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# Multiracial Graduate Students' Perceptions of Online Doctoral Programs

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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MA, Capella University, 2008

BS, Troy University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Abstract

The retention rates for multiracial students in higher education have been the focus of researchers, student affairs practitioners, and other key stakeholders for many years. Despite the increase of this population attending online doctoral programs, the retention rates continue to remain in question. The research problem for this study examined how online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of their online university's student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. The theoretical framework of the study was Tinto's theory of institutional departure, which addressed student challenges in establishing positive engagement practices in their online learning environments. Data from seven participants were collected through interviews on Zoom and analyzed using thematic content analysis. In-depth semistructured interviews were used to capture the unique understandings of multiracial doctoral students and their experiences in an online university. There were four clear themes which emerged from the data; positive engagement between faculty and students, the value of student to student interaction, course delivery and design, and pushing through barriers: student performance and characteristics. The findings from this study established that effective engagement practices had a positive impact on the academic achievements of multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. Student affairs practitioners may be better able to assist in the development of programs designed for recruiting and retaining diverse students when they understand how multiracial students make sense of their educational environments.

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# Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my mother Antoinette King, although you are no longer here with me, I still hear your positive and encouraging voice every single day. You instilled the courage to chase my dreams, so I pursue this degree in your honor. To my father, Vernell King, you have been the greatest cheerleader any gal can have. I will never forget all of the support and encouragement you have given me throughout the years. Mama would be so proud of you. To my four beautiful children, Forest, Corey, Nala and Journey, I love and cherish you more than you could ever know. All four of you have been so loving and supportive and I pass the baton to you in hopes you will pursue dreams of your own. To my granddaughter, Raegan Bryant, you arrived just in time to give me a bright ray of sunshine as I crossed the finish line. I hope that I leave a legacy for my children and grandchildren. To my sister, Aretha and my niece, Lauren, thank you for all the support and laughter throughout the years. I'm still laughing at some of those text messages. To my wonderful in-laws, Yvonne and Rufus Bryant. Thank you for all of your support and encouragement throughout the years. Yvonne, I could write a book about encouragement filled with your amazing and supportive text messages. I thank you both for raising such an amazing son, my husband.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to 2016 Census data, the multiracial population in America is growing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In 1970, there were 460,000 children living in mixed-race families compared to 996,070 in 1980 and almost 9.0 million in 2016 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). This notable shift in the demographics of the population in the United States also reflects the rapidly growing population of multi-racial students attending colleges and universities (Hurtado, Alvardao, & Guilermo-Wann, 2015). As these students matriculate into graduate education and even more narrowly, doctoral education, institutions of higher education are challenged to focus on best practices for recruiting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds (Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2018; Luedke, 2017).

Currently, many researchers focus on categorizing multiracial students as one monolithic group (Chang, 2016). Often, programs designed for recruiting and retaining diverse students are centered on theories based on under-represented, monoracial students (i.e., Black, Hispanic, White, Native American, and Asians; Anumba, 2015; Harris & Linder, 2018). More specifically, the driving forces of research and retention programs have been tailored toward undergrad students in traditional brick and mortar colleges and universities (Horzum et al., 2015). As a result, the issue of retention in other learning platforms such as distance education learning for graduate-level students is neither clear nor concise (Berman & Ames, 2015). Higher learning distance education has become an established part of education where students receive the majority of their education online (Berlin, 2017).

Distance education refers to students taking the majority of their higher education programs via some form of technology (Gregori, Martinez, & Moyano-Fernandez, 2018). Allen et al. (2016) defined distance education as formal education provided to students in separate locations, where students and instructors communicate through interactive telecommunications systems. According to several studies, taking courses online is presently one of the most rapidly growing and often used forms of distance education (James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Ortagus, 2017; Sun & Chen, 2016). *Distance education* will be the all-encompassing term used throughout this research and will be used when discussing online education.

Currently, distance education continues to grow at a significant pace, even more so than traditional higher education enrollment (James et al., 2016). According to the National Science Foundation (2016), the learners in graduate-level distance learning education are also becoming increasingly diverse. For instance, according to the statistics, there are 3.9 million graduate students in the US enrolled in a distance-learning program (NCES, 2016). This diverse population consists of 65% White non-Hispanic, 16% African American, 8% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 4% two or more races (NCES, 2016). Additionally, more than 90% of online learners enrolled in a graduate level program are older than 24, have children, and work full time in their careers (Banks, 2018). The demographics of this growing population of working adult students highlights the importance of understanding the inherent needs of online graduate students (Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

The inability of student affairs professionals to effectively increase retention rates of multiracial students as a whole may be grounded in their approach to understanding

multiracial students (Macrander & Winkle-Wager, 2016). The experiences of multiracial students in higher education are unique, and they experience a complex identity development process (Harris et al., 2018). Researchers studying multiracial identity development shed light on the challenges multiracial students encounter within their academic environments (Csizmadia, Rollins, & Kaneakua, 2014; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2012). Furthermore, contemporary researchers find positive outcomes for multiracial students who perceive their environments to be inclusive as well as engaging for multiracial students (Franco & Franco, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero, 2015).

## Background of the Problem

As there is an influx of multiracial students attending higher education institutions, researchers and student affairs professionals are challenged to focus on the best practices for recruiting and retaining those students (Harris & Linder, 2018; Hurtada et al., 2015). Despite the current programs and services offered to help increase retention rates among multiracial students, the statistics regarding low graduation rates have not improved (Harris, 2016). Gaither (2015) found that multiracial doctoral students are often overlooked in the literature related to successful outcomes and academic achievement when addressing the documented problem of low retention rates.

Overall, a wide variety of student interventions include exploration with monoracial student outcomes with no regard to multiracial development (Cross, 1995; Harris & Linder, 2014). Chang (2016) suggested mixed-race students might be better served when student affairs professionals have a better understanding of racial identity development. Tinto's (1993) research on retention served as a foundation to help

understand the unique experiences of multiracial doctoral students in online academic environments.

## Problem Statement

Several researchers of online programs have focused on the technical aspects of online learning, yet have neglected the importance of students' perceptions of student engagement and academic achievement while enrolled in an online doctoral program (Byrd, 2016; Ozaki & Renn, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). As previous researchers suggested, student engagement has been shown to be one of the many positive factors in the academic achievement of college students (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017). Redmond, Hefferman, Abawi, Brown, and Henderson (2018) proposed that more engaged students are more likely to have the best academic achievement, thus increasing their likelihood of college graduation. Engaged students are better equipped to cope with academic stress, more specifically, the increased challenges students face in an online learning environment (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Although the aforementioned research regarding the retention of multiracial college students attending higher education institutions reflects important findings, I found no research that had examined how multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities with regard to student engagement and academic achievement in distance education learning. Given such, further research was warranted that could examine how multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities with regard to student engagement and academic achievement in distance education in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multiracial doctoral students in distance learning education (Ozaki & Renn, 2015).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative generic design study was to explore the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students in regard to student engagement and achieving academic goals in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multiracial college students in distance education (Hubain et al., 2016). There is an increase in this population of students entering graduate and doctoral programs in distance educational platforms (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016; NCES, 2016). As a result, it is important to understand how multiracial doctoral college students experience receiving doctoral instruction at an online university. I used semistructured, in-depth interviews to examine the participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of their university regarding student engagement and achieving academic goals, in an effort to gain a better understanding of the opinions, beliefs, and reflections of the participants' experiences in an online distance education program. Findings from this research provided a more in-depth insight on the unique experiences of multiracial students in online doctoral degree programs. The application of the research findings may promote further research into gaps in specific programs geared to help increase retention rates correlated with multiracial doctoral students attending online universities.

## Research Question

Research Question: How do online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention?

## Theoretical Framework

Tinto's theories have been widely used in studying the experiences of multiracial students and have been suggested by various scholars as appropriate frameworks for understanding the unique experiences of multiracial graduate students (Harris & Linder, 2014; Leverette, 2009; Steele, 2012). Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure asserts that institutional climate is as equally important to student retention as academic or financial factors. Moreover, Tinto (2012) specified that student integration into the academic and social aspects of college is more predictive of retention than any other factor. Student retention reflects the individual experiences in the total culture of an institution and the meaning those individuals attach to those experiences (Tinto, 2017).

Tinto (2012) established that more research is needed to gauge the relationship between race and retention rates in higher education. In an effort to explore the perceptions of online multiracial doctoral students, I drew upon Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure as it addresses the commitment of the higher education system to implement strategies that will improve student retention, including faculty and staff development. Tinto (2012) suggested the biggest mistake a university can make, when addressing retention, is to dismiss the challenging environment many students encounter. Thus, Tinto's (1993) theory was useful in informing this study as students may be challenged to establish those positive engagement practices in what will affirm their place in an online learning environment. As such, student perceptions of engagement while enrolled in an online doctoral program was examined and the theory of institutional departure was used to frame the significance of student engagement in terms student achievement and retention. In addition to informing the study design, the theory was also

used as a lens for analysis of the data and the interpretation of the findings was grounded in the theory.

## Nature of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative generic design study was to explore how multiracial doctoral college students perceive the effectiveness of online universities as it pertains to student engagement and academic achievement in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multiracial college students in distance education (Harris, 2016; Hubain et al., 2016). The design was used to outline, translate, and view the lived experiences of multiracial students in online learning environments. This generic design study was appropriate because was aimed at understanding the participants experiences' in real life situations, not experimental situations (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015).

According to Percy et al. (2015), a generic qualitative research design is considered a practical way of offering answers to research questions that can be applied in practical settings. Research data included a collection of multiracial doctoral students' responses to preset interview questions regarding the effectiveness of online universities student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. The design was appropriate to gain a better understanding of the opinions, beliefs, and reflections of the participants' experiences in distance education (see Rijnsoever, 2017).

## Definition of Key Terms

*Academic Achievement:* For doctoral students, level of achieving goals which can include both grade point average and progression through stages of academic program (Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015).

*Distance Online Education:* A program of study where the students receive the majority of their education online (Berlin, 2017)

*Monoracial:* Makes reference to a person's racial lineage when it reflects a single racial group (Csizmadia et al., 2014).

*Multiracial:* Refers to anyone who identifies as "two or more races" in which their biological parents are of different "races" or are mixed "race" themselves (Chen & Norman, 2016).

*Retention:* Retention is defined as the number of online students who complete or graduate from online programs (James et al., 2016)

*Student engagement:* The amount of time invested towards learning, including active involvement and commitment to education while collaborating with others (Kahn et al., 2017).

## Assumptions

There were several assumptions that come with this study. The first assumption was that all participants would be open and honest while sharing personal experiences as multiracial doctoral students enrolled in online doctoral education. In general, self-reports allow participants to directly converse on their experiences with greater accuracy, especially when the researcher assures confidentiality (Foster, Rzhetsky, & Evans, 2015). Second, it was assumed that each participant would feel comfortable enough to provide sufficient material to support the purpose of the study. Last, I assume the information provided in this research may not mirror the opinions and beliefs of every single multiracial doctoral student enrolled in an online university.

## Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to the experiences of multiracial doctoral students who are enrolled in an online university. The students were selected with no consideration to the program of study in which they were enrolled. I interviewed participants from the selected online university without consideration from other online universities. Additionally, in order to reflect U.S. Census Bureau reporting measures, this study was limited to native-born, domestic students. Each participant self-identified as a multiracial doctoral student who had completed at least one required academic residency. The results from this study is not intended for use with other populations, and the findings will not be generalized. However, the findings may offer support for future studies.

## Limitations

Several limitations were present in this study. The first limitation was the lack of generalizability to larger populations. I interviewed seven multiracial doctoral students selected from one online university. Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, and Kingstone (2018) suggested an optimal sample size of six to 10 in order to collect enough rich data to identify the actual lived experiences of the participants. Choy (2014) added that a generic qualitative design often seeks to discover and understand the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved. Ideally, a higher participation rate from several online universities would have allowed for more diverse opinions. The second major limitation relates to the scoop of the study. The results from this study may not be applicable to other universities as qualitative studies are unique and difficult to replicate (Sim et al., 2018). According to Percy et al. (2015), qualitative studies often lack generalizability to

larger populations. The study was limited to one online university, which posed a selection threat (see Rijnsoever, 2017). However, the online university had a high population of minority doctoral students, which represents the doctoral student population concerned in this study.

