbal and nonverbal responses from the participants, which made the coding process more detailed and accurate when reading through each transcript. Upon completion of all interviews, the participants received their interview transcript electronically for review to increase credibility of the data collected. There were no follow-up interviews conducted.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Upon receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I proceeded with the data collection portion of my study. "To facilitate the interpretation of federal guidelines at a project level, internal or external institutional review boards (IRBs) are typically instated at universities and other research-conducting institutions" (Hom, Podlogar, Stanley, & Joiner, 2015, p. 107). I selected participants who I did not have a personal connection or relationship with to avoid any potential biases in the participant selection process. Being an African American student who formerly attended a PWI, it is important to understand that my unconscious biases can influence the outcome of the study, therefore eliminating biases altogether may be difficult at times (Clark & Vealé, 2018). Reflective and interpretive thinking throughout this qualitative study helped produce accurate information from the research, data collection, and data analysis processes. Personal opinions and perspectives can affect the study's findings when dealing with unconscious biases, to evade this outcome I made every attempt to withhold my personal experiences, beliefs, or attitude.

According to Clark and Vealé (2018) qualitative researchers must minimize and disclose their personal assumptions and biases while collecting, coding, and sorting qualitative data to acquire an accurate representation of the phenomenon or topic (p.484). My role as the researcher was to solely observe, listen, and take notes throughout each interview. Although I interviewed participants who I did not have a personal connection with, I exhibited personal empathy so that each respondent can feel at ease and comfortable with opening up about their experiences. For participants to feel as if they can talk freely, the initial friendly rapport established remained consistent throughout the interview. The personality of the researcher and his or her integrity can have a greater benefit to qualitative research than it would a quantitative study (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

To begin the analysis process, I created a data analysis table which included five color coded categories used to better identify the common themes noted in the individual responses to the interview questions. For all responses that related to positive interactions or support from faculty the color was green. Any response that related to student involvement in clubs or organizations on campus, the color was yellow. Negative interactions with faculty or peers were highlighted using red. When the participant spoke on their support system or motivations to attend college, the corresponding words or statements were blue. Lastly, for ideas that Mid-Atlantic University can use to place more focus on student retention were highlighted in purple. After reviewing each transcript multiple times and color coding throughout, I used those colors to pinpoint keywords,

overlapping responses, themes, and statements. Some of the words and phrases that were captured as main ideas or issues presented in the data were diversity awareness, social organizations, student involvement, faculty support, and financial aid.

### **Data Analysis Results**

I conducted this qualitative phenomenological research study, using one-on-one interviews to explore the lived experiences of African American juniors and seniors currently enrolled at a 4-year PWI. Working closely with the institution's Office of Student Engagement (OSE), participants selected for this study were delimited by race, gender, institutional type, and graduation year to determine if they are a current junior or senior. In preparation for the conducting the interviews, I coordinated with the OSE Assistant Dean of Students to obtain a list with student names and contact information that matched my criteria for students to participate in the interviews. The participants were solicited via email once the list of potential participants was received.

After contacting 12 students to participate in the study, I received responses from 10 willing participants. The 10 students were all African American juniors and seniors with various majors. Although my recruitment search was open to both male and female African American students at Mid-Atlantic who are junior or seniors, only one male consented to participating in the interview. I did ask each participant their major and year of graduation prior to starting the interview just to have a better gauge on the rigor of their coursework. The male senior and one female junior were both nursing students. Two seniors and one junior were all pre-physical therapy students. The remaining five juniors were business marketing, social work, communications, and psychology students.

Table 1 lists the participants' gender, race, and year of graduation.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants Who Currently Attend a Mid-Atlantic University*

'Gender	'Race	Year of graduation
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2020
Male	African American	2020
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2021
Female	African American	2020

*Note.* Graduation year 2020 represents a senior and 2021 represents a junior.

Table 2 is a list of the key words and phrases from the participants' responses.

Table 2

*Words and Phrases Coded in the Interview Transcripts*

Categories	Open codes
Positive interactions, support from faculty	Positive relationships, supportive, relate to Black professors, closeness among students of color
Involvement in clubs and organizations	Greek life, Black Student Union (BSU), National Council for Negro Women (NCNW) cliques, Black clubs certain comfort level
Negative interactions with faculty/peers	Limited office hours, comfort level, language barriers, discrimination
Support system/motivation to attend college	Family, self-motivation, HS teachers

More focus on student retention at Mid-Atlantic University	Financial advice/support, workshops, diversify faculty, students of color represented for marketing
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Table 3 list the common themes found in the responses to the interview questions.

Table 3

*Common Themes Mentioned in the Interview Transcripts*

Categories	Themes
Positive interactions, support from faculty	Faculty members are supportive, faculty cares about student success
Involvement in clubs and organizations	Combat stereotypes, involvement helps college experience, cliques on campus
Negative interactions with faculty/peers	Varies by academic area, needs improvement, racism exists, inappropriate commentary
Support system/motivation to attend college	Family, self-motivation
More focus on student retention at Mid-Atlantic University	Financial aid, faculty of color presence, students of color for marketing purposes

Table 4 lists a summary of the statements shared by the participants.

Table 4

*Summary of Statements in the Interview Transcripts*

Categories	Themes
Positive interactions, support from faculty	There are faculty members who do care about the students.

Involvement in clubs and organizations	Outside of BSU and Greek Life, there is not much for students of color to get involved with that will keep their interest.
Negative interactions with faculty/peers	Diversity awareness needs to be at the forefront of student success and retention. Family, self-motivation
Support system/motivation to attend college	The desire to attend college and excel in life has always been there. Family is the added support and motivation that has helped a lot.
More focus on student retention at Mid-Atlantic University	More focus needs to be on ways to help support students of color financially. Creating a more diverse faculty and student body can help with retention.

Table 5 lists the background information that each participant shared outside of their academic and social experiences while enrolled at Mid-Atlantic University.

Table 5

*Participants' Background Information*

First generation student	Resident or commuter	Employed	Financial aid recipient
Yes	Resident	Yes	Yes
No	Resident	Yes	No
Yes	Resident	Yes	Yes
No	Commuter	Yes	No
No	Resident	Yes	Yes
Yes	Commuter	Yes	Yes
Yes	Resident	Yes	Yes
No	Resident	No	Yes
Yes	Resident	Yes	Yes
No	Resident	Yes	Yes

*Note.* Participants are employed while attending college.

## **Themes**

The findings in the study were informative of the interview questions (Appendix B) which prompted five categories and recurring themes. To analyze the data collected, open coding with thematic analysis and member checking were the methods used to capture the overall themes, patterns, and ideas shared by the 10 participants during their interviews. Throughout the interviews, there were a number of common themes that surfaced. Under the category for positive interactions and support from faculty, some of the common themes were positive relationships and closeness among students of color. Common themes for the involvement in clubs and organizations category were Greek Life, Black Student Union (BSU), Black Men United (BMU) and National Council for Negro Women (NCNW). Themes that fell under the category of negative interactions with faculty and peers were discrimination, inappropriate comments, and lack of diversity awareness. The category for support system and motivation to attend college had common themes such as family and self-motivation. The last category for ways to focus more on student retention included themes such as financial support, faculty diversity, and better representation of students of color in the institution's marketing.

### **Research Question 1**

**Theme 1: Positive interactions and support from faculty.** Each of the participants provided me with good insight on their experiences with faculty. Some of the experiences with faculty were similar to those interactions with their peers. I was not surprised to learn that these interactions, both negative and positive played a significant

role in their overall academic and social experiences. For example, Participant 2 who did not always have positive interactions shared:

I guess mine is different because I am in a sorority. I am a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, but even that can be a struggle at a predominantly White institution. There are a lot of programs and opportunities that we would like to have on campus that would exist at an HBCU. My former advisor was a member of a non-Black sorority, so when we brought ideas to the table they were dismissed. They don't seem to understand our culture and our organizations.