Another limitation relates to the sampling strategy. The participants for this study had to meet several key criteria to contribute to this study. It was expected that all participants read and sign the consent form and only agreed to participate if they met all of the criteria. I assumed the participants responded to the research because they wanted their voices to be heard, as there were no monetary or grade incentives. Finally, in qualitative research, determining the trustworthiness of the findings can present challenges, as qualitative research is grounded more on opinion and judgment (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Measures to enhance researcher credibility included member checks and audit trails. Participants had an opportunity to review the descriptions of their experiences for accuracy as well as track the progress of the study (Choy, 2014).

## Significance of the Study

This qualitative study filled a gap in the literature by examining the perceptions of online doctoral students with an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multiracial college students (Hubain et al., 2016). Although higher education institutions are noticing an influx of multiracial students, they are challenged to focus on the best practices for recruiting and retaining those students (Harper, 2016). Findings from this study can expose the differences within and across multiracial students, as they perceive the effectiveness of online universities regarding engagement and academic achievement. As the demand for online courses continues to grow, so does

the call for accomplished faculty who can properly design and deliver online instruction that fosters student engagement (Sun & Chen, 2016). This study can contribute to existing research regarding the importance of the inclusion and proper use of multiracial data, which should be included when developing policies aimed at improving educational outcomes in multiracial doctoral college students.

The study has implications for positive change: The knowledge obtained from this study can lead to positive social change by utilizing the students' experiences to facilitate improvements in online doctoral programs to help improve retention rates. Student affairs practitioners are better able to assist in the development of programs designed for recruiting and retaining diverse students, when they understand how multiracial students make sense of their educational environments (Oguntoyinbo, 2015). Key stakeholders and who benefit from this study will be student affairs practitioners, professors, institutional therapists, program developers and graduation counselors.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative generic study was to gain insight into the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students in regard to student engagement and achieving academic goals in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multicultural college students in distance education (Hubain et al., 2016). While research exists examining the retention of multiracial college students, there is a gap that was addressed by this research. This qualitative research used Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure to explore the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students attending an online university. This study may contribute to existing research regarding the importance of the inclusion and proper use of multiracial data, which

should be included when developing policies aimed at improving educational outcomes in multiracial doctoral college students. Chapter 2 consists of a thorough examination of the current literature regarding areas of focus associated with the research question. The review of the literature will provide a basis of knowledge regarding the history of multiracial students, college retention and engagement, as well as a discussion of the theoretical framework.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative generic design was to explore how multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities in terms of student engagement and academic achievement. As higher education institutions continue to have an increased inflow of multiracial students, the challenge to focus on the best practices for recruiting and retaining those students increases (Harris & Linder, 2018). Overall, colleges and universities may benefit from this research as it is intended to address the effectiveness of online universities student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. Although most institutions have programs set in place to address the current issues of student retention, the overwhelming need for multiracial inclusiveness is often unmet in many colleges and universities (Macrander & Winkle-Wagner, 2016).

Several researchers have revealed the fragility in the academic environment of multiracial students in terms of understanding their overall experiences (Wanger, 2015; Yoo et al., 2016). Moreover, many researchers have focused on traditional college students in their collegiate years, which are typically identified as a crucial time for identity development and self-discovery (Arroyo, Palmer, Maramba, & Louis, 2017; Brittian, Umana-Taylor, & Derlan, 2013). However, educational researchers have described the current online graduate learner as a 25 and older, nontraditional student with unique challenges including families, careers and other time-consuming demands (Banks, 2018; Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2016). Banks (2018) found that in comparison to the more traditional student, adult learners have

specific needs and face various obstacles that imped their progress toward achievement of their academic and career goals.

In comparison to traditional students, adult online students have particular needs and typically desire engaging and interactive lessons as opposed to simply reading text or being inactive recipients listening to professors' lectures (Yu, Huang, & Posadas, 2019). Additionally, researchers have shown that distance learning is highly student-centered and requires students to undertake more responsibilities and maintain self-sufficiency, especially in online learning environments (Dixon, 2015; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018). Consistent with these themes, Yeboah and Smith (2016) found self-confidence and lack of support were among the few categories that emerged from their research on graduate students in online learning environments. More specifically, it is important to understand and explore how multiracial online graduate students make sense of their educational experiences (Harris & Linder, 2018; Helen, 2012).

When examining the experiences of multiracial college students, researchers have revealed that multiracial students in higher education environments travel a unique path in comparison to their monoracial peers (Museus, Lambe Sarinana, Yee, & Robinson, 2016; Wilton, Rattan, & Sanchez, 2017). According to Harris, BrckaLorenz, and Laird (2018), retention programs in colleges and universities are not always effective in addressing the needs of multiracial students as the programs are not backed by research pertaining to multiracial individuals. Therefore, monoracial identity models have long been recognized as insufficient for multiracial intervention plans, as the models are incapable of describing racial identity development in multiracial individuals (Stepney, Sanchez, & Handy, 2015).

The intent of this literature review is to provide a multifaceted scholarly background of multiracial doctoral students and their educational experiences in an online university. I explore the theoretical, historical, and empirical aspects of the research to convey the significance of examining the differences within and across multiracial students as it relates to multiracial identity development and student engagement. The results of this study may indicate the importance of the inclusion and proper use of multiracial data, which can be included when developing policies aimed at improving educational outcomes in minority college students (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016).

The literature review will begin with a detailed breakdown of the literature review search strategies leading into a brief description of the theoretical framework of the study. I will further elaborate on this framework within the literature review. This will be followed by a background of the history of the multiracial population, including how the notable shift in the demographics called for a change in the racial classification system. Specifically, in the second section, there will be a scholarly focus on multiracial college students, followed by an in-depth look into issues associated with the educational experiences of multiracial college students, including doctoral retention rates, and understanding the importance of identity development in multiracial individuals. The next section will provide an historical overview of early multiracial identity development theories, followed by research in current theories of multiracial identity development. It is in this section where a more detailed look into the multiracial identity theory selected for this research is provided. The final section of this literature review presents multiracial

students and academic environments, student engagement and success factors for online education programs.

Empirically, I will examine seminal and recent research on multiracial graduate students in academic environments, and the influence of student engagement, connectedness, online learning environments, and support programs for multiracial online graduate students. In doing so, justification for the inclusion of each variable in this population of students is provided. The summary section includes a discussion on how this study may provide knowledge related to multiracial identity development and student engagement online doctoral students. I also reiterate the importance of the inclusion and proper use of multiracial data, which should be included when developing policies aimed at improving educational outcomes in multiracial doctoral college students (Bawa, 2016).

## Literature Search Strategy

The literature was gathered through online resources including the University's Library and Google Scholar. Specific keyword searches discovered relevant material from prominent databases: EBSCO, Google Scholar, PsychARTICLES, ProQuest Central, Sage, Premier, SocINDEX, and ERIC. The phrases and keywords were as follows: *Multiracial students, racial identity, distance education learning, retention, retention programs, retention monolithic, retention multiracial, retention doctoral, online school counseling, college counseling, college selection, online learning, student engagement, teacher engagement, Poston's Model, theories multiracial identity development, risk factors, minority higher education, student support, dropout rate, resilience, student perspectives, perceptions of online doctoral students, mixed race students, multiracial doctoral students, distance education, cultural diversity, retention*

*plans, monoracial retention plans, interracial relationships, browning of America, college intervention programs,* and *academic environment.*

Initially, in order to obtain a broader overview of the available literature associated with the research topic, I originally did not specify a year range when conducting a search of the database. This was effective in that I was able to identity formative research related to the selected research topic. Once I decided on the research focus, I reduced the year range from 2005-2019 in order to find current literature. When searching through the databases in the University Library, I limited my search to peer-reviewed articles with full–text and current (within the last five years). Additionally, I reviewed reference lists from the selected articles, to assist in identifying other relevant studies that would add to my research literature. The scope of the literature review ranged over a 13-year period, 2005-2019; however, relevant historical research was included from the early and mid-1900s. Literature on early racial identity theories dated back to 1938. Finally, I browsed through the reference lists of selected research to identify other relevant research in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of pertinent research in other similar studies. In the following literature review, I provide a historic and current layout of the theoretical framework, provide an overview of multiracial identity development in academic settings, and provide a comprehensive analysis of empirical literature related to all study variables.

## Theoretical Framework

In electing to study how online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention, it is important to outline the philosophical constructs

informing this study's analysis. According to Percy et al. (2015), it is essential to identify the philosophical framework proposed and define the basic considerations in how it shapes the study's approach to analysis. With regard to exploring the perceptions of online multiracial doctoral students, Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

Tinto (1993) established that a student's ability to be successful and be engaged by a university is achieved by providing appropriate integration methods into formal and informal academics and social systems. Consistent with these themes, researchers have proposed when a student maintains regular engagement in his/her educational programs, he/she experiences higher levels of satisfaction, which in turn leads to a greater chance of retention (Kahn, Everinton, Kelm, Reid, & Watson, 2017; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Although academic and social integration are two methodically distinct concepts, Tinto's model works more effectively when both forms of integration are developed simultaneously (Wagner, 2015). For example, classroom discussions can encourage the academic connection to a university while at the same time encourage relationships that may extend to social activities outside of the classroom (Dika & D'Amico, 2015). Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact as many students fail to return to their institutions when they are disappointed in the education they are receiving (Wagner, 2015). In addition, Lee (2017) suggested that to offset their problems in the socialization aspect of learning, students often channel their efforts toward academics, which can happen at the expense of student engagement. Bagaka, Badillo, Bransteter, and Ripinto (2016) noted that many students find they are unable to maintain their school workloads or assimilate within the campus population.

Tinto's (1993) theories have been used in studying the experiences of multiracial students (Leverette, 2009; Steele, 2012) and have been suggested by various scholars as appropriate frameworks for understanding the unique experiences of multiracial graduate students. In the case of multiracial students, it is theorized that academic and social connections are harder to establish for multiracial students than monoracial students (Matsumura, 2017). Tinto (1993) theorized doctoral student determination is shaped by individual and intellectual connections that transpire between students and faculty and the diverse communities that make up the complete systems of the institution.

According to Gregori et al. (2018), understanding how one perceives his/her environment can essentially impact multiracial individuals' educational outcomes. Thus, according to Harris and Linder (2018), it is important to make student engagement an essential part of support programs and services for multiracial students. Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure will provide a framework to determine which factors are most influential to the retention of online multiracial doctoral students.

In this research, Tinto's theory of institutional departure (1993) was paired with answering the question regarding the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students and how they experience their online university. Tinto's (1993) theory was useful in informing this study as the students may be challenged to establish those positive engagement practices what will affirm their place in an online learning environment.

## Literature Review

### History of Multiracial Population

In 1967, the Unites States Supreme Court ruled in *Loving* v. *Virginia* that it was unconstitutional to ban interracial marriages (Newbeck & Wolfe, 2015). It took over 30

years from that court date for the last state in the U.S. (Alabama) to concede and no longer attempt to repeal the law (Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). Although interracial relationships existed long before it was no longer banned, the changes in the law did not automatically translate to changes in society or the behaviors in individuals (Chen & Ratliff, 2015). The children of interracial relationships remained targets of racial injustice, ridicule, and social alienation for many years (Brittian et al., 2013). Consequently, it was not uncommon for multiracial children to experience rejection from their white relatives and in some cases by their black relatives. In general, society viewed multiracial children as black and they would receive the same consequences of racial injustice as black families (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2018).

In the United States, the expression *the browning of America* is a phrase often used to describe the growing mixed-race population (Museus et al., 2016). For example, in 1970, there were 460,000 children living in mixed-race families in comparison to almost 9.0 million in 2016. It is projected that the multiracial population will climb to 22% by 2050 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). As mentioned in Chapter 1, this is quite a notable shift in the demography of the population in the US, and understandably called for a change in the racial classification system. Interestingly, it was not until 1997 that the Office of Management and Budget decided to offer the option to select one or more races on the United States Census forms (Office of Management and Budget, 1997). These policy changes symbolized the deep recognition of the United States government's acknowledgments that there was an increase in racial diversity (Clayton, 2018).

Prior to this policy change, the United States Census form did not include a category for multiracial citizens. American citizens were forced to select from the available categories, which included White, Black, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Hispanic Origin, and Other Races (Jones & Bullock, 2013). According to Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas (2014), the terms multiracial and biracial were often overlooked in that there was no opportunity to add clarity on the census form. Historically speaking, many multiracial citizens were forced to identify with one race regardless of their heritage (Daniel et al., 2014). For example, individuals with both white and black parents were often pressured into identifying as black alone and were discouraged from claiming a multiracial identification (Jones & Bullock, 2013).

**College Access**

In addition to the change in the country's demographics, the federal court system responded accordingly with the addition of policies, including the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Higher Education Act of 1965. These three federal policies and court mandates were the culmination of social justice accomplishments, which resulted in increased access and growth in college attendance for many minority groups (Museus et al., 2016). Thus, the number of college students who identified as minorities rose from 15% in 1976, compared to 32% in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016).

Although the increase in access to higher education for minorities was a remarkable achievement, it also called for a change in former predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Neville et al., 2016). Despite the growth of underrepresented students attending PWIs, there remained an increased challenge of competition between the PWIs

and the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Neville et al., 2016). Consistent with these themes, throughout the 1960s until the early 1970s, most minority college students, specifically African Americans (including those who identified as African American), attended HBCUs (Ezeala-Harrison, 2014). Early researchers on this topic show African American students were able to attend HBCUs without feeling alienated because of their race (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Sowell et al., 2015).

Currently, there is an increasing number of students (including those who identify as multiracial) attending historically Black universities and colleges, which indicates the continued call for different types of learning institutions that specifically meets the needs of all students (Jones, 2015). As the American population continues to change and become more diverse, little scholarly research focuses on the multiracial population (Albuja et al., 2018). In particular, very little research on the educational outcomes of multiracial students in higher learning settings has been studied (Arroyo et al., 2017). Clayton (2018) suggested multiracial students may be better served when student affairs professionals have a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of multiracial college students.

**For-Profit Colleges and Universities**

In higher education, online education is the fastest growing platform than any other, especially when it comes to for-profit education (Deterding & Pedulla, 2016; Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). According to the Institute of Education Sciences (2017), enrollment rates for graduate level degrees are expected to rise another 9% by 2026, with the leading enrollment occurring at for-profit universities and colleges (FPUCs). In comparison, between 2000 and 2015, FPUCs had an increase in enrollment that was

140% higher than nonprofit universities and colleges and public institutions (Institute of Education Sciences, 2017).

Anderson and Taggart (2016) posited there are several reasons FPCUs have become a popular way to earn a college degree or obtain a professional certification. According to Anderson and Taggart (2016), students tend to select FPUCs because they offer flexibility and have less capacity constraints than traditional colleges and universities. Indeed, adult learners tend to be drawn to programs that allow the learner to maintain a full-time job, raise children, and have multiple options for when and where a student can complete the required work for each program (Cellini & Koedel, 2017; Gilpin & Stoddard, 2017).

As FPCUs take in the majority of their revenue from student tuition, they have a deep incentive to offer programs that cater to student satisfaction and student retention (Gelbgiser, 2018; Ulmer, Means, Cawthon, & Kristensen, 2016). When compared to traditional colleges and universities, Deterding and Pedulla (2016) found that enrollment and completion outcomes by field at FPCUs are more responsive to postdegree employment opportunities. For example, FPCUs build degree programs which target the unique demands of the labor market in student communities (Gilpin & Stoddard, 2017)

As previously mentioned, the demographics of this growing population of online learners are older than 24, have children, and work full time jobs (Banks, 2018). More narrowly, the notable shift in the demography of the population in the United States also reflects the rapidly growing population of minority doctoral students attending online universities (Hurtado et al., 2015). According to Deming, Yuchtman, Abulafi, Goldin, and Katz (2016) minority students make up 55% of the graduate student population

attending for-profit universities. As FPCU enrollments continue to rise, there is a continuous challenge to take specific measures in successfully recruiting, enrolling and retaining students, more specifically students that are correlated with the likeness of low retention rates (Basken, 2019; Gelbgiser, 2018).

**Recruitment and Enrollment of Minority Students**

As the numbers of minority doctoral degree recipients continue to rise, progress in terms of proportional representation continues to be a challenge (Gardner, 2015). Although increases in the number of minority students in doctoral programs have been consistent with overall increases in the number of students across the board, the number of minority students has only grown slightly during the same period (Bowie, Nashwan, Thomas, Davis-Buckley, & Johnson, 2018). For this reason, scholars have continued to identify increasingly doctoral graduate diversity as an issue of great importance (Dieker, Wienke, Straub, & Finnegan, 2014; Gardner, 2015). Several researchers continue to encourage universities and colleges to develop strategies to recruit and retain a more diverse student body to doctoral level education (Bowie et al., 2018; Byrd, 2016; Gardner, 2015). The recent development of student affairs practitioners at universities around the U.S. sheds light on a comparatively new effort to increase both ethnic and racial diversity within the graduate student population (Andrews, Imberman, & Lovenheim, 2016). Consistent with this theme, in an effort to increase retention rates, many colleges offer programs for students who are more likely to withdrawal or fail out of their program all together (Stoessel et al., 2015).

According to Dieker et al. (2014), scholarly reflection of graduate diversity recruitment strategies generally falls into two categories: general factors influencing

students' enrollment decisions and best practices in diverse student recruitment. In studies focused on graduate student choice, student choice included factors such as institutional quality, consideration of social factors (traditional and online programs), and sensitivity to students from underrepresented groups (Keating, 2015; Nguyen & Ward, 2017). Grapin, Bocanegra, Green, Lee, and Jaafar (2016) noted social factors such as opportunities for social and cultural outlets, and quality of life on and off campus as a main focus for minority students. Multiple scholars found faculty friendliness and financial aid to weigh heavily as factors considering selection of program and school choice for minority graduate students (Gardner, 2015; Taylor, 2015).

A study of minority doctoral student recruitment and admissions indicated the ability to offer grants and fellowships positively influenced participants' decisions to attend those universities (McGee et al., 2016). The successful recruitment of underrepresented students is often paired with identifying community characteristics such as geographical location and representation of existing minority students (Andrews et al., 2016). Several scholars note that in addition to the previously mentioned factors, recruitment efforts should include early identification of outreach programs of minority students (Grapin et al., 2016), a multifaceted recruitment strategy to include proactive pre-doctoral training of potential students through summer research programs (Gardner, 2015), and partnership with institutions serving minorities (Cokley, Obaseki, Jackson, Jones, & Gupta, 2016).

Furthermore, researchers indicated that efforts to build relationships with faculty serving undergraduate minority students can have a significant impact on positive recruitment efforts (Greene, 2015; Nguyen & Ward, 2017). Building relationships with

faculty and staff offers the recruiting staff to consistently have access to a diverse student body with potential interest in their institution (Cokley et al., 2016). For many student affairs practitioners, in a jointed commitment to enhance student diversity, it is understood as a priority in their work and efforts to increase diversity within their institutions (Maramba, Sule, & Winkle-Wagner, 2016).

**A Call for Student Affairs Practitioners**

As the number of multiracial students enrolled in online doctoral programs continues to grow, it is essential for student affairs practitioners to understand the complexities of multiracial identity development in order to properly help them navigate the systems in place in any given situation (Sims, 2016). Creating a space where individuals can feel accepted is often acknowledged and celebrated is a necessary part of inclusion (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Johnston-Guerrero (2015) discussed the plethora of opportunities traditional institutions have when it comes to offering programs catered to the unique population attending those institutions. However, meeting the cultural and development needs of students becomes more of a challenge for online education programs (Bagaka et al., 2015).

In traditional institutions, opportunities for inclusion can be offered in the form of a multiracial center or a recreational center where the students can meet weekly with other students with similar interests, engage in extra-curricular activities on and off campus, and have other experiences where students can be purposeful in their cultural journey (Hill, Posey, Gomez, & Shapiro, 2018; Kampf & Teske, 2013). However, as previously mentioned, online universities offer degree programs where students receive

the majority of their education online (Berlin, 2017). Although opportunities for online students are limited, there are still many opportunities for student inclusion, including, but not limited to residences, in-course communication, virtual clubs and other forms of purposeful student engagement (Caruth, 2017). Harris and BrckaLorenz (2017) discussed the importance of student affairs practitioners taking the initiative to rethink the structure of cultural programs and services to ensure they are inclusive of the needs of multiracial students.

**Background of Retention in Higher Education**

In higher education, student retention is typically defined as the sustained enrollment of a student throughout the program they are enrolled in (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). For most, if not all, universities, student retention is a vital component to the success of higher education institutions (Bawa, 2016). According to Appel and Taylor (2015), when an institution's statistics reflect high retention rates, more students will pay the tuition and obtain higher academic achievements. Both are critical to the success of higher education institutions (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). While student retention has been a serious matter since the establishment of colleges and universities, the theoretical frameworks focused on student retention are fairly new (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligin, 2015). After an exhaustive search on retention research, most of the theories related in retention were derived in the 1970s and have since been reexamined in recent works (Renn, 2012; Sands & Schuh, 2003; Tinto, 2012).

History reflects upon the shift where institutional goals of building upon individual competencies in selected skill areas, have since turned to focus on graduation rates as a whole (Allen et al., 2016; McPherson & Lawrence, 2015). Researchers have

found that the increase of student retention models is a direct reflection of an influx of new students in the new modern world (Bowman & Culver, 2018). During this expansion period, retention became a worldwide concern, prompting several researches to solely focus on theoretical frameworks reflecting student retention in higher education institutions (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Tinto, 2017).

As previously mentioned, early work on student retention theories focused on the specific individual characteristics of students attending universities and colleges (Caruth, 2018; Tinto, 2008). Several researchers have discussed statuses such as socioeconomic class, race, and gender to establish specific characteristics that are directly related to student retention (Bawa, 2016; Tinto, 2017). Despite the growth, it was not until the early 1980s when researchers began to address the interaction between the students and the institutions they were attending (Stepney et al., 2015). Consistent with these themes, interpersonal variables began to surface in student retention research (Davis et al., 2013).

**Factors impacting retention.** As student retention and achievement continue to be vital to the longevity of higher educational institutions, there is an increased recognition of specific factors that may affect the retention rates in college students (Witkow et al., 2015). Researchers consistently indicated specific dropout indicators as grounds for research regarding why students separate from educational higher institutions (Masika & Jones, 2016; Radovan, 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016; Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fissler, & Sturmer, 2015). Unfortunately, student retention rates often include students who transfer to other universities, and do not provide an accurate account of students who simply dropped out (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016). Natoli et al. (2015) and Tinto (1997) found similar findings regarding why

students drop out of school. In a qualitative study of 13 students, Natoli et al. (2015) found that students rely heavily on the social and academic support they receive from the university they attend. More narrowly, students who considered departing from their university were unable to identify experiences in terms of positive interactions with peers and staff members. The results from this study aligns with Tinto's (1997) research based on student retention, where he places emphasis on the inclusion of academic and social engagement.

Bowman and Culver (2018) found that students who participate in academic programs have overall higher GPAs than their peers who do not. Similar to these findings, Kamf and Teske (2013) found significant results regarding 3,809 male and female students of various ethnic backgrounds who participated in recreation programs offered by their universities. In this qualitative study, Kamf and Teske (2013) concluded that the more students used the collegiate recreation facility, the greater their chance of retention. In general, the presence of a recreational facility has been shown to increase retention of students as it encourages a sense of belonging and commitment from the institution (McElveen & Rossow, 2015).

Dika and D'Amico (2015) found that many students dropped out of school for reasons that were out of the colleges' and universities' control. With the escalating cost of college, many students lacked the finances to continue on with their programs (Slanger, Berg, Fisk, & Handon, 2015). Researchers support this theme in that several studies found students receiving academic scholarships and grants have a higher rate of retention than those who must work to pay their tuition (Culver, 2018; Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Culver (2018) found that many students find themselves so exhausted from

working many hours, leaving little energy to attend classes on a regular basis. According to Tinto (2017), poor student institutional fit and academic changes are among the factors that may be beyond institutional control. Secondly, Tinto (2017) highlighted many students fail to make a connection to the environments within their institutions, inside or outside the classrooms. Many students fail to return to their institutions because they are disappointed in the education they are receiving (Tinto, 1997). Consistent with these themes, students find they are unable to manage the school workload or assimilate within the campus population (Ali & Smith, 2015a).