In contrast to the statement from Participant 2, were the positive academic and social experiences of Participant 3 who stated:

For me, being an African American male nursing major, there are not many of us as you know. However, to be honest with you, I had a very good time during my first two years. A lot of the African American students tend to feel singled out at times. For me however, I took that and ran with it because I did not focus on the negative aspects of being a Black male nursing major. Instead it was more of a positive that I can use to my advantage instead of a disadvantage. I put myself in different situations in order to achieve the same opportunities as my peers.

**Theme 2: Clubs and organizations.** A majority of the participants shared the common theme of being involved in clubs that are specific to the African American student population such as the Black Student Union (BSU), Black Men United (BMU), National Council for Negro Women (NCNW), or African American fraternities and



sororities also known as the Divine Nine. There was one response to the social experiences of an African American student that was unexpected from Participant 7 explaining:

I'm a member of Delta Sigma Theta (DST), and I know financially some clubs and organizations receive stipends from the Student Government Association (SGA) on campus. We're not funded by the SGA but BSU and BMU receive money so I cannot say that all of our organizations aren't funded, but I know specifically for us as sororities, we don't receive funding.

This was interesting to uncover because institutions understand that funding is a major requirement to keep programs, clubs, and organizations fully operational. If the financial resources are limited, then this could hamper the success of the program and overall student satisfaction which would be reflected in the student retention outcomes.

**Theme 3: Negative interactions with faculty and peers.** When asked about the negative interactions that the participants experienced, common themes that emerged were discrimination, inappropriate comments, and lack of diversity awareness.

Participant 6 noted:

For me, I've been comfortable. Some of my faculty have been supportive, but it is still challenging for the Black students here. Mainly because nobody really looks like you and especially being in the business program, I would be lucky if there is one other Black person in my class.

Participant 10 also shared similar encounters explaining:

One of my professors made me really uncomfortable. It was an anthropology class and he just made me very uncomfortable. For one, I was the only person of color in the entire class so for me, my first semester was pretty hard.

**Theme 4: Motivation to attend college.** With 50% of the participants being first-generation college students, it was not a surprise to see a majority of their motivation to attend college being family or self-motivation. One participant stated that the motivation to attend college was their high school guidance counselor, but all others had similar support systems.

**Theme 5: More focus on student retention at a mid-Atlantic university.** It was instructive to hear the participant responses to ways that Mid-Atlantic can improve student retention. Many of the participants expressed the need for more financial aid awareness workshops prior to enrolling. For example, Participant 1 noted:

I think it would definitely be better if they offer more financial aid and make it easier to live financially on campus. I think even with just having more staff available to talk about these things within the financial aid office and have more workshops. I am not really sure what they do now, but I just think coming together to really tell people what options are available to them. Not knowing much was my headache.

Participant 2 also shared the same sentiments by stating:

For the financial issue, I think most students drop out because of academics and because the tuition is so expensive. I think they should really work on having a program to keep these students enrolled. I feel like the university should start

recruiting from within their local community to increase the African American student population and offer better scholarships that are needed.

## **Research Question 2**

**Theme 1: Positive interactions and support from faculty.** It was invaluable to speak with participants who majored in various subject areas at the university because the services and programs available differed based on the academic department. For example, Participant 3 explained:

If it weren't for me being actively involved, I wouldn't have started gaining those leadership qualities that I now have. For me, being so passionate about nursing and then being able to take a leadership role in my major, that opened doors for me. I figured maybe I can transition this into different clubs and organizations. Not just the nursing program courses, but even in my general education courses, I tried to connect with all of my professors inside and outside of the classroom, whether it be during their office hours or just talking in passing on campus.

**Theme 2: Clubs and organizations.** All of the participants were involved in a club or organization on campus, some within their major and others for extracurricular involvement. There was a pre-orientation program prior to their freshman year that many of the participants spoke of which encouraged them to get involved early on. When looking at the inclusiveness of clubs and organizations, Participant 5 noted:

When it comes to on campus events sponsored by multicultural organizations, I think that definitely does happen where students who are not African American feel uncomfortable, like that isn't for me. I have seen some of my White peers at

the events leave early because for the most part it's people of color in attendance and they feel as if they don't belong.

Participant 6 stated:

Socially, I met a lot of Black people mainly in the beginning, but I made sure that I did because I knew I was coming to a PWI. I would say early on I did form a connection with my African American peers, because I participated in the pre-orientation program. If I didn't participate in that program my experience would have been more difficult.

Participant 8 further explained:

The social climate is diverse, but it is catered to certain clubs more than others, just in terms of popularity and numbers. Those would be the clubs with the most attention and the ones with the most students involved. In terms of clubs and organizations that actually exist, I will say that Mid-Atlantic University does a good job of offering diverse clubs for every student to be involved in.

**Theme 3: Negative interactions with faculty and peers.** When asked about negative interactions within clubs or organizations, there were not many responses to show that the participants were dissatisfied. Participant 8 explained:

I don't think I've had a negative interaction with faculty yet. I think it's because of my major being the communications studies program. From what I'm told, those professors are not like the other professors on campus. They are open, they are understanding, and they want to have personal relationships with you. I communicate with all of my professors on a first name basis. So that's one issue

that I haven't had. Just learning other staff members and who they are, they are really open, but most staff members aren't going to know who you are unless you're involved on campus.

**Theme 4: Motivation to attend college.** For the question about their motivation to attend college, I was expecting to hear the participants mention the social experience in college as part of their motivation. Interestingly enough, this aspect was not a motivational factor for the participants.

**Theme 5: More focus on student retention at a mid-Atlantic university.** The programs and services available on campus play a significant role in the student success and retention rates. If students are not engaged while enrolled at an institution, particularly being a minority and not feeling a sense of belonging, they may consider transferring to another school especially if they are further away from home or dropping out of college altogether due to one bad experience. In response to ways that Mid-Atlantic University can help African American students persist toward graduation. Participant 2 shared "I think they should work on having a program to keep these students here to keep them from dropping out." Participant 10 stated "Just having activities and engaging the students more. I just feel like it's a boring school."

### **Discrepant Cases**

In my study, I did not discover any variance in the outcomes or data that did not confirm the findings from the research. When coding my transcripts, there were not any significant outliers. The reason for this could be a result of my small sample size of only 10 participants, all of the same ethnic background with similar experiences at their 4-year

PWI. All of my participants experienced positive and negative interactions with their faculty and peers, all of my participants were involved in clubs and organizations on campus, all of my participants had a motivation to attend college, one being their HS guidance counselor and the others family and self-motivation. Every participant provided ideas for ways that the institution can place more focus on retaining students of color. In order to detect discrepant cases, the data must ensure accuracy and credibility which was done on my behalf along with the participants who reviewed their transcript upon completion of the interview.

### **Evidence of Quality, Accuracy, and Credibility**

Prior to beginning the data analysis process, each participant was sent a copy of their transcript to review which helped validate the accuracy and credibility of the study. If there were any noted errors or statements that did not convey their words or ideas correctly, they were asked to share those changes to be made. Fortunately, every participant agreed with the data transcribed from their interview. To establish credibility, methods from different paradigms can be used or data collected from different sources, at different times (Birt, Scott, Caver, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Member checking which is also known as participant validation was important for the data collection process when focusing on credibility of the study's results. Using this participant validation technique, potential researcher bias can be reduced (Birt et al., 2016). In a qualitative study, much of the research is based on a respondent's personal lived experience, often times leaving trustworthiness to be questioned. As phenomena interpretations can change over time, it is necessary to ensure as much trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry as possible. (Birt et

al., 2016). A strategy that I used for credibility of the data's results, was returning the transcript of the interview to each participant for their review as this can potentially increase the accuracy of the data (Birt et al., 2016). This epistemological stance enhanced the credibility by implying that there is truth and value in the data collected (Birt et al., 2016).

### **Project Deliverable**

An outcome of this research study is a professional development/training plan that is designed to include ways that 4-year PWIs can increase diversity awareness and understand the minority student experience. Recent data shows that graduation rates for African American students from 4-year PWIs are lower than those of their White counterparts. The professional development plan will present ideas to help faculty and administrators support the success of all students, increase their cultural competence, and an outcomes-based evaluation plan that may provide valuable feedback to improve the experience for minority students through ongoing trainings and further recommendations.

The findings of this study uncovered qualitative data that aligns with the research problem and research questions. The participants recounted their academic and social experiences while enrolled at a 4-year PWI. There were many similarities in the experiences of the 10 participants that ranged from their interactions with faculty and their peers to their involvement with clubs and organizations that were predominantly African American student based. I found that 80% of the participants felt that increasing college financial literacy prior to students enrolling would improve the retention rates of

minority students at Mid-Atlantic University, compared to the 20% who felt that hiring more faculty of color would make a difference in student retention.

There were five prominent themes that were produced from my data analysis that included diversity awareness, stereotypes, social organizations, family support, and financial aid. The data supported my preexisting notion that the academic and social experiences of African American students has a significant impact on their success and retention while enrolled at PWIs. Although many of the participants shared that they are satisfied with the amount of clubs and organizations offered at Mid-Atlantic University that do cater to a diverse group of students, they would like to see more inclusivity and support at events sponsored by specific organizations on campus. For example, if the Black Student Union hosts a fundraiser or gathering, the support of all students, faculty, and administrators would be welcomed. I did assume that financial literacy workshops for students and their families prior to enrolling would be beneficial. Especially for first-generation students who lack the necessary knowledge prior to committing to such an important lifetime investment such as a college tuition. I was surprised by the number of participants that agreed with this assumption.

Based on these previous findings, Section 3 will provide a detailed explanation of the proposed Meeting Students Where They Are professional development/training plan. Some of the specific areas covered will include a description of the project, rationale, literature review, project evaluation plan, and the project's possible implications for social change.



### Section 3: The Project

The purpose of this study was to explore faculty and administrators' understanding of diversity and inclusive practice in higher education and to identify supportive services needed to help all students be successful learners. Education is important for all citizens, including military, disabled, first-generation, and other populations that are unique because of their background experiences and makeup. The current study addressed how each student be embraced in a way that makes them feel accepted and respected in the learning community. For this study, a professional development/training plan was designed for faculty from all academic areas and student affairs administrators in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The goal of the 3-day professional development and training is to educate leaders in higher education about the importance of being available to service the needs of all learners regardless of their backgrounds and experiences.

Each professional development session is dedicated to a specific topic: the minority experience in higher education, creating an inclusive learning environment, and walking in someone else's shoes. Near the conclusion of the 3-day professional development and training sessions, role playing will be the final activity to assess how well each participant understood the information throughout the course of each day. This professional development and training can be facilitated through an institution's office of diversity, office of multicultural affairs, or any other department on campus that focuses on equity and inclusiveness in the learning environment.

## **Rationale**

The 3-day professional development and training program to explore existing knowledge about diversity awareness will address the areas where support is most needed to help all students be successful in their collegiate journey. The problem addressed in the current study was that in African American students who attend 4-year PWIs tend to have lower graduation rates than their White counterparts. The findings showed that African American juniors and seniors who attend PWIs encounter more challenges that significantly impact their academic success and social interactions among their peers, faculty, and administrators.

In my one-one interviews with current African American junior and senior students, I found that interactions with faculty and administrators play a role in students' engagement, involvement on campus, level of comfort, and academic success. For example, students pointed out that it was common for stereotypical or biased comments to be made regarding race from both faculty and peers. With all students majoring in different subject areas, I noted that some academic programs are worse than others. Some students shared stories in which privileges were given to their White counterparts such as submitting assignments late or retaking exams. In my collection of data, I also noted that faculty and administrator support need to be at the forefront of student success and retention. Although I found positive interactions among students and faculty, diversity awareness and inclusivity appeared to be lacking on this predominantly White campus. Findings from this study may positively impact the experience of African American

students who attend PWIs by boosting student retention and helping them persist toward graduation.

### **Review of the Literature**

A professional development project is an effective choice for helping faculty and administrators understand the challenges that African American students face inside and outside of the classroom while enrolled at a 4-year PWI. This project may also help faculty and administrators develop best practices for interacting with students from different backgrounds, create an inclusive learning environment on predominantly White campuses, and embrace all students so that everyone feels accepted and treated equally among their peers. I conducted a literature review associated with topics focusing on professional development of cultural competence, including teaching professional development and microaggressions in college. The following database resources within the Walden library were used to research peer-reviewed scholarly articles that were published in 2015 or later: Academic Search Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Source, and SAGE Journals. The following key terms were used to narrow my search for scholarly articles relevant to my study: *minority experience in higher education, professional development for diversity awareness, diversity awareness, Black students at predominantly White institutions, biases in education, diversity and inclusion in higher education, microaggressions in college, equality in higher education, supporting Black students, faculty diversity in higher education, and college graduation rates*. Along with researching databases in the Walden library, I also conducted a general search using the internet for additional information related to the

minority experience at PWIs and ideas to design my professional development plan. The following review included relevant studies that helped me formulate the basis for my professional development plan.

### **Professional Development for Cultural Competence**

To produce anticipated outcomes and see a shift in the preexisting knowledge, a professional development plan must show balance that demonstrates best practices and highlight some of the most pressing issues that the learner needs to focus on. In higher education, a professional development session is necessary because diversity awareness is a hot topic and now is the best time to learn as much as possible about the needs of student populations that institutions serve (S. Cox, 2018). Professional development opportunities for teachers in intercultural education can motivate teachers to engage with a level of sensitivity and transform their knowledge into their pedagogical actions (Pinho, 2015; Sandell & Tupy, 2016). Based on current enrollment demographics, colleges and universities must prepare themselves to service a student population that is more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other time in U.S. history (Kruse, Rakha, & Calderone, 2018). Although many higher education institutions have been working to increase diversity awareness and promote inclusivity, Kruse et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of creating strong and effective professional learning in cultural competency. An agenda for professional learning and development can include the following anticipated outcomes:

- increased sense of efficacy among faculty that results in student persistence and success;

- increased sense of satisfaction with educational opportunities and services among faculty, staff, and students; and
- a greater collective responsibility for all students' educational outcomes (Kruse et al., 2018).

A professional development plan focusing on cultural diversity and inclusivity should include four core components that can transform a valuable learning experience into a collective institution wide responsibility. To acknowledge cultural differences and how they may influence the delivery of educational programs, (Christianakis, 2019; Saiki, Snell, & Bhanji, 2017), a professional development plan should provide an impactful learning experience for professionals at all levels in their careers. Teaching without this approach may lead to lost learning opportunities (Saiki et al., 2017). Shared basic conceptions and knowledge, professional learning at all levels of the organization, inclusive instructional methods, and aligning with other diversity-related initiatives are all areas that can be strong predictors of training success if integrated (Kruse et al., 2018). Although other professional development plans focus on diversity awareness training for specific departments, campus members who directly interact with students would benefit most from professional development that focuses on cultural competency to understand how it is experienced and practiced (Hermond, Vairez, & Tanner, 2018; Morettini, Brown, & Viator, 2019). Professional development should not only focus on cultural differences among students, but should also be important for leaders in academia to be reflective of their own culture (Geerlings, Thompson, Bouma, & Hawkins, 2018). Although every institution has its own unique set of challenges when focusing on cultural

competence among faculty and staff, to be effective a professional development plan should be specific, clear, and knowledge based (Kruse et al., 2018).

A guide that introduces best practices should be a plan that aligns with specific institutional goals. The desired outcomes of cultural competence development can be cognitive, attributional, experimental, and/or behavioral (Kruse et al., 2018). Each professional development outcome will place a different focus on the needs of the individual and their self-defined purpose. For example, professional development for cognitive outcomes may focus on misconceptions or stereotypes about different groups of people, while a desired outcome that is attributional may focus on understanding cultural differences and how a person's cultural history impacts their behavior (Kruse et al., 2018).

An awareness of and commitment to cultural competence will vary at higher education institutions because just as the student demographics are different, the makeup of faculty, staff, and administrators has its own uniqueness. There will be different skill sets, background knowledge, and levels of understanding working to meet the needs of the institution. The goal of professional development for cultural competence is to support the social structures that make higher education institutions places where the entire learning community can thrive by experiencing consideration, respect, and ongoing support.