Although researchers offer a number of reasons why individuals were satisfied with their learning environments, a desire for sense of belonging and an engaged campus environment were two themes that were consistent throughout the research (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015; Tankari, 2018). In an effort to ensure inclusiveness for all students, Roper and McAloney (2010) encouraged student affairs leaders to reconsider the structure of existing cultural programs and services at colleges and universities. Many university and college campuses are acknowledging the notable change in the diverse student bodies, yet continue to remain ill-prepared to deal with the challenges that come in the wake of changing demographic populations (Harris et al., 2018).

**Retention in online doctoral programs.** As enrollment in online and distance education continues to grow, educational institutions offering online learning opportunities must work hard to ensure successful student outcomes (Wood & Ireland, 2014). Kyei-Blankson, Ntuli, and Donnelly (2016) found universities offering online courses often struggle to maintain a sense of community, which is often regarded, as vital

to successful student outcomes. According to Kyei-Blankson et al. (2016), the experiences of learning online are considerably different than traditional learning institutions. Adapting to school at the doctoral level can be quite stressful, and for this reason it is imperative to offer services designed to minimize the stressors unique to doctoral students (Lambie, Hayes, Griffith, Limberg, & Mullen, 2014). Armellini and DeStefani (2015) added online students are often sustained by the connections they make with their peers.

In a netnographic study, utilizing research collected from the Internet, Janta, Lugosi, and Brown (2012) suggested that doctoral students' diminished advancement in their programs resulted from a lack of engagement and unhappiness early in doctoral programs. Additionally, students in online doctoral programs noted the increased time it took to achieve their educational goals, which overshadowed the satisfaction of receiving the degree (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Among these factors, students often have the desire to give up when they suffer from stress, isolation, and disconnection (Berry, 2017). Student engagement is an intricate multidimensional concept that shows a strong correlation to student retention (Janta et al., 2012).

According to Berman and Ames (2015), successful students in online doctoral programs determined social support as the key to their success. The support helps reduce stress and assisted them in completing the required steps for degree completion (Berlin, 2017). A shift to online learning requires variations to the teaching and learning practices traditionally associated with college learning environments (Redmond et al., 2018). As the demand for online courses continues to grow, so does the call for accomplished faculty who can properly design and deliver online instruction that fosters student

engagement (Sun & Chen, 2016). For the purpose of the proposed research, focus will be placed on student engagement and the impact it has on the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students in higher education environments.

**Multiracial Doctoral Student Retention**

Although higher education institutions are noticing an influx of multiracial students, they are challenged to focus on the best practices for recruiting and retaining those students (Harper, 2016). Early work on the educational outcomes regarding multiracial students reflects in-depth experiences of undergraduate students, yet few researchers focus on the experiences of multiracial graduate students (Arroyo et al., 2017). Despite the growth in this unique population, multiracial college students, more narrowly, multiracial doctoral students are often overlooked in literature relating to successful outcomes and academic achievement (Gaither, 2015).

Many university and college campuses are acknowledging the notable change in the diverse student bodies yet continue to remain ill prepared to deal with the challenges that come in the wake of changing demographic populations (Gomez, Ocasio, Lachuk, & Powell, 2015). Currently, a wide variety of student retention programs include exploration with mono-racial student outcomes with no regard to multiracial development (Harris & Linder, 2018). Further analysis of some of the early intervention programs highlight the troubling sequence of programs, designed specifically for recruiting and retaining monoracial groups (i.e., Black, Hispanic, White, Native American, and Asians), being offered to more diverse groups (Freeman, 1999; McKinney, 2014).

Consistent with these themes, aggregating all of the multiracial students into one monolithic category bypasses the authentic differences between students with different

multiracial cultures and experiences (Renn, 2012). Furthermore, this practice hides the authentic distinction between students, obstructing the ability to understand the intricacies of the experiences of the multiracial college student (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). According to Schaidle (2016), it is common for this group of students to fall into the label of students of color, which is commonly attributed to racial minorities in higher education. Thus, it is not uncommon for multiracial graduate students to experience the aforementioned issues specifically relevant to students of color (Stepney et al., 2015).

The inability of student affairs professionals to effectively increase retention rates of multiracial students as a whole may be grounded in their approach to understanding multiracial students (Harris, 2016). As previously mentioned, it is not common for institutional practices to promote or accommodate multiracial identities (Matsumura, 2017). Harris and BrckaLorenz (2017) highlighted the importance of student affairs leaders taking the initiative to rethink the structure of cultural programs and services to ensure they are inclusive of the needs of multiracial students. Congruent to this assertion, Matsumura (2017) suggested that in order to put theory to practice, student affairs professionals must take the initiative to understand multiracial development.

**Understanding Multiracial Student College Experiences**

As previously stated, multiracial experiences became relevant due to the increase in notable shift in the demography of the population in the United States (Hurtado et al., 2015). Despite the limitations of research on this rapidly growing population, multi-racial students attending colleges and universities disclose a vast array of unique experiences (Freeman, Pauker, & Sanchez, 2016). Several researchers suggest the lack of understanding the experiences of multiracial college students comes from previous

generalizations of racial identity and the failure to understand the background of the multiracial population (Flowers et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2016).

Chapman's (2005) qualitative research based on the experiences of thirteen multiracial graduate students and their perceptions regarding the environment of their college camps reveled several themes that are consistent with themes relating to racial identity development. The major themes included the college experience, a clear vision for the future, and laying the foundation for multiracial student. Chapman (2005) established the students were able to acknowledge the differences between their experience and their racial identities and that the atmosphere at higher education institutions afforded these students the opportunity to test the assumptions about multiracial students and learn new information about their heritage. Similar to those findings, Hubain et al. (2016) revealed the importance of early childhood experiences and how they lay the foundation for racial identity development before the individuals enter higher education environments.

Although the population represents the fastest growing population, these adverse experiences disclose that institutions may not be ready to effectively guarantee the success of multiracial students within their environments (Ozaki & Renn, 2015). Consequently, if problems are not rectified in order to improve the services for and the support of multiracial students within higher education, there will continue to be an increase in doctoral student retention (Ezeala-Harrison, 2014).

**Racial Identity Development in Students**

Currently, a wide variety of student development intervention plans are not applicable to multiracial students, as they are molded solely by the experiences and

perceptions of monoracial students (Linder, 2018). Theories of White identity development and Black identity development were among the first intervention plans to address the racial identity development of college students (Pauker et al., 2018) According to Harris (2017), current monoracial models of racial identity development are appropriate for minority monoracial students of color, yet they do not necessarily address the needs of multiracial students. Franco and Franco (2016) shared that monoracial identity models have long been recognized as insufficient for multiracial intervention plans, as the models are incapable of explaining racial identity development in multiracial individuals.

Although the focus on contemporary research has shifted towards an approach that better serves a more in-depth understanding of multiracial identity, researchers continue to focus on the shared themes that tend to run throughout both the monoracial and multiracial identity models (Chen & Norman, 2016; Freeman et al., 2016). Scholarly research regarding racial identity runs fluid with the structure of programs and services at colleges and universities (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). Therefore, student affairs professionals are challenged to gain a deeper understanding of this population (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). As previously mentioned, researchers indicated the complexities in the process of understanding multiracial identity development (Harris, 2016; Legette, 2018). Consistent with this theme, Albuja et al. (2018) argued that several theories require the understanding of monoracial identities that together make up the distinctiveness of multiracial identity development.

Wilton et al. (2017) stated understanding the similarities and differences in monoracial and multiracial identity development allows for exploration of the

intersections of multiple racial identities. Despite the limitations of monoracial identity development theories, many universities and college programs continue to rely heavily on student outcomes of such theories (Harris & Linder, 2014). Luedke (2017) added it is common for this group of students to fall into the label of students of color, which is commonly attributed to racial minorities in higher education.

According to Arroyo et al. (2017), the lack of early multiracial interventions may be due to limited race selection categories. Given that the United States Census Form (prior to 2000) did not include a category for multiracial citizens, American citizens were forced to select from the available categories, which more often than none, categorized multiracial people under a monoracial category (Harper, 2016). Jones (2015) stated that multiracial individuals with one black parent were encouraged to select Black, as they were not able to identify with the other categories (i.e., Black, Hispanic, White, Native American, and Asians). In contrast to much of the research regarding identity development in both monoracial and multiracial students, researchers point to the similarities in which students perceive their educational environments, regardless of their racial makeup (Renn, 2012; Schaidle, 2016).

Overall, monoracial identity development models have contributed to the development of multiracial identity (Wijeyesinghe, 2012). Helm's Model of White Identity Development, Sellers Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) and Cross' 1971 Model of Black Identity Development have contributed to the work of several multiracial identity models (Renn, 2004; Root, 1990). Although several identity models offer necessary frameworks for minorities, they are tailored to monoracial individuals, offering no recommendations and assumptions for multiracial individuals

(Matsumura, 2017). Research regarding multiracial identity development is essential in order to supplement and possibly challenge current perceptions of student identity development (Renn, 2012; Tinto, 2017; Wilton et al., 2017).

## Historical Overview of Multiracial Identity Development

Researchers of multiracial identity development literature shed light on the unique challenges multiracial students encounter within their academic environments (Ezeala-Harrison, 2014; Freeman et al., 2016). Since multiracial identity development is quite different than monoracial identity development, it is essential to consider developmental processes and stages for multiracial individuals to have a better understanding of their experiences in a collegiate setting (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016). In an effort to highlight the complexities of understanding multiracial identity development, the following section will explore the early and current literature on multiracial development.

Although the focus on contemporary research has shifted towards an approach that better serves multiracial individuals, research continues to focus on the shared themes that tend to run throughout both the monoracial and multiracial identity models (Freeman et al., 2016). According to Schaidle (2016), research regarding racial identity runs fluid with the structure of programs and services at college and universities. Therefore, institutional leaders and student affairs professionals are challenged to understand that patterns in racial identity are malleable and influenced by social and cultural factors (Gaither, Chen, Pauker, & Sommers, 2018).

**Multiracial identity development theories and models.** Research conducted from the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) found that the number of doctoral degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions by students claiming two or

more races stood at 2.3% in comparison to White students at 69.3% and 12.2% for Asian/Pacific Islander students (NCES, 2016). As higher education institutions notice an influx of more and more multiracial doctoral students, many are dealing with how to acknowledge and support this growing population (Matsumura, 2017). Specifically, college and university leadership seek to understand how multiracial doctoral students navigate through their own racial identities in a higher education environment (Schaidle, 2016). Although there are some common themes in monoracial and multiracial identity development theories, the identity development of multiracial students clearly does not follow the path outlined in traditional identity development (Renn, 2004; Root, 1994; Wijeyesinghe, 2012).

Theorists in the area of multiracial identity development propose that biracial or multiracial individuals' racial identity claims may change over the course of their lifetime (Renn, 2004; Root, 1995; Root, 1994). According to Bakker (2015), this is often seen across different contexts, and throughout various multiracial, multiethnic, or even monoracial individuals. Furthermore, Franco and Franco (2016) indicated the complexities in the process of understanding multiracial identity development, as several theories require the understanding of monoracial identities that in part make up multiracial identity. Wilton et al. (2017) noted early work on multiracial identity development had major limitations, as there was very little research to use as variance in development experiences. In fact, most, if not all of the scholars relied heavily on the developmental research of the identity development of monoracial individuals (Allen, 1992; Choi-Misailidis, 2004; Stonequist, 1935). Bakker (2015) stated the likelihood that any early research offered real-life resolutions for a multiracial individual is less likely as

to include developmental experiences that occur within monoracial groups. In an effort to highlight the complexities of understanding multiracial identity development, the following section will explore the early and current literature on multiracial development.

**Early work on multiracial theories.** In his book, The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict, Stonequist (1935) discussed the pathology in white families in comparison to those in black families. In an effort to explain the need for research based on multiracial people, Stonequist (1935) asserted that developing a multiracial identity is a marginal experience, because multiracial people come from two worlds in which they do not experience at the same time. Historically speaking, the marginal man was often described as vulnerable and subject to rejection and isolation from the more dominant groups, including other minority groups (Brown, 2017). For example, individuals who were mixed with White and Asian decent were not only discriminated from the White society but also faced rejection from the Asian community (Chang, 2016). Multiple scholars describe this phenomenon as dual minority status (Perkins, 2014; Stepney et al., 2015).