### **Inclusive Teaching Professional Development**

African American students often encounter societal and systemic barriers that impede their college success. There is notable struggle with underrepresentation, social

isolation, academic hurdles, and racial stereotyping from their peers and professors (New, 2016); teaching approaches concentrating on the diverse study body (Moriña, Cortés-Vega, & Molina, 2015); and equal academic outcomes of minority students, first-generation students, students from lower SES backgrounds, and other marginalized groups of students (Schmid, Gillian-Daniel, Kraemer, & Kueppers, 2016). Institutional barriers that can negatively impact African American student achievement at PWIs are the following:

- overall campus climate around diversity;
- faculty diversity;
- class size; and
- access to the major, instructional approaches, and types of academic supports in place for at-risk students (Schmid, et al., 2016).

Although there are several factors that can negatively impact academic success for students of color, it is important for institutions to take into consideration the quality of instructors as being the most influential factor affecting student achievement that campus leadership can control. The process for creating a professional development plan that is centered on inclusive teaching must include initiatives that are engaging, relevant, and appealing to a diverse group of learners (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2019; Rodesiler & McGuire, 2015). Working to implement best practices for inclusive teaching will address inequities by having instructors engage in professional development and training that focuses on a specific topic that supports all students (Dalton, Lyner-Cleophas, Ferguson, & McKenzie, 2019; Levesque-Bristol et al., 2019; Schmid et al., 2016). Before beginning

the process of preparing instructors to teach more inclusively to their diverse student population, these individuals must first understand the issues facing students of color through cultural responsiveness and policies and practices that can favor or hinder the path toward inclusion (Endo, 2015; Heitner & Jennings, 2016; Sánchez, Rodríguez, & Maldonado-Martínez, 2018).

An effective professional development and training session will start by allowing instructors to self-reflect and acknowledge their unconscious and implicit biases that could include issues of White privilege and degree of multicultural knowledge (Schmid et al., 2016). Using a cross-disciplinary approach in a professional development and training session by creating groups of different instructional or departmental cohorts (i.e. arts, sciences, humanities, student affairs, disability services) may encourage collaboration that is learner centered, innovative, and evidence based. Everyone in the group may have unique experiences to share that could inform their practice in academia. Overall, a professional development for inclusive teaching should educate to close achievement and equity gaps, provide a space for self-reflection, create a better understanding of all students, and encourage best practices.

### **Microaggressions in College**

The civil rights movement was a period in history during the 1950s and 1960s when African Americans gained equal rights, racial discrimination was banned, and resources for African Americans were more accessible. It was no longer acceptable to be openly prejudiced against people of color, which made this movement one of the greatest historical achievements. Although racism in some instances is not as blatantly



demonstrated as it was during the civil rights era, it still exists, and racial beliefs from early in life are influenced by cognitive and conative components (Ford, 2015; Patterson & Domenech Rodriguez, 2019). Racism and microaggressions create a negative school climate and impact educational achievement according to students of color who attend PWIs (Patterson & Domenech Rodriguez, 2019). When students of color encounter microaggressions directed toward them, their sense of belonging is decreased and their emotional stress is increased, which hampers their academic success.

According to Patterson and Domenech Rodriguez (2019), the term microaggression was first described as “subtle, stunning, often automatic and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put-downs’ of blacks by offenders” (p. 128). Raising awareness about the impact of prejudices, biases, and microaggressions on all college campuses at a time when the demographics in higher education are becoming more diverse is invaluable for the success of all students (Felix & Castro, 2018; Mills, 2020). Since there has been backlash for improving campus climates and challenging structural racism at PWIs (Jones & Reddick, 2017), addressing issues of racial and ethnic injustice must shoulder the responsibility to support student development in alignment with the institutional mission (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016). Prejudicial bias has shifted from overt racism to a more covert modern racism which could make raising awareness on this difficult to achieve (Patterson & Domenech Rodriguez, 2019; Willis, 2015). Although there are still some individuals who exercise blatant racism, there are others who operate under a colorblind racial ideology. Despite evidence to the contrary or the reality, this ideology maintains the status quo that people are the same across all racial groups and have the

same opportunities (Patterson & Domenech Rodriguez, 2019). Supporting a colorblind racial ideology would mean that an individual prefers to remain neutral. Neutrality can sometimes bypass the problem, which then helps the oppressor rather than the victim (Patterson & Domenech Rodriguez, 2019). Although microaggressions can be unintentional, they are behaviors that can be insulting, convey rudeness, and/or demean a person's racial identity (Lee & Hopson, 2019). Given the current climate of racism in the United States, it is important for institutions to be aware of the negative impact that racialized communication can have on the learning environment.

This review of the literature linked the student of color college experience with the need for improvement in the roles of those individuals who are on campus to guide and support all students. The literature that has been reviewed is instrumental in creating a professional development plan that focuses on inclusive teaching, cultural competence, and microaggressions in college which will be used to guide the overall development of the project.

### **Project Description**

The design of the professional development plan will consist of three full days of training with two breakout group sessions, one at the start and conclusion of each day. On day one, the start of the day will be used for an icebreaker activity allowing everyone to introduce themselves, their role in higher education, and what they hope to learn from the professional development experience. At the beginning of days two and three, the groups will discuss what they learned from the previous day and what questions remain to be answered. Content for three specific topics: The Minority Experience in Higher

Education, Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment, and Stereotypes vs.

Microaggressions will be spread out over the course of the three days. At the end of day three, everyone will be assigned to a partner to complete a stereotype vs. microaggression activity. This final activity will assess the participants' knowledge of information that has been shared throughout the three days of professional development. It will be an interactive activity that challenges each participant to reflect and think unconventionally so that they can gain a better understanding of what a student of color experiences on a predominantly White campus.

Each day of the professional development will introduce new concepts and ideologies that encompass unconscious and implicit biases surrounding multiculturalism in society. Day one of professional development will be broken into segments covering the minority experience in higher education, the value that academic support has on retention of students of color, and the importance of positive student-faculty interactions. To begin the minority experience in higher education professional development day, responses from recent interviews with African American juniors and seniors enrolled at a PWI will be shared. These shared responses will provide insight on the academic and social experiences of African American juniors and seniors. The focus for day two will be creating an inclusive learning environment which will consist of topics such as diversity, what comes to mind when that word is mentioned, and best practices to support marginalized groups of students. To wrap up this day of professional development, the groups will share what diversity means to them, resources that could be implemented to

help all students be successful, and lastly how an institution can collaborate to create an inclusive learning environment.

The third and final day of professional development will be the day to reflect on everything learned over the past two days which will lead right into the closing topic of stereotypes and microaggressions. Beginning with a review of the minority experience in higher education and unique backgrounds and learning styles, each group will discuss the various stereotypes associated with individuals from different backgrounds. After providing the attendees with the definitions, research to support the definitions, and examples of stereotypes and microaggressions, the day will culminate with role playing as the final activity. To gain a realistic experience and better understanding of what students of color encounter on predominantly White campuses, the attendees will partner up to create phrases for the audience to guess whether the statement is an example of a stereotype or microaggression. The goal is for each attendee to have a better understanding of all students while reflecting on some of their own existing practices that can improve at the conclusion of this interactive three-day experience.

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

Many colleges and universities already have funds allotted in the institution's budget to support departmental professional development throughout the academic year. The budget that currently exists would need to be reviewed to ensure that adequate resources are available to support the professional development project. Miscellaneous expenses associated with hosting professional development and training sessions on a campus would be for items such as food and additional classrooms materials to provide

attendees with. If recommendations are made following the professional development sessions, such as the increase of minority faculty members for added support of students, the institution's budget may need to go under further review.

### **Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers**

Potential barriers to this project would be resources to make the necessary changes toward improvement and possible ongoing support from faculty and administrators to continue effective diversity trainings. When improvements are needed at an institution, resources to support specific changes such as new hires, new programs, or leadership development opportunities may present a challenge. Along with additional resources, ongoing support could be a potential barrier. With new ideas and change can come hesitation or rejection which can hamper the success of this project. A final potential barrier would be the time needed for the three-day professional development sessions. A solution to this potential barrier would be planning the professional development sessions in advance to align with the institution's academic calendar and each participating department's calendar of events to avoid scheduling conflicts.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timeline**

The timeline for the professional development plan is to begin implementation at the beginning of the fall semester which is typically in the month of August and continue planning throughout the duration of the academic year, August – May. It is my recommendation that the Office of Diversity and other members facilitating this professional development meet 2-3 times during the fall semester and 2-3 times during the spring semester to effectively plan the consecutive three-day professional

development sessions to be held during the summer months, May-August. Contingent on administrative support and approval, the professional development sessions should be scheduled during the business days when all participating members are on campus. The summer months would be highly recommended to host the three-day professional development and training sessions because there are less activities taking place on campus which would open availability for rooms, participants, and calendar scheduling. This would also be beneficial as one academic year closes for participants to reflect and another academic year is ramping up to resume for participants to brainstorm and prepare.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

There are a few key roles needed to successfully implement the Meeting Students Where They Are professional development plan. Everyone involved will be instrumental in carrying out this plan. I will serve the role as the instructor who develops and implements the three-day professional development and training sessions. The administrators within the Office of Diversity, Multicultural Affairs, or other offices that focus on equity and inclusiveness in education will have a dual role to serve the host of the three-day sessions for their institution as well as facilitating the reflections in the days to follow the professional development and trainings. The roles of the individual participants will be active listening, observation, and collaboration with other administrators and staff on campus for future workshops and trainings. They will also be responsible for the ongoing implementation of best practices when interacting with students.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

In higher education, colleges and universities should center professional development around individual career success and as a result, student success (Edwards, 2020). Using an outcomes-based evaluation plan to assess how the professional development plan aligns with this research study will best determine the effectiveness of new processes to be implemented and goals for future training sessions. An outcomes-based evaluation can add substance to the professional development plan as it will provide foundations for continuous improvement of diversity awareness issues within higher education (Shen, Qi, Liu, Ma, & Zheng, 2018). To understand if the results have been achieved from the professional development, it is essential to focus on the learning outcomes, organization support and change, and new knowledge and skills presented. According to Kartal, Dogan, Irez, Cakmakci, and Yalaki (2019), an effective evaluation model consists of a five-level design: (a) reactions to the professional development program (b) learning about the content (c) whether the professional development programs make a difference in beliefs and learning content (d) whether the professional development programs make a difference in practice and (e) learning outcomes (p.406). These five important areas can be used to assess the efficacy of an evaluation plan created to meet the goals of the professional development. The overall purpose of the evaluation plan is to determine the benefit of the professional development, which would ultimately be improving diversity awareness initiatives campus wide that would lend to supporting the success of all students, particularly students of color who attend PWIs.

The outcomes-based evaluation plan used in this study is a fundamental method for gauging if the professional development plan is achieving its intended results. Participants will be asked to complete an electronic survey at the conclusion of the professional development sessions. The hosts of the professional development will designate one individual from the planning team to distribute the survey to each participant's email. This project evaluation form (Appendix A) administered will provide effective feedback and suggestions for future on campus diversity trainings. The information gathered from this survey will serve as data for the institution's executive team that provides insight on the effectiveness of hosting these trainings in the future based on the content and learning outcomes. The stakeholders who the results of the evaluation will be shared with include faculty department chairs and administrative directors who can utilize the data to strengthen their department's cultural competence through continued trainings. It is important to understand that evaluations of the effectiveness of professional development programs can be complex as some institutional leaders may be reluctant to implement change initiatives based on the results (Kartal et al., 2019). This is why it is necessary to use an evaluation plan that incorporates data at various levels with as much relevant information as possible that focuses solely on the outcomes.

## **Project Implications**

### **Local Stakeholders**

This project was designed to advocate for positive social change in the development of diversity awareness and equality in education initiatives at 4-year PWIs.



As higher education continues to evolve, it is important for all stakeholders who are instrumental in student success to adapt to the everchanging diverse student populations by employing best practices in their daily interactions. Comparing White students to African American students, previous studies identified disparities in terms of college preparation, social experiences, and academic success on predominantly White campuses. Creating a holistic plan that uses professional development and trainings to focus on the minority experience in higher education can bridge the academic achievement gap that exists at 4-year PWIs. A professional development plan that allows for faculty and administrators to improve their knowledge can ultimately lead to the success of the students. The targeted population for this project is at 4-year PWIs, but other types of higher education institutions can potentially benefit from this project with similar stakeholders within the learning community.

### **Larger Context**

This project in a larger context can possibly improve the success rates for African American students enrolled at PWIs throughout the country. As key stakeholders collaborate with colleagues and outside community members, other institutions may find that the Meeting Students Where They Are professional development plan can potentially bring added value to their overall retention and success rates. Diversity in higher education is growing at institutions nationwide and it is imperative that faculty and administrators have the knowledge and skillsets needed to effectively engage with students of all backgrounds and unique learning styles. Section 4 focuses on reflections and conclusions of this project study. Some of the areas discussed will be the project's

strengths and limitations, recommendations for alternative approaches, reflection on the importance of the work, and a personal reflection that supports implications for future research.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of Section 4 is to explain the strengths and limitations of the study and project through my personal reflections on the work and what was learned. I also describe ways that the project can address the problem differently by presenting alternative approaches and solutions to the problem through my personal reflections as a scholar. This is followed by the project's potential positive impact for social change at the appropriate level. Section 4 concludes with implications and directions for future research.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Project Strengths**

There were many strengths that supported the study and project related to African American student success at PWIs. The local problem and research-based evidence presented in the study indicated that administrators and faculty at PWIs lack some of the foundational knowledge and understanding that is critical for helping students of color succeed on their campuses. Understanding and addressing issues of student retention includes ways to improve mentorship for Black undergraduate students enrolled at PWIs (Reddick & Pritchett, 2016). The Meeting Students Where They Are professional development/training sessions provide leaders who actively engage with students on predominantly White campuses with a comprehensible plan that focuses on bridging the gap that exists between their roles and the success of all students from various backgrounds. To support this study and research-based evidence, the professional development plan included active learning through collaboration with individuals from

the academic and student affairs divisions. This professional development plan provided an evidence-based understanding of the interactions and partnerships that are necessary to achieve an institutional culture that supports the success of all students. This project focused on the current progress of the institution and established a plan to determine the next steps toward improvement in areas to support student success that are lacking.

### **Project Limitations**

The first limitation of this project was the amount of informational content shared, which consisted of minimal participant involvement. If more activities were included throughout the professional development each day, this would not only increase participant engagement, but it would also allow more time for the participants to think creatively by incorporating their ideas based on past experiences and interactions. The second limitation was solely focusing on a predominantly White audience that have not experienced the same challenges as minority students. The student population on predominantly White campuses has become more diverse, which would signify a need for more diversity training among leaders in higher education. All races could benefit from a project that teaches the importance of diversity awareness and working to support students of color, which could be reflected in the project's content.

The third limitation of the project was that only one PWI was used to facilitate a training about the minority experience in higher education. There is a need for this type of professional development at many PWIs. Instead of limiting the professional development to one campus, it should be opened to other institutions to impact more campuses.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

Although the Meeting Students Where They Are professional development/training plan is one way to raise awareness of the challenges that students of color face on predominantly White campuses, there are alternative approaches that may be beneficial. If hosting the 3-day professional development sessions during the summer months presents a conflict, the university may consider smaller diversity-focused workshops to be held during the academic year. These smaller workshops can take the lessons from the 3-day professional development sessions and use each topic for 1 to 2-hour meeting sessions throughout the fall and spring semesters. Hosting diversity-focused workshops throughout the academic year could be advantageous for faculty and administrators because each topic in the professional development plan supports their ongoing interactions with students of color. Diversity-focused workshops as an alternative approach may encourage consistent improvement that incorporates best practices.