According to Stonequist (1935), it was because of this reason that multiracial individuals experienced indecision and ambiguity, which can further exacerbate problems people face when attempting to identify with other racial groups, including their own. Brown (2017) argued that the marginal man theories focused on the discrepancies and issues related to having a multiracial background. Quaya and Harper (2015) identified this as a problem as multiracial individuals are more susceptible to developing an inferiority complex and other psychological outcomes. According to Stonequist (1935), the marginal man experienced three phases, which included the introduction phase where

individuals are not aware of the potential conflict while trying to experience assimilation of both worlds and the crisis stage when the individual becomes consciously aware of the conflict between the two cultures. Lastly, the individual attempts to take control by taking an active role in defining the significance of their existence (Stonequist, 1935). However, according to Yasui (2015), given that the United States experienced segregation during this time, it was quite apparent that the marginal man fell into the monoracial group (blacks) they most likely represented. It is likely at the very least this person became isolated and withdrawn from society (Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017).

Brown (2017) argued that unlike current theories, the marginal man theory presents major limitations, as it does not discuss other factors such as racism or racial order and it is largely focused on the internal development within multiracial individuals. According to Rauktis, Fusco, Goodkind, and Bradley-King (2016), further limitations of this early model are that it does not address other functions of marginality that could affect the development of multiracial identity. These limitations include parental group conflict between racial groups, and or the absence of one parent creating a void from one racial identity (Yasuni, 2015). Despite the efforts, many of the early researchers failed to describe the experiences of multiracial individuals that have characteristics of both races minus the feeling of conflict or the feeling of marginalization (Chen & Ratliff, 2015). Yoo, Jackson, Guevarra, Miller, and Harrington (2016) noted that a transformative approach on the research of multiracial people took place as the numbers of scholars who identified as mixed race started to increase. Correspondingly, this transformation included a change in perspective towards multiracial individuals (Chan & Ratliff, 2015).

**Current theories in multiracial identity development.** In the 1980s and 1990s, a group of scholars set out to offer another set of outcomes of biracial' or multiracial individuals with healthy identities within different cultures and varying locations (Poston, 1990; Root, 1995; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). According to Yoo et al. (2016), much of this research focused on challenging the assumptions of multiracial people, and it is because of this groundbreaking research multiracial individuals were regarded as a distinct group worthy of theoretical study. Exploring current theories based on multiracial identity development allows for a stronger, more in-depth understanding about how multiracial individuals make choices regarding their own identity (Sims, 2016). More specifically, current theories offer less generalizations of racial identity in regard to the multiracial population in higher education environments (Villegas-Gold & Tran, 2018).

Previous studies based on early identity models require some acceptance into the minority culture of origin, particularly during the immersion stage (Sims, 2016). One of the first multiracial theories that challenged some of the early theories was Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. Poston (1990) declared there were similarities in all early work theories, as models did not reflect the true experiences of multiracial individuals. Unlike early research on multiracial identity development, Poston (1990) included research from relevant support groups and also encompassed constructions of racial identity, ideology and self-esteem. According to Stone and Doblin-MacNab (2017), this theory represents a new model, which embodied individuals who already identified as multiracial.

Poston (1990) included stages such as personal identity, group affiliation, enmeshment or denial, appreciation, and most importantly integration. Owen et al. (2016)

noted, when applied to multiracial identity development, this theory suggests individuals are not interconnected to any specific race or ethnic group when they are children, yet move through a process of selecting multiple options of race throughout their lifetime. Accordingly, Poston (1990) was able to identify numerous factors influencing the identity choice of multiracial individuals such as physical appearance, cultural knowledge and environmental factors (such as perceived group status and social support). Furthermore, Poston (1990) noted individuals experience confusion and guilt over not being able to identify with all traits of one's heritage. Luedke (2017) noted this often leads to feelings of disappointment, anger and shame where individuals must work through this guilt in order to successfully move through the latter stages. Consistent with these themes, the main goal of this theory was for multiracial individuals to reach integration, where they recognize and appreciate all of the racial and ethnic identities that make an individual unique (Poston, 1990).

Franco and O'Brian (2018) argued that unlike Root's (1990) ecological framework of multiracial identity, Poston (1990) suggests there is only one outcome of healthy identity for multiracial individuals. Counter to these findings, Root's (1990) study was to present alternative resolutions to understanding ethnic identity based on exploration and history of racial hierarchy in the United States. In contrast to Poston's (1990) identity model, Root (1990) addressed the influence of societal racism and how individuals may view themselves in comparison to how others see them. Owen et al. (2016) noted this theory fails to incorporate healthy racial outcomes overall for multiracial people, and this exclusion shaped the foundation for future research by scholars who identified a range of health outcomes for multiracial individuals.

Counter to these findings, Root's (1990) nonlinear multiracial identity model includes an evaluation of influences such as political, sociocultural and familial, on multiracial identity development. Within the first stage, an individual experiences acceptance and identifies with the group that society assigns them (Root, 1990). According to this model, when family and other strong influences accept assignment of said identity, the individual will easily accept the identity. Root (1990) noted, depending on the support from others, an individual may be able to identify with both (or all) racial groups. The theorist further proposed a process where multiracial individuals may identify with a single racial group, where they chose one racial group based on their own internal forces or chose to move fluidly throughout racial groups while overall identifying with other multiracial people (Root, 1990).

With regard to moving fluidly between racial groups, both Renn (2012) and Wijeyesinghe (2012) suggested individuals might battle with learning how to manage a dual existence. Wijeyesinghe's (2001) factor model of multiracial identity was crafted in an effort to focus on the various factors that affect independent choice of racial identity. More specifically, the factor model represents the diversity of within and between groups of multiracial people. The eight factors of the FMMI model include: (a) Racial Ancestry, (b) Early Experience and Socialization, (c) Cultural Attachment, (d) Physical Appearance, (e) Historical Context, (f) Political Awareness and (g) orientation, (h) Other Social identities, and Spirituality (Wijeyesinghe, 2001). The FMMI model was developed from a qualitative study of adult (Black/White) participants who selected a range of identities, including Multiracial, Black and White. Additionally, individuals were both male and female, had different life experiences, and were in different socioeconomic

backgrounds. Dixon and Telles (2017) noted the importance of defining factors, as they may help agents understand the experiences of multiracial people and their selection of racial identity. According to Harris (2016), this model represents factors that have an interrelating relationship. For example, some individuals may base their identity selection on both physical appearance and racial ancestry or their current political and cultural orientation. Paulker, Meyers, Sanchez, Gaither, and Young (2018) suggested that when faced with a threat to their multiracial status, multiracial individuals often switch among the described factors as a way to help perceive the current world around them. Similar to this assertion, Tran, Miyake, Martiniz-Morals, and Csizmadia (2016) and Luedke (2017) noted those individuals who have the ability to alternate may experience favorable psychological and social consequences, as they are able to better navigate racially diverse situations.

In general, it is possible the contrast in theories represent research which stems from two different times frames with more than 50 years in between. Interestingly, current research maintains equal contradictions in research outcomes regarding multiracial identities (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016). Research regarding multiracial individuals has gone through a considerable revolution during the past century and as a result, increased the ability to better navigate racially diverse situations, which may lead to beneficial outcomes in social categories (Harper, 2016). Omi and Winiant (2015) argued these social categories influence multiple environments including, work, home and educational institutions.

**Summary of multiracial theories and models.** This section highlighted literature related to multiracial identity theories and models relevant to this study.

Exploring theories based on multiracial identity development will allow for a stronger, more in-depth understanding about how multiracial individuals make choices regarding their own identity (Pauker et al., 2018). Although many of the studies complement one another, the contradictions allow for a reasonably sound research foundation for understanding and highlighting the complexities of understanding multiracial identity development (Clayton, 2018).

As previously mentioned, it is important to understand and explore how multiracial students make sense of their educational surroundings (Tran et al., 2016). Specifically, colleges and universities seek to understand how multiracial doctoral students navigate through their own racial identities in a higher education environment (Harris et al., 2018). Additionally, in an effort to ensure inclusiveness for all students, Linder (2018) encourages student affairs leaders to consider the structure of existing cultural programs and services at colleges and universities.

**Multiracial Identity Development in Academic Environments**

As previous researchers have suggested, racial identities can have a significant impact on the educational experiences in academic environments, including early child development to education received in postsecondary institutions (Anumba, 2015). Racial identity plays a major part in how students relate to instruction, how they treat or are treated by school staff and students as well as how they relate to the curriculum (Museus et al., 2016). Several scholars have investigated the connection between racial identity and academic achievement, yet few provided insights on the identity development of multiracial students (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Steele, 2012).

Macrander and Winkle-Wager (2016) noted a disconnection between multiracial students and academic achievement based on the social construction of race. Chang (2016) supported the notion that being forced to choose a single racial identity can be unfavorable to multiracial individuals' academic achievement. Further, Poston (1990) proposed that forcing students to choose one race may send a message to the student that their multiracial identity is not recognized or valued, causing a negative effect of the student's academic performance.

Overall, researchers have stressed that teachers' and peers' perceptions of multiracial individuals' racial identity can play a large role in the formation of racial identity in students (Renn, 2008; Wilton et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, when a teacher perceives a student as belonging to one group or another, there is a chance the student will be placed in a category in which the student does not relate. Good, Sanchez, and Chavez (2013), studied multiracial individuals who identified as having at least one white parent. The findings of the study indicated that students with a greater amount of white ancestry are perceived as experiencing less discrimination and are less likely to be categorized as a minority (Good et al., 2013). Although the participants offered a number of reasons why they were satisfied with their learning environments, a desire for sense of belonging and an engaged campus environment were two themes that were consistent throughout the research (Good et al., 2013). For the purpose of the research, focus will be placed on student engagement and the impact it has on the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students in online higher education environments.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a concept often discussed as a primary component of effective teaching and often thought of as the backbone in any effective higher education learning environment (Wood & Ireland, 2014). Several researchers indicated student engagement as a key element in the outcomes of student success (Dunstan, Eads, Jaeger, & Wolfram, 2018; Meyer, 2014; Wood & Ireland, 2014). According to Armellini and DeStefani (2015), engaged students often demonstrate a sense of satisfaction and ultimately exhibit higher levels of learning and personal development. In addition, researchers have found that students who allocate more time to purposeful engagement benefit from additional positive outcomes in the following domains: moral and ethical development (Gutiérrez-Santiuste, et al., 2016; Linder, 2018); applied competence and skills transferability (Meyer, 2014); an increase of social capital (Ozaki & Renn, 2015); and psychosocial development and more specifically, productive gender and racial identity formation (Gaither, 2015). Consistent with these themes, Kahn et al. (2017) proposed when a student maintains regular engagement in their educational programs, they experience higher levels of satisfaction, which in turn leads to a greater chance of retention. In an effort to increase retention rates, many colleges offer programs for students who are more likely to withdrawal or fail out of their program all together (Stoessel et al., 2015). According to Redmond et al. (2018), a shift to online learning requires variations to the teaching and learning practices traditionally associated with college learning environments. As the demand for online courses continues to grow, so does the call for accomplished faculty who can properly design and deliver online instruction that fosters student engagement (Hathaway & Norton, 2014).

**Student engagement in online learning.** According to Berman and Ames (2015), engaged students in an online learning environment, have a greater sense of satisfaction, which in turn are more likely to persist. Current researchers have reported an increase of low retention rates in the online learning platform (Tankari, 2018; West, Heath, & Huijser, 2016). When examining the impact of how student engagement applies in online learning, it is significant to understand the definition of student engagement as perceived by online students (Taylor & Dunn, 2015). Kuh (2009), the founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), offered a simple explanation of engagement where he noted the more a student studies a subject, the more the student understands the subject, and the more repetition the student experiences, the more feedback the student receives from faculty and staff members. Kuh (2009) noted when students are continuously writing, collaborating and problem solving, the deeper they come to understanding what they are trying to learn. Villegas and Tran (2018) added students are more likely to become proficient at handling complexity, tolerating uncertainty, and collaborating with individuals from different backgrounds or different views.

As previously mentioned, many researchers have suggested engagement as a broadly used term but appear to have a range of meanings and interpretations (Redmond et al., 2018; Sinha et al., 2015). As such, it is necessary to further explore what researchers highlight as key principles of student engagement in online learning. Redmond et al. (2018) noted it is here where there is a clear distinction of methodology between traditional learning environments and online learning environments.

According to Wood and Ireland (2014), with the proper methodology, students attending online universities can outperform traditional, brick and mortar students. Bolton and Gregory (2015) conducted interviews with 18 online lectures in six universities, located in several different countries. Rather than considering research concentrated on the reasons why students drop out of courses, both researchers focused on professors' views and effective strategies they currently use in their course. Bolton and Gregory (2015) found that all professors agreed collaborative activities, social interaction (blogs, chat rooms, discussions), and real time videos as effective ways to foster student engagement with online content.

Martin and Bolliger (2018) found similar results stating that a link in social relationships in the course room helps students connect with the subject matter through innovative use of technology. In this survey-based research study, Martin and Bolliger (2018) used a 38-item survey on learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-content engagement strategies. One hundred and fifty-five students completed the survey, resulting in findings similar to that of Bolton and Gregory (2015). It emerged that when online course rooms support interactions with all three types of engagement strategies, including adopting online activities, the integration of technologies and active connections with the professor, there was a direct result in higher engagement and retention in online programs (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; McPherson & Lawrence, 2015).

**Online doctoral students and engagement**. As previously mentioned**,** navigation and completion of a doctoral degree presents numerous challenges (Lambie et al., 2014). Adapting to school at the doctoral level can be quite stressful, and for this reason it is imperative to offer services designed to minimize the stressors unique to doctoral

students (Bagaka et al., 2015; Lambie et al., 2014). Although much of the research on retention and success has focused on undergraduate students, research supports student engagement as being a key element that influences success in doctoral students (Meyer, 2014; Weimer, 2016). According to Berry (2017), the experiences of online doctoral students are much different than the experiences of students attending traditional, face-to-face doctoral programs. In general, traditional students have multiple opportunities to interact and engage with their peers and faculty members (Ali & Smith, 2015a).

According to West et al. (2016), engaged students often demonstrate a sense of satisfaction and ultimately exhibit higher levels of learning and personal development. Bettinger et al. (2017) noted that if a student is disconnected in an online learning environment, the student is less likely to put forth the energy needed to perform at a higher capacity. Phirangee and Malec (2017) studied perceptions in students who felt "othered" as an online student. In their findings, 3 themes were identified: academic, ethnic, or professional (p.164). They found there was an increased sense of isolation and feeling disconnected, when students felt "othered" in online courses. When the students became increasingly engaged, there was a reduction in feelings of isolation (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Various scholars have revealed that online learners benefit from positive relationships pertaining to enhanced student engagement in faculty and advisor relationships (Janta et al., 2012; Kahn et al., 2017). According to Dixson (2015), online doctoral students can make progress in the dissertation phase by simply making sure to communicate with their supervisors. In contrast, Janta et al. (2012) noted that the lack of engagement with online doctoral students could leave them feeling isolated and

disconnected. Dunstan et al. (2018) suggested the challenge in distance learning is how to maintain a sense of community. In order to maximize a sense of engagement in online education programs, Myers, Jeffery, Nimmagadda, Werhman, and Jordan (2015) suggested continuous communication between using online technologies that allow for synchronous (i.e. real-time or live) contact between faculty members and students, and opportunities for traditional methods (i.e. discussions, presentations, and more). Myers et al. (2015) proposed offering opportunities that allow for asynchronous (i.e., not real time) communication between faculty and classmates through weblog postings, online assignment submissions, and prerecorded messages and lectures. Moreover, McFarland et al. (2017) noted network learning as a method to help develop relationships to facilitate acquisition of knowledge related to ethics, techniques, and norms in their individual fields.

Overall, researchers increasingly support the significance of student engagement in online doctoral programs (Dixson, 2015; Kahn, et al., 2017). Consistent with these themes, McFarland et al. (2017) suggested student organization and support systems can be exceptionally transformative for online doctoral students. Strategies that reduce feelings of isolation in online students in what is already an isolated environment have shown to be critical to student persistence while studying in an online environment (Ali & Smith, 2015a; Dunstan et. al., 2018). According to some researchers, the interactions between a student's academic self-concept and their learning situation influenced the student's academic achievement when there was incongruence between a learning environment and a student's characteristic (Richardson, Maeda, & Caskurlu, 2017;

Sembring, 2015).Thus, in the following section, I will review and synthesize studies related to academic achievement related to multiracial online doctoral students.

## Academic Achievement in Online Doctoral Students

Aside the many definitions, academic achievement is most commonly defined as the point to which students are achieving their educational goals, and is mostly determined by assessment (Horzum, et al., 2015; Rockinson et al., 2016). In particular, academic achievement is often presented in a convenient quantitative summary of a student's success in college (Bagaka et al., 2015; Caruth, 2017). When an institution produces high retention rates, more students will pay the tuition and obtain higher academic achievements. Bawa (2016) argued that both are critical to the success of higher education.

**Adult learners and life demands.** Whatever the reason may be for pursuing an online doctoral degree, adult learners must take life demands into consideration when setting the guidelines for achieving academic goals (Sue & Chen, 2016). As previously mentioned, current researchers describe the current online graduate learner as a 25 and older, non-traditional student, with unique challenges including families, careers and other time-consuming demands (Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2016). Banks (2018) found that in comparison to the more traditionally aged student, adult learners have specific needs and face various obstacles that imped their progress toward achievement of their academic and career goals. Life demands may be different for each student, but are commonly defined as family, work, and other responsibilities are committed to in addition to obtaining their educational goals (Fielding, 2016). James et al. (2016) stated that when the demands are too high, students can be pulled away from

their educational goals, and as a result can display lower levels of academic achievement. Consistent with these themes, when a student has less demands, the student will have more time to focus on their education, thus increasing the opportunity for achieving academic goals (Duggal & Mehta, 2015). Life demands often serve as motivational factors for achieving academic goals, but may also have a negative impact on progress, given the restraints of online learners (Bettinger et al., 2017). Contrary to these previous findings, recent research has shown that higher levels of academic achievement are displayed in students who are working full time and less in students who are not working (Rockinson-Szapkjw et al., 2016).

**Adapting to online learning.** As previously mentioned, adapting to an online learning environment is often quite challenging for adult online learners; therefore, adult online learners are more likely to feel lonely and isolated than traditional students attending a school on campus (Weimer, 2016). Banks (2018) found in comparison to the more traditional student, adult learners have specific needs and face numerous obstacles that imped their progress toward achievement of their academic and career goals. According to Dixon (2015), this includes a level of isolation, which often reduces the student's need or wants to participate in activities linked to success in college. Thus, Dixon (2015) noted adult learners often focus more on academic achievement as a common coping mechanism for many students. Several researchers have suggested that personal confidences are often enhanced when a student achieves academic success (Markle, 2015; Masika & Jones, 2016; Sue & Chen, 2016). Congruent to this assertion, several researchers suggest, to offset their problems in the socialization aspect of online learning, students often channel their efforts toward academics, which can happen at the

expense of student engagement (Lee, 2017; Yeboah & Smith, 2016). According to Lumpkin, Achen, and Dodd (2015), online programs have focused on the technical aspects and have neglected the importance of students' perceptions of student engagement and academic achievement while enrolled in an online doctoral program. More specifically, this research focuses on the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students.

**Academic achievement for multiracial doctoral students.** As previously mentioned, despite the growth in this unique population, multiracial doctoral students are often overlooked in literature relating to successful outcomes and academic achievement (Jones, 2015). Several researchers suggest there is a clear disconnection between multiracial students and academic achievement based on the social construction of race (Davis et al., 2013; McDonald, 2014). Empirical findings have indicated that there are associations between academic achievements and several factors and variables, including self-concept and racial identity (Fryer & Greenstone, 2010; Gilborn, 2015). Researchers support the notion that being forced to choose a single racial identity can be unfavorable to multiracial individuals' academic achievement (Chang, 2016; McDonald, 2014).

## Summary and Conclusions

The literature review provided a foundational understanding of multiracial identity development, student engagement and academic achievement in online multiracial doctoral students. As presented in this chapter, monoracial identity models have long been recognized as insufficient for multiracial intervention plans, as the models are incapable of explaining racial identity development in multiracial individuals (Macrander & Winkle-Wagner, 2016). The lack of theoretical application of multiracial

identity development in higher education retention programs is indicative of the rapidly growing multiracial population (Chen, 2015).

As presented in this chapter, the experiences of online doctoral students are much different than the experiences of students attending traditional, face-to-face doctoral programs (Ortegus, 2017). A review of literature regarding student engagement is highlighted as a primary component of effective teaching and often thought as the backbone in and online learning environment (Wood & Ireland, 2014). The experiences of multiracial students in higher education are unique, and they experience a complex identity development process (Harris, 2016). Research presented in this review revealed that online learners benefit from positive relationships pertaining to enhanced student engagement in faculty and advisor relationships (Bettinger et al., 2017; Dixson, 2015). Suggestions of techniques in student engagement are provided, including synchronous and asynchronous communication between faculty members and students, and networking as methods to maximize a sense of engagement in online education programs (Myers et al., 2015).

Although research regarding the retention of multiracial college students attending higher education institutions reflects important findings, I have found no research that has examined how multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities as it pertains to student engagement and academic achievement in distance online learning. Given that student retention is a critical component in the success of many colleges and universities, it is beneficial to understand the underpinning of student engagement and racial identity development and how they can successively be applied to current programs (Natoli et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, multiracial

student organization and support systems can be exceptionally transformative for multiracial doctoral students (McFarland et al., 2017).

# Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative generic design study was to explore the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students in regard to student engagement and racial identity in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multiracial college students in distance education (Harris & Linder, 2014). In this chapter, I discuss the study's methodology, including the research design, the sampling strategy, procedures to identify participants, and instrumentation. I also discuss trustworthiness, credibility and potential ethical issues.

## Research Design and Rationale

In this qualitative study, I sought to explore how online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities regarding student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. A qualitative generic design was used to gain a better understanding of the opinions, beliefs and reflections of the participants' experiences in distance education (Zohrabi, 2013). According to Percy et al. (2015), a generic qualitative research design is considered a practical way of offering answers to research questions that can be applied in practical settings. Research data included a collection of multiracial doctoral students' responses to preset interview questions regarding their perceptions the effectiveness of their university's student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. For this study, I focused on multiracial doctoral students at the selected online university. Participants included students currently enrolled in a doctoral program who have completed all of the required coursework and have attended at least on residency.

## Role of the Researcher

As the interviewer, I served as the data-collection instrument. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), collected data is only as good as the skills of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher benefits from understanding the phenomenon being studied. As a doctoral student attending an online university, I have an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding the participants chosen for this study. I did not have a personal relationship with any of the multiracial doctoral students who were selected to participate in this study.

In qualitative research, researchers must remain objective while collecting data as their subjectivity may impact the date collected from interviews. Sim et al. (2018) stated that it is common for the researcher to make assumptions and biases explicit to self and others. Thus, the researcher must have the capacity to collect information from the participants, while at the same time vigilantly taking note of detail (Choy, 2014). I took great care to eliminate bias while collecting and interpreting data. For example, I set aside preconceived notions about the selected participants. In order to accomplish the goal of reliable data collection, it is important to take detailed notes, use audio recording for interviews, and transcribe the audio verbatim. Remaining nonjudgmental and balanced is essential when engaging with the participants (Mason, 2010).

## Methodology

### Population

Participants were selected from a population of doctoral students attending an online university within the United States. To earn a doctoral degree, most doctoral students in the US must advance through a program of study that includes coursework

and original research (Caruth, 2017). According to the National Science Foundation (2017), most minority groups are obtaining their doctorates from traditional universities. However, the online university used in this study was far outperforming every other university in the U.S. in admitting minority populations (NSF, 2017). More specifically, for doctoral degrees granted to African Americans in a 5-year total (2013-17), the selected university (rank one) granted over 900 doctoral degrees in comparison to 344 from Howard University (rank two; NSF, 2017). Therefore, minority students are increasingly pursuing doctoral degrees online. It was feasible to believe that participants could be located who fit the criteria of the current study from the selected university.