### **Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change**

#### **Scholarship**

The mindset and characteristics of a scholar include active listening, observational learning, analytical problem-solving, cognitive processing, and applying best practices to educate others. Looking at my personal scholarly journey over the years, I have learned more about myself as a researcher, writer, and educator. This road traveled has not always been an easy one. Having been a traditional student in my undergraduate program and years later working as a single parent throughout my graduate program, I understood

what it meant to be a nontraditional student and the many obstacles that can be placed in the path toward degree attainment. Lifelong learning is a process that focuses on self-development and does not always occur in an educational environment. As a self-proclaimed lifelong learner, I accredit my scholarship to patience, diligence, perseverance, accountability, determination, and awareness of the world around me. On my journey I have met some phenomenal leaders in higher education. These individuals have supported my vision and shared innovative ideas that have contributed to my work as a scholar practitioner. I seek to be an advocate for positive social change in higher education, and my scholarship has allowed me to implement ideas supported by scholarly research.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

Having worked at the site school as the assistant director of multicultural admissions, I had the opportunity to liaise with several departments on campus, which included the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Office of Diversity, Office of Civic Engagement, Student Affairs, Residence Life, Financial Services, and the Nursing department. My primary role in admissions was the first point of contact with students. Once students were enrolled, my interactions with various departments throughout the academic year supported the retention of each student. I witnessed firsthand the gap between enrollment and graduation that existed for African American students at a PWI. African American students on this campus did not seem to graduate at the rate of their White counterparts despite having the same resources and opportunities available on campus. Through a variety of diversity awareness trainings, personal learning

experiences, and one-on-one conversations with African American students, some of which have been presented in this study, I learned that cultural sensitivity trainings and workshops are necessary. My professional development project was created to raise awareness and initiate improvement in key areas such as the minority experience in higher education, faculty-student interactions, peer-to-peer communication, and acknowledgement of the stereotypes and biases that are prevalent on predominantly White college campuses. The project that I developed is the foundation for what will require ongoing training sessions as the demographics in higher education continue to diversify and new faculty and administrators are introduced to their roles.

### **Leadership and Change**

Following the concept shared by Gandhi, to be the change that I wish to see in my field of higher education, I must first be willing to acknowledge the problems that exist, address them transparently, and take a stance by bringing awareness to them for others to see. Although change is necessary, the reality is that sometimes there may be an army of one called to action. As a leader who advocates for positive social change and equality in education, I am confident in my abilities to initiate and carry out a transformative plan.

A leader should be able to motivate others to work toward achieving one common goal; however, resistance to change can impede the progress toward success. There is strength in numbers; therefore, I believe that many are called but few are chosen to educate and lead young people. Having a vision, plan, collaborative mindset, and a strong passion to see all students succeed, a leader who seeks change can easily influence others to do the same.

### **Reflection on Importance of the Work**

This project study is important because it addresses several issues in higher education that have hampered the success of African American students since before the civil rights movement. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in political protests and social action among African American students who attend PWIs to address their experiences of racism and inequalities on campus. The current study focused on the issues that hinder African American students from graduating from 4-year PWIs and the areas that these institutions need to improve upon to see an increase in graduation rates from this student population.

In my study, African American college students enrolled at PWIs shared that if they knew what their experiences would be like prior to enrolling, they would have attended an HBCU where they would have felt part of a more inclusive environment. The interpersonal and institutional experiences that many African American students encounter at PWIs impact their motivation to persist through college and graduate. Civil rights activists fought to end segregation and inequalities that African Americans still face, which further emphasizes the importance of this work. As more research is conducted on equality in higher education, hopefully there will be a shift in the overall experiences and success rates of African American students attending PWIs. The purpose of this project study was to explore the academic and social experiences of African American students and ways to improve in these areas. I learned that on the surface it may seem as if African Americans have come a long way, but in reality there is still work



to be done to change the academic and social trajectory of African American students who attend PWIs.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

#### **Implications**

The results of this study on improved institutional best practices can impact positive social change by increasing the success rates of African American students at PWIs. The findings in this study related to the academic and social experiences of African American students on predominantly White campuses may encourage the faculty and administrators at the institution to move beyond enrollment of students of color to increase diversity and focus on ways to help these students persist toward graduation. Participants in the project study were enthusiastic about awareness being brought to some of the issues they have faced and were hopeful about seeing positive change at their PWI and institutions with similar demographics and challenges. I am optimistic about positive social change taking place regarding the college graduation gap that exists among African American and White students at PWIs.

#### **Applications**

The research study and the Meeting Students Where They Are professional development plan aligned with the local and broader problem in higher education. As a result of this study, there may be policy changes within higher education that would require continuous trainings and workshops throughout the academic year that focus on best practices for faculty and administrators who work with diverse student populations. The interviews used to collect data for this study generated good follow-up inquiries that

provided a strong indication that students of color may now be encouraged to openly address their concerns with the leadership teams on their campus. The goal of this study was to examine the underlying issues that prevent African American students from graduating at the same rate of their White counterparts from 4-year PWIs. The purpose of the project was to create a comprehensible plan that faculty and administrators can use to change the trajectory of the African American student experience on a predominantly White campus. Now that the study has been concluded, I anticipate that PWIs will do a better job of promoting inclusivity, implementing best practices, and allowing students of color to speak out against the inequalities they experience academically and socially to receive the support that is needed to graduate.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This qualitative study addressed the experiences of African American juniors and seniors who attend a 4-year PWi. Although the participants were limited to this cohort of students who attend this one type of institution, there are implications that could be useful for future research to improve higher education overall. The first recommendation for future research would be to expand the study to include all students of color who attend PWIs as the graduation rates for those who identify as Latinx, Native American, Asian, Middle Eastern, and multiracial all differ in comparison to those who identify as White. Another recommendation would be to explore other types of PWIs, not just 4-year institutions. Future research could address the graduation rates at community colleges, technical colleges, and junior colleges. Attending a 4-year institution is not a route that every student chooses to take, and higher education is now becoming more diversified

than ever. Therefore, it would be beneficial to research ideas for improvement or best practices that can be implemented at all types of institutions with diverse student populations. Yielding data from faculty and administrators of color at PWIs that will provide insight on their experiences can also add another layer to future research that focuses on the academic success of students of color.

### **Conclusion**

As an African American who graduated from a 4-year PWI and had unique academic and social experiences of my own along the way, I found this study to not only be relevant to the climate of today's society but particularly within the realm of higher education. Inequality in education has been a longstanding issue and whether it is acknowledged or not, according to the available data and resources, it is a problem that does still exist. Working in the field of higher education for over 10 years on both the enrollment and retention side, I found it necessary to look beyond my own experiences and research the work of others that focuses on this problem. In addition to researching studies related to my topic of interest, having an opportunity to interview current African American juniors and seniors provided me with even more insight on the issues that we as leaders in higher education need to be focusing on.

When I initially started my study, I simply stated the problem and purpose having no idea what the outcome would be or how this could change my life on a personal and professional level. Now combining the study and project which aligns with all of my research, I feel a greater purpose and need to share what I have learned with my

colleagues, my students, and my children as they go further down their educational path and professional journey someday.

In order for positive social change to occur, it truly takes a collaborative team of individuals who are passionate about their purpose. I am now confident in knowing at the end of my study that my sole purpose is to be the voice for the silenced, the advocate for the underrepresented, and the visionary leader for the overall improvement of educational diversity and equality. I now carry an abundance of knowledge to be applied to the ongoing work that needs to take place at many institutions of higher education as I hold myself accountable for being a leader and change agent in this field.