**Sampling Strategy**

The goal of this qualitative study was to document participants' descriptions of their experiences, explore how they experience their online university, identify how they define their experiences, and document the themes that reflect their perceptions. The participants for this study must have met several key criteria to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling, specifically criteria strategy, was used to ensure participants were able to share personal knowledge of the phenomenon as well as share certain demographic characteristics. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposeful sampling encompasses the identification and selection of individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest. For this research, I used the criterion strategy to purposively select participants who fit the criteria of this study. The criteria are: (a) participant must be a native born, domestic student (b) participant is currently enrolled in a doctoral program at the selected university, (c) participant self-identifies as multiracial (which is defined as having biological parents

belonging to different racial groups), and (d) participant completed at least one required academic residency.

**Sample Size**

The sample size for this research was determined by reviewing existing qualitative generic studies and research similar to the purpose of this study. According to Palaganas, Caricativo, Sanchez, and Molintas (2017), generic data collection seeks to gather information from samples of people about their experiences and real-world events. It is possible for a small sample to provide rich information about the topic however, the sampling approach aims for larger representations of the population (Alholjailan, 2012). Overall, researchers reveal the sample size for generic qualitative research can vary depending on the scope of the study (Mason, 2010). Sim et al. (2018) suggested an optimal sample size of six to 10 in order to collect enough rich data to identify the actual lived experiences of the participants. Fusch and Ness (2015) defined saturation as being achieved once a researcher has exhausted the collected information and has an in-depth set of date available. For this research, I reached saturation after conducting interviews with seven qualified participants.

**Procedures for Recruitment, Participants, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through The Participant Pool, a resource provided by the selected university for members of the university's community. The Participant Pool is a virtual bulletin that connects researchers to students who are interested in participating in research. This resource provides access to a very diverse community, allowing participants to read and participate in studies listed on the site. Once the current study was listed, participants were able to review criteria for inclusion and determine if

they are eligible. It was expected that all students reviewed the list of criteria and only participated if they meet all of the criteria. Interested participants were directed to request an account with the online research participation system, and follow the steps provided on the Participant Pool web page.

Additional participants were sought after via a social media campaign. Announcements listing specific criteria was posted in an effort to recruit potential participants. All interested participants were asked to send an email to the provided email address, stating they meet the criteria for the study and would like to participate. Once interested participants were identified, they received a consent form via email and were instructed to respond to the same email stating they agreed to the consent form. The first seven participants who meet the criteria were selected to participate in the study. Data was collected through in-depth semistructured interviews in order to capture the unique understandings of multiracial doctoral students and their experiences in an online university (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasnieme, 2016). Using a semistructured interview process allowed for more probing and was broad enough to allow participants to provide a narrative of their experiences (Smith, 2009). The interview process was flexible in order to allow the participants to speak freely so they feel comfortable expressing detailed information about the phenomena. Zohrabi (2013) suggested using broad, pre-scripted questions, as an option should the participants require clarity or additional information regarding the initial interview questions. Each interview session lasted between 35 to 45 minutes and will only require one interview session per participant.

Participants choose to interview via phone, Face Time, or Zoom. All seven

participants chose to interview on Zoom. When possible, participants were encouraged to participate via Face-to-face (i.e. add Face Time and Zoom to stimulate face-to-face communication). Tuttas (2014) noted that face-to-face interviews are more effective in that the participants tend to provide more detailed responses. The interview consisted of questions provided on the Interview Form provided in Appendix A. Data was recorded using Zoom and the Voice Memos App as a backup. The recordings were uploaded to Descript for transcription services. All options were secure, as they were recorded on a password-protected device.

Each interview began with a brief introduction of the study, as well as an attempt to engage the participant in some brief casual discussion to make sure the participant was relaxed. Leedy and Ormrod (2016) note that initiating the interview with informal discussion could assist in relaxing the participant before the interview before formally getting started. Once the participant appeared to be relaxed and ready to move forward, they were given an explanation of the conditions for participation, as well as an outline of the procedures taken to ensure their privacy once the interview was complete. Kline (2017) stated participants are inclined to be more open when they feel like their privacy will be respected throughout the course of the research. Additional steps to encourage participant participation consisted of informing the participant of my intent for the research and letting the participant know they were free to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty (Tuttas, 2014). At the end of each interview, each participant was debriefed by going back over the purpose of the research and I thanked them for their participation.

Kallio et al. (2016) suggested utilizing inter-related phases when developing a semistructured interview guide. Based on their findings, Kallio et al. (2016) produced a formulated process that encompassed identifying specific prerequisites for utilizing semistructured interviews as well as retrieving and using previous knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. Rabinonet (2011) stated it is important for the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of the substance of the research. According to Chenail (2011), the proper development of a semistructured interview guide thoroughly contributes to the trustworthiness of a semistructured interview when conducting qualitative research.

With regard to exploring the perceptions of online multiracial doctoral students, Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure was the theoretical framework that guided the semstructured interview questions. Tinto (2017) highlighted that many students fail to make a connection to the environments within their institutions, inside or outside the classrooms. Tinto (2017) noted that students are more likely to preserve when they are more academically and socially involved with other students and faculty members. In a qualitative study used to identify influences on student engagement, Natoli et al. (2015) used a semistructured interview guide consisting of eight open ended questions broadly based around Tinto's model of student engagement. The semistructured interview questions allowed for a deep probing as participants were asked questions that allowed them to provide a narrative of their experiences. For instance, participants were asked to tell the researcher about their involvement in their classes and the type of interactions they have with their faculty (Natoli et al., 2015).

Qualitative researchers can explore a phenomenon by asking probing questions about specific events, time frames and people connected to the phenomenon (Spaulding & Rocksinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Therefore, content validity will be established by structuring the open-ended questions to prompt the participants to reflect deeply about their experiences at an online university regarding student engagement and academic achievement. Tinto's (1997) theory was used as a lens for analysis of the data and the interpretation of the findings were grounded in the theory. The interview questions were grounded in the theory as well as the interpretation of the findings. Interview questions provided in Appendix A.

**Data Analysis Plan**

According to Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017), in qualitative research, data analysis begins during data collection as the researcher starts to engage with the data. I used thematic content analysis as the process of identifying patterns or themes within the collected qualitative data of this study (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Thematic content analysis, like several other qualitative methods, does not follow a particular set of steps to analyze data (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Although there are many different ways to approach thematic analysis, I followed Clark and Braun's (2013) 6-step framework to interpret data collected from the participants.

First, I began the analysis by carefully reading through each transcribed interview to become familiar with the data. Alhojailan (2012) suggested reading and re-reading the transcripts while taking rough notes of early impressions. Next, I searched for emerging themes and assigned preliminary codes. Clark and Braun (2013) suggested organizing the data in a meaningful and systematic way as coding condenses a lot of data into small

chunks of meaning. Merriam and Tidsdell (2016) describe the importance of making sure each statement that is selected, should have the potential to be used in the findings, and coded as a theme. During this process, I only coded each section of the data that was relevant to the research question for this study. Nowell et al. (2017) stated when there are no pre-set codes, open coding allows for the researcher to develop and revise the codes as they work through the coding process. I then examined the codes to create a broad list of themes that were relevant to the research question. Clark and Braun (2013) stated it is in this third step where a researcher will find some of the coded words distinctly fit together into a theme. At this stage, I created separate lists, making note of codes that were associated with more than one theme. Alholjailan (2012) suggested creating a miscellaneous theme for codes that do not fit in a theme at this stage. In the fourth step, I reread the data in these groups, looking for more specific themes in the data and categorized the data accordingly. During this stage, Clarke and Braun (2013) suggested the researcher review the themes to make sure they make sense, support the data, have any overlapping themes and search for subthemes. The fifth stage consisted of defining themes with the purpose of identifying the true 'essence' of what the theme is about (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this stage, I compared the sub themes to see how they interacted and related to the main themes. Lastly, I included the write-up of the final data analysis in chapter 4. Data was stored, managed, and analyzed with the use of NVivo software.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

### Credibility

According to Percy et al. (2015), credibility is essential when collecting and interpreting data. This includes a truthful and thorough disclosure of the researcher's experiences and bias toward the research as a whole. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), minimizing subjective bias should be considered when conducting qualitative research. Measures to enhance researcher credibility included member checks and peer de-briefing. Member checking can be used to determine if participants agree that the descriptions and interpretations truly reflect their lived experiences (Sousa, 2014). Participants will be provided with a copy of researcher interpretations. Through a process of peer debriefing, a researcher can work to make sure the participants' thoughts and feelings are reflected in the data and results, rather than the researcher (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). The steps I took to work through peer debriefing included the discussion of data collection and analysis with my committee chair and colleagues throughout the process and listening to feedback from others regarding my role in the study.

### Transferability

Transferability allows for the reader to understand and relate to the lived experiences of the participants (Mason, 2010). The results from this study may not be applicable to other universities as qualitative studies are unique and difficult to replicate (McAloney, 2010). The transferability of this study is likely to be limited to the field of online education. However, findings may be applicable to multiple levels of online programs that are managed by similar polices, and face challenges by similar students'

issues. In order to properly communicate the participants' lived experiences, I used thick description to describe the experiences of the participant's life. Hengst, Devanga, and Mosier (2015) describe thick description as documenting descriptions of voices, actions and meanings and feelings. Participants will have an opportunity to review the descriptions of their experiences for accuracy as well as track the progress of the study.

**Dependability**

According to Smith et al. (2012), dependability refers to whether or not the date would be the same if the study were to be repeated at another time, or in different settings. In order to establish dependability, I maintained a thoroughly detailed audit trail including all of my notes, interview recordings, the interview guide, all copies of transcripts including hard copy and electronic data. According to Choy (2014), an audit of the research should be clear in order to verify the research was conducted correctly and with integrity.

**Conformability**

Conformability of a qualitative study refers to the degree of impartiality maintained by the researcher (Sousa, 2014). Although it is important to remove researcher bias in all kinds of research designs, it plays a major role in qualitative studies because the researcher must analyze, contextualize and make sense of the collected data. According to Palaganas et al. (2017), reflexivity is a continuous process of reflection on the researchers' own values, examining and understanding how their individual assumptions affect their research practice. Specific steps were taken to foster reflexivity by staying aware of my own preconceptions and staying true to the method by making room for the participant's lived experiences to come through in order for the data to come

forth (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). As data emerges, I remained aware of my own preconceptions (Sim et al., 2018).

**Ethical Considerations**

In accordance with the University's policies, approval was received from the institutional review board (IRB) prior to collecting data for the study. The IRB was provided with a full explanation of the study, including the plan to collect and analyze the data, as well as the plan to protect the participant's information during the course of the study. In order to comply with the University's research, ethics, and compliance policies, I made sure the identities of the participants were protected throughout the study. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and consented to having their interviews recorded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consent forms offered a clear scope as to what's expected from participants. Participants understand that participation is voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without repercussions.

As I was the only researcher on the study, information regarding participants' name or reference numbers that may identify participant will not be shared to observe anonymity. All materials collected digitally shall remain password protected on my home computer and the transferred to a hard drive until the study is complete. I will treat information collected with confidentiality as well as lock away data collected for a minimum of 5 years. At the end of the 5-year time frame, all documentation will either be permanently erased (digital files) or destroyed via document shredding. Once the study is complete, the participants will receive a copy of the entire research including results and conclusions. No personal information of the participants will be included on the final copy of the research.

## Summary

In this chapter, I provided a thorough and in-depth overview of the design, data collection and analysis processes, as well as the possible issues of trustworthiness, followed by the ethical procedures. In this generic qualitative research study, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of multiracial students and their lived experiences regarding the effectiveness of online universities student engagement and academic achievement as it pertains to student retention. This generic design study was appropriate because it was aimed at understanding a participant's experience in real life situations, not experimental situations (Percy et al., 2015). I discussed the process of thematic content analysis that was used as a method of identifying codes and themes found in the data collected from the interviews. In Chapters 4 and 5, I provided the data analysis, findings and recommendations.