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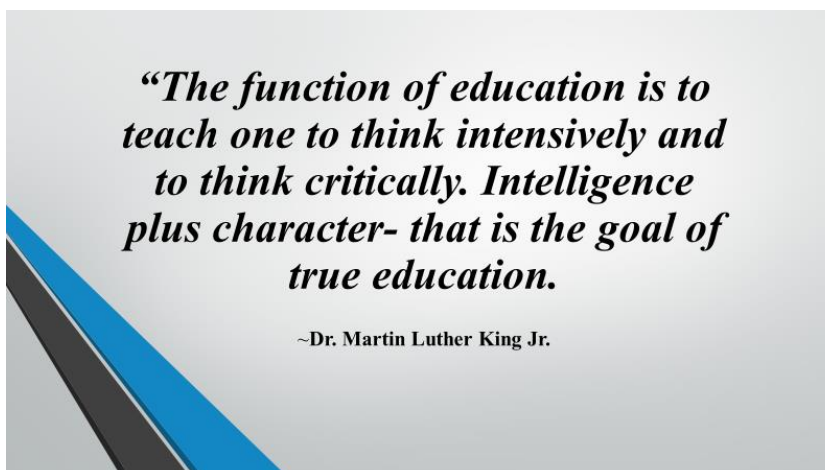
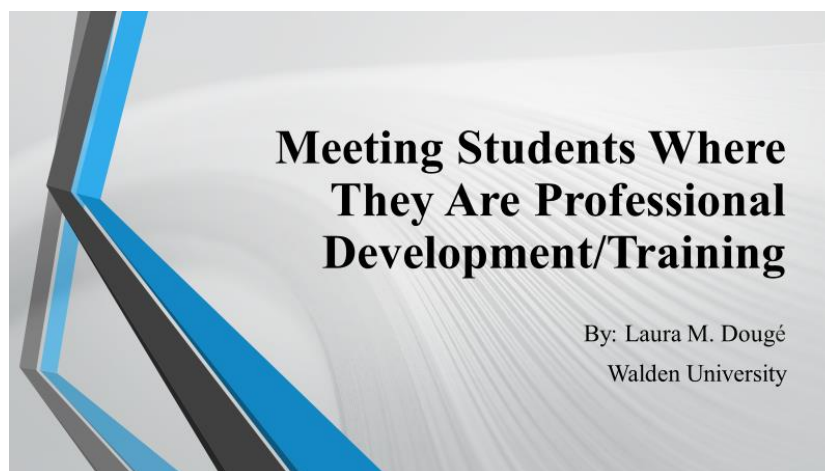
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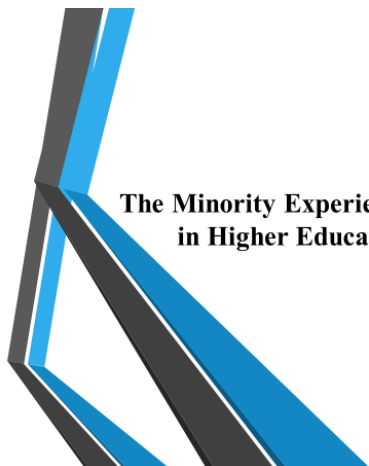
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## Appendix A: Professional Development/Training Support Plan



**Welcome to a 3-Day Professional Development/Training Experience**

<b>Purpose/Target Audience:</b>	<b>Goals:</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes:</b>
To educate those who directly interact with students about the importance of being readily available to service the needs of all learners regardless of their unique backgrounds and experiences.	Education is key for all future citizens of our society... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Understanding Diversity</li> <li>➤ How do we embrace all students to make them a feel 100% members of the learning community?</li> <li>➤ Why is inclusion so important?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To recognize stereotypes so that they can be confronted directly</li> <li>2. Understand what biases are and bring them to the forefront in an educational setting</li> <li>3. Responding to microaggressions in the classroom</li> </ol>
Target Audience: Faculty Members, Student Affairs and Office of Diversity professionals.		



## The Minority Experience in Higher Education

# DAY ONE

*Why are students of color who attend predominantly white institutions not persisting toward graduation at the rate of their white counterparts?*

### Academic Support

Historically, research has treated African American youth as a monolithic group demonstrating below standard achievement on traditional measurements of academic performance (i.e. standardized tests, grades, college enrollment rates) in comparison to US averages across all levels of education (Hudley, 2016).

For students to feel a sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy, supportive relationships with teachers and administrators are needed to predict students' academic engagement and social-emotional well-being (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016).



## TRUE OR FALSE?

Negative interactions in high school may potentially be detrimental for a student's academic and social development in college?

## TRUE

In order to shift to more positive trajectories at the college level, motivation, preparation, and support should be implemented in the high schools with a more diverse student population.

## Student-Faculty Interactions

**When students embark on their collegiate journey, this educational experience should prepare them with courses, faculty, administrators, and resources that will help them succeed in a multicultural community.**

## Problem vs Resolution

**1.** Not enough faculty diversity

**2.** Engaging with students of color from a "colorblind perspective"

**1.** Students deserve to feel a presence from leaders who can be mentors and role models by providing a relatable perspective of justice and equality inside and outside of the classroom.

**2.** According to a recent study, White faculty members who mentored students of color on their campuses often engaged with their students using race-neutral, colorblind language that avoided but implied racial terminology (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015).



## PEER to PEER INTERACTIONS

Although there has been progression for racial and cultural minorities, racism still remains a prevalent and lived reality for many people of color, especially within higher education (Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, & Jackson, 2015).

## Problem vs Resolution

**1.** Many students tend to feel more comfortable socializing with those who “look like them”.


**1.** A 2014 study has shown that cross-racial interactions have a greater effect on African American students’ sense of belonging than other students who feel that interacting with others outside of their race does not impact their idea of acceptance. (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

**2.** A lack of clubs and organizations on campus that recognize all backgrounds (i.e. cultures, ethnicities, gender identity, religions).

**2.** Conduct a student climate survey each academic year for students to offer suggestions of clubs and organizations that they would like to see on campus

## Day 1- Wrap Up

- **Academic Support**
  - ALL students should feel a sense of “belonging”
- **College preparation implemented “early”**
  - High schools with diverse student populations help to prepare students for college early on
  - Partner with local colleges and universities to help students have a smoother transition
  - Offer summer bridge programs
- **Student-Faculty/ Peer-Peer Interactions**
  - Be a resource to help students of color succeed academically
  - More trainings/professional development opportunities
  - Create more inclusive clubs and organizations to help interact and build positive relationships



**Creating an  
Inclusive Learning  
Environment**

## **DAY TWO**



### **ALL BACKGROUNDS AND LEARNING STYLES ARE WELCOME!**

African American students attending PWIs are often transitioning from racially segregated neighborhoods and high schools, because of this, their racial minority status takes on particular significance in understanding their postsecondary success (Keels, 2013).



### **WE ARE ALL UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS**

**What comes to mind  
when you hear the word  
“DIVERSITY”???**



## FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS

Known to enroll in college at lower rates than continuing-generation students (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).

### NORMAL TO FEEL:

- Nervousness - “Is college really for me”?
- Lack of Trust - “Who can help me”?
- Unfamiliarity - “Where do I go if I need X,Y, or Z”?
- Academic preparedness - “My high school did not have those resources”.

## WORKING WHILE ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

Low-income working students tend to work longer hours than their high-income counterparts. According to a 2018 report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University they tend to be Black, Latina, older, or female (St. Amour, 2019).

### FACTORS THAT MAY INTERFERE WITH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:

- Stress- “I have to support not only myself but my family too”
- Time Management- “I have to work late and study for an exam tomorrow”
- Loneliness- “No one understands what I’m going through”

## LACK OF RESOURCES

Many students who come from marginalized groups are at a disadvantage for reasons such as socioeconomic barriers, lack of available resources prior to attending college, and lack of peer counseling.

### HOW YOU CAN BECOME A VALUABLE RESOURCE:

- Institutional support- Collaborate with other institutions for support service ideas
- Combat negative stereotypes- Work with ALL students without pre-judgement
- Financial obligations- HS workshops, financial aid counseling.
  - *Difference between scholarships, grants, and loans*

## Day 2- Wrap Up

- **Diversity is not just about RACE**
  - There are differences in languages, religions, beliefs, cultural traditions, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation and so much more to be celebrated
- **First-generation, working college student, minimal resources**
  - Working to achieve one common goal: OBTAINING A COLLEGE DEGREE
- **Create an inclusive learning environment**
  - ALL students bring something “unique” to the learning environment. Learn about diversity, embrace it, and apply it to your daily interactions with students and colleagues

**Role Playing:  
Walking in  
Someone Else's  
Shoes**

## DAY THREE

### **Stereotypes vs. Microaggressions**

As incidences of overt racism and discrimination occur on college campuses across the country, understanding how students experience microaggressions has sparked an interest among higher education leaders (Ellis, Powell, Demetriou, Huerta-Bapat, & Panter, 2018).

## What are STEREOTYPES?

### Definition

Stereotype- An assumption or idea about a thing or group based on outer appearance or prejudgment which may be untrue.

### Research Shows

In a 2013 study conducted at a large PWI in a rural area in the Northeastern region of the US, a researcher interviewed 12 students where the criteria for participation required students to self-identify as Black women and as a leader (Domingue, 2015).

## What are STEROTYPES? Examples...

During the interviews, all participants in the study expressed challenges being an African American female college student leader at a PWI.

Participants reported the following common stereotypes:

Black students are loud, intellectually inferior, confrontational, angry, and difficult to work with.

## What are MICROAGGRESSIONS?

### Definition

Everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that can be intentional or unintentional targeting a person solely based on their marginalized group membership (Harrison, 2016).

### Research Shows

Students feel that collegiate advocacy and leadership can help improve the incidences of discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotypes that exist on predominantly White college campuses (Anonymous, 2014).

## What are MICROAGGRESSIONS? Examples...

**You are pretty for a dark-skinned girl.**

How is this insulting?

It indirectly says that girls with a darker skin complexion are not pretty

**Why do you sound White?**

How is this insulting?

One would ask, how does a White person sound? OR How should a non-White person sound?

## STEREOTYPE or MICROAGGRESSION? ~Role Playing Activity~

- Find a partner
- Write down 6 phrases: 3 examples of stereotypes and 3 examples of microaggression.
- Your audience will then have to write down whether each statement is a stereotype or microaggression based on the example provided
- For each microaggression, they must explain what the statement indirectly insinuates or how it can be insulting to another individual.
- A) A White **EXAMPLES:**
- woman clutching her purse when walking past a Black man.
- B) Asking someone who is not White, where are you really from?



**Acknowledgment that microaggressions aren't so micro is key to creating an inclusive learning environment for all students.**

Leaders in higher education should work diligently to address the barriers associated with marginal identity (Fleurizard, 2018).

## Day 3- Wrap Up

- **Stereotypes:**

As campuses become more diversified, we must interject the prejudices and assumptions that move from one's thoughts to being spoken aloud as this can negatively impact a student's ability to engage academically and socially.

- **Microaggressions**

Lack of empathy or concern when microaggressions are demonstrated does not support the well-being of all students. Direct but empathetic discussion may be most effective in dealing with microaggressions (Fleurizard, 2018). DON'T IGNORE IT!

- **Maintaining Respect for all individual learners**

Educators should make it a priority to develop a habit of conducting self-reflections regarding their own understanding and integration of race and culture into their pedagogy (García & Ramirez, 2015).

## Knowledge Check Q&A

Thank you

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## Meeting Students Where They Are: Professional Development/ Training Plan

### Day 1 Agenda

9:00-9:30am	Registration, Facilitator Introductions, Training Objectives & Expectations
9:30- 10:15am	Icebreaker Activity – Attendee Introductions/ Professional Background
10:15-11:00am	Introduction to <i>Meeting Students Where They Are</i> (Slide 3)
11:00-11:15am	Break
11:15- 12:15pm	Overview of The Minority Experience in Higher Education (Slides 4-5)
12:15-12:30pm	Knowledge Check- True or False Questions (Slides 6-7)
12:30-1:30pm	Lunch
1:30-2:30pm	The Minority Experience in Higher Education Continued
2:30- 3:00pm	Overview of Academic Support, Unique Characteristics of Minority Students, Faculty/Student Interactions (Slides 8-11)
3:00-3:15pm	Break
3:15-4:00pm	Day One Wrap Up (Academic Support, College Preparation, Student- Faculty/ Peer to Peer Interaction) (Slide 12)

### Day 2 Agenda

9:00-9:15am	Review of Day One (Q&A)
9:15- 10:00am	Overview of Unique Backgrounds and Learning Styles (Slide 14)
10:00-11:00am	Marginalized Groups of Students/ Best Practices to Support (Slide

	14)
11:00-11:15am	Break
11:15- 12:15pm	Resources to Help All Students Be Successful Brainstorming & Planning
12:15-1:15pm	Lunch
1:15-2:15pm	Resources to Help All Students Be Successful Continued Brainstorming & Planning
2:15-2:30pm	Break
2:30-3:15pm	Overview of Diversity – What Comes to Mind? (Slides 15-18)
3:15-4:00pm	Day Two Wrap Up (Diversity, Marginalized Students, Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment) (Slide 19)

### Day 3 Agenda

9:00-9:30am	Review of Day Two (Q&A)
9:30- 10:30am	Overview of Unconscious and Implicit Biases
10:30-11:00am	Introduction to Stereotypes and Microaggressions (Slides 21-25)
11:00-11:15am	Break
11:15- 12:15pm	Stereotypes and Microaggressions Continued (Slides 21-25)
12:15-1:15pm	Lunch
1:15-2:15pm	Role Playing Activity- Brainstorming & Planning (Slide 26)
2:15-2:30pm	Break
2:30-3:30pm	Role Playing Activity- Stereotypes vs. Microaggressions (Slide 26)

3:30-4:00pm

Day Three Wrap Up (Maintaining Respect for All Individual Learners) Knowledge Check Q&A (Slides 28-29)

## Meeting Students Where They Are: Professional Development/Training Evaluation

## Evaluation: Meeting Students Where They Are

<b>Content</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1. The objectives and expectations of this training were clearly defined.					
2. The content was well organized and informative.					
3. The facilitator was knowledgeable about all of the content shared.					
4. The facilitator was responsive to my questions.					
5. The content consisted of scholarly research to support the findings.					
6. The content provided is applicable to my professional role.					
7. The content enlightened me in areas that I was unfamiliar with.					
8. The content helped to prepare me for potential challenges when interacting with diverse groups of students.					
9. The training objectives were all met.					
<b>Learning</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1. Each day of my professional development I gained new knowledge.					
2. The training enhanced my knowledge of The Minority Experience in Higher Education.					
3. The training enhanced my knowledge of working with students of all backgrounds and unique learning styles.					
4. The training enhanced my knowledge of best practices to support marginalized groups of students.					
5. The training enhanced my knowledge of resources to help all students be successful.					
6. The training enhanced my knowledge of what "diversity" means.					
7. The training enhanced my knowledge of unconscious and implicit biases.					
8. The training enhanced my knowledge of stereotypes and microaggressions.					
9. Everything that I learned can be transferred into my professional role.					

Additional Comments:

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What was your experience both academically and socially as an African American student during your first 2 years at Mid-Atlantic University?
2. What has the student-faculty interaction been like for you?
3. What differences have you encountered in comparison to your peers enrolled at Mid-Atlantic University who are not African American?
4. What resources are available at Mid-Atlantic University that have helped you persist over the past 2 years leading up to your junior and senior year?
5. What are some key factors that you have noted which may contribute to retention at Mid-Atlantic University?
6. What is the social climate like at your institution (clubs and organizations for the interest of all students)?
7. What clubs are you involved in (if any)?
8. What was your educational background prior to attending Mid-Atlantic University?
9. Are you currently a resident or commuter student?
10. Are you a first-generation college student?
11. What are your parents' educational backgrounds?
12. What type of school did you attend?
13. Did you have a support system, who encouraged you in your pursuit of a college degree?
14. How many hours do you work per week?

15. Do you receive financial aid?
16. How much information did you receive regarding your financial obligation as a college student prior to enrolling at this institution?
17. Based on your experiences, in what areas can Mid-Atlantic University improve most that could help African American students persist toward graduation?