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# Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative generic study was to gain insight into the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students in regard to student engagement and achieving academic goals in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multicultural college students in distance education (Hubain et al., 2016). In this section, I present the data collected through in-depth interviews of 7 multiracial doctoral students who are currently attending the selected online university. The interviews continued until saturation was reached. In this chapter, I present information regarding the data analysis process of collecting, managing, and analyzing data. The study was driven by the following research question: How do online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention?

This chapter describes in detail the process of how I established the themes and subthemes based on the guiding research question. In order to provide data to document specific accounts and details of the students' experiences, I have provided direct quotes from the responses of the participants.

## Study Setting and Demographics

I received approval from the University's IRB to begin conducting this research study on May 14, 2020 (IRB Approval #05-14-20-0061160). This chapter provides findings based on the perceptions of seven online multiracial doctoral students. Participants for this study were recruited via Facebook. All participants received and signed an informed consent form and noted they had no questions or concerns about participation. All participants understood their participation was voluntary and agreed to

have their interview recorded on Zoom. I asked each participant nine interview questions along with several questions which allowed me to clarify or expand on the responses they provided (Appendix A). Demographic information is provided in Table 1. All participants met the criteria for the study. The seven participants for this research study were doctoral students who are currently attending the selected online university. Each participant self-identified as a multicultural, native-born domestic student who has completed at least one required academic residency (see Table 1). The participants consisted of four females and three males who were all 18 years of age or older.

Table 1

*Demographics*

| Participants | Sex | Race |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Female | Colombian/Turkish/Dominican |
| Participant 2 | Female | Egyptian/Turkish |
| Participant 3 | Male | African American/Persian |
| Participant 4 | Male | African American/Dominican |
| Participant 5 | Female | German/Pakistani/Lebanese |
| Participant 6 | Female | White American/African American |
| Participant 7 | Male | Hispanic/African American |

## Data Collection

Initially, I sought to recruit participants through a participant pool provided by the selected university for members of the university's community. However, after more than a week of unsuccessful attempts to recruit participants, I referred to my Plan B, which was to recruit via Facebook. A recruitment letter was posted in multiple Facebook groups

with high numbers of minority doctoral students attending online universities. Within 2 weeks of posting a recruitment post on Facebook, eight participants volunteered to participate in the study. Each participant received and completed a consent letter via email, an expressed no concerns or questions regarding their participation in the study. Once the consent form was received, participants were sent an email with a link to Calendly.com where they could select a list of available interview times.

Participants were given the option to participate via Zoom chat, Zoom video chat, or over the phone. Each participant agreed to be recorded on Zoom video chat, with no requests to conduct a phone interview. I asked each participant nine semistructured interview questions to gain insight into their lived experiences of being multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. In the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they were able to stop the interview at any time. All participants with the exception of one, completed the interview with no concerns or distractions. Repeated attempts to reschedule interviews with one volunteer was unsuccessful over the course of 3 weeks. After reviewing the data collected from the first seven interviews, I determined data saturation was achieved as I had an in-depth set of data available. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data saturation is achieved once a researcher has exhausted the collected information and has an in-depth set of data available. As a result, I decided to move forward with the data analysis.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

### Credibility

Barusch, Gringeri, and George (2015) explained the importance of peer debriefing so that a researcher can work to make sure the participants' thoughts and feelings are

reflected in the data and the results. I had several discussions with a peer regarding data and themes throughout the analysis process. In addition, I had no prior relationship to the participants, nor did I have any connections. Finally, member checking was utilized as all participants were offered transcripts of their interview so they could have the opportunity to determine if the transcripts reflected their true statements or make any adjusts as necessary. All but one of the participants declined the offer. No additional information was added.

**Transferability**

For the purpose of this study, it was my intent to provide information on a specific sample of respondents rather than that of a large population. According to Rijnsoever (2017), the results from this study may not be applicable to other universities as qualitative studies are unique and difficult to replicate. Transferability was limited due to only interviewing 7 participants. Details of how the research was conducted are provided to allow for another research to repeat the study and achieve comparable results.

**Dependability**

In order to confirm dependability, the interview questions were approved by the University's IRB and were applicable to the research being conducted. Also, to ensure integrity, I maintained a thoroughly detailed audit trail including all of my notes, interview recordings, the interview protocol, all copies of transcripts including hard copy and electronic data. Bree and Gallagher (2016) suggested maintaining a detailed audit of the research in order to confirm the research was accurate and conducted with integrity. Accordingly, participants were given an opportunity to add additional thoughts at the end of the interview and were told they could clarify any comments once they received a

transcribed copy of their interview. Only one requested the transcription but chose not to enhance the validity.

### Confirmability

According to Anguinis and Solarino (2019), researchers must maintain a degree of neutrality in order to show confirmability in a qualitative study. In order to reinforce confirmability, I utilized NVivo as an effective data analysis system. Once all of the interviews were transcribed through a transcription service, I was able to review the data while listening to the recorded interviews and make adjustments as needed. In order to remain neutral and objective, I made sure all data collected was consistent with the peer-reviewed literature and all biases were set aside.

## Data Analysis

All recordings of interviews were recorded on Zoom and saved to a secure, password-protected desktop prior to being transcribed. The recordings were uploaded to Descript for transcription services. I used NVivo to store, manage, and analyze the data collected for this study. Thematic content analysis, like several other qualitative methods, does not follow a particular set of steps to analyze data (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Merriam and Tidsdell (2016) described the importance of making sure each statement that is selected should have the potential to be used in the findings and coded as a theme. In order to become familiar with the data, I carefully read through each transcribed interview to become familiar with the data. To simplify the process, I removed filler words such as “um” and “uh.”

**Codes, Categories, and Themes**

I searched for emerging themes and assigned preliminary codes to each section of the data that was relevant to the research question. Once the first round of coding was complete, I continued to further refine each code, looking for overlapping themes and assigned subthemes. Once the themes and subthemes were identified, I checked for supportive quotations from the transcript to support the derived themes (see Table 2). After reviewing and analyzing transcriptions of the interviews, four distinct themes materialized: (a) positive engagement between faculty and students; (b) the value of student to student interaction, course delivery and design; (c) pushing through barriers; and (d) student performance and characteristics.

Table 2

*Semistructured Interview Questions and Emergence of Themes*

| Question # | Question | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Can you tell me a little about your background and how you came to be an online student at the selected University? | 1, 4 |
| 2 | What experiences in your online program as a whole stand out to you with respect to engagement? Please elaborate how this was a positive or a negative experience. What effect did it have on you? | 1 |
| 3 | Can you tell me about opportunities you have to interact with other students in the course room? How do the interactions impact your experience in the course room? | 2 |
| 4 | Can you describe experiences in your online courses when you felt deeply engaged? Were there times where you felt unengaged? | 1-2 |
| 5 | Can you describe any collaboration on assignments with other students in your online courses? Have the experiences been positive, neutral, or negative for you and why? | 2-3 |
| 6 | Can you describe your general experience with your professors in your online courses? How do the interactions impact your experience within the course room? Tell me about a time where an instructor stood out. | 1 |
| 7 | What barriers, if any, have you faced in being a successful and engaged online student? | 4 |
| 8 | Can you describe any specific activities at a residency you believe contributed to your academic achievements? | 2-3 |
| 9 | What experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success? What about the experience aided your academic success? | 1-3 |

## Thematic Results

### Theme 1: Positive Engagement Between Faculty and Students

Positive engagement between faculty and students was the theme most frequently identified within the transcripts of the seven interviews. This theme relates to the interaction between students and members of the faculty. According to the interviews, students appreciate the relationships and connections they have with faculty and describe this be a key factor in their perceptions of engagement and achievements. Participants noted the significance of constructive and extensive feedback and appreciated professors who took the time to go beyond standard expectations. For example, Participant 1 said, "For the most part, I've had a phenomenal experience with online engagement. Most of my positive experiences came from professors who were always there and who always responded to class discussions.**"** Participant 1 also shared when she felt unengaged:

> When I think back to my most unengaged course, there were moments when I felt like I was going through a loop because she would say one thing one week, then another thing another week. Sometimes I felt like the feedback was so conflicting, and I would just think I don't want to do this anymore. After speaking with her and letting her know how I felt, things got a little better…but still unmotivating.

Participant 3 said, "I had mostly positive experiences in the courses where the instructors went above and beyond. I remember a time I had an assignment I found quite challenging, and an instructor took the time to offer a completely new way of looking at an assignment. The feedback was really great!" He later shared: "I can also remember a time when I accidently cross submitted an assignment and one of the teachers noticed and

the another one did not. It made me question the feedback and whether or not he was truly engaged in the class."

All seven participants noted faculty accessibility as being a strong characteristic of positive engagement. Most indicated the lack of accessing a professor can be perceived as an unengaging learning environment and can be a significant obstacle to productive learning. Participant 7 said, "I had a professor who graded my work in clumps, and never responded to my emails in a timely manner. I hardly received feedback, and when I did, it was vague and confusing. This was incredibly frustrating." He also mentioned he was fortunate to have only experienced this in two of his courses early in the program. Participant 4 expanded on the importance of faculty accessibility: "I feel like in some classes, they just give you work, you do the work, they grade the work and that's the gist of it, but there's really not a lot of feedback in between."

Participants also indicated they appreciated faculty members who were engaging and passionate when responding to emails, weekly discussion boards, and occasionally personal phone calls. Participant 6 described the appreciation of motivational videos her professor would post every two weeks. She said, "You can tell he really cared about his students because he was always reminding us to be considerate and engaging in the course room. He always sent reminder posts when upcoming due dates were approaching."

Finally, in regard to positive engagement, several participants indicated an appreciation for faculty who allow accommodations for students experiencing life constraints. Participant 2 shared:

> Mid way through my last term, my mother passed from cancer. I was so taken back by grief and overwhelmed because I had to take care of all her belongings. After two weeks of not participating in the class discussions (not on purpose), my professor sent me an email checking in on me. After learning what happened, he made accommodations for me that allowed for me to take care of my business, and then catch up with my work. Thanks to his compassion, I was able to complete the class on time and make a passing grade. He believed in me…he was also paying attention.

Participant 5 expressed difficulties she was having during the second year of her program. She noted the two stark responses she received from both or her professors at the time. She was taking two classes at the time, and stated:

> I think I was toward the end of the first semester. I told her that I was pregnant and that I was kind of thinking should I take time off…should I continue? Because you know, I'd never had a baby before. And I thought, I don't think that I could keep up with this, especially with the lack of sleep that would possibly happen. She gave me the advice that I should not leave because I'd never come back. The other professor never responded to my email, so I got scared and dropped out of her course.

This participant expressed if it wasn't for the professor's willingness to work with her and stay engaged throughout the process, she would have dropped from the program and possibly not returned. "I probably could have managed the other course had the other professor responded to my email and was willing to work with me...I got scared."

This theme relates to how faculty members engage with students in online course rooms. I have determined students undoubtedly appreciate faculty who go above and beyond. Faculty who fail to provide an interactive course room, offer extensive and prompt feedback on coursework, or extend accommodations for students are not perceived to provide an engaging learning environment.

**Theme 2: The Value of Student to Student Interaction**

It is evident in the data that the student to student connections were the most frequently identified source of positive engagement. Every participant identified multiple occasions where the relationships with other students in an online learning environment are perceived to be a noteworthy source of engagement. Several participants made reference to the connections made through thought provoking conversations within the discussion board and throughout the required residencies. Participant 1 shared:

> My interaction really came from the virtual residencies. That's really where I started making connections. I actually am still in touch with three individuals from my first residency. We still keep in contact and we help each other throughout the process. So, I think the residencies in person do a really good job of establishing connection, establishing, engagement and interaction.

Participants 3 and 4 noted similar experiences regarding rich engagement opportunities while attending both face-face and virtual residencies. Participant 3 stated: “We had to participate in an activity that required the students to take a stance on a specific topic and make an argument for it. My group was so involved in this activity, we almost forgot we had just met for the first time 30 minutes prior. That was two years ago,

and we all attended the remaining residencies together. They are my doctoral family. My support system."

Participant 4 stated his program only required one residency, but he had the option to attend another if he chose to do so. He shared with excitement: "I plan to attend another 'face to face' as soon as I get the next opportunity." He went on to say he still communicates with two students he met at the first residency. "We went everywhere together for those few days at residency, and now we call each other for support from time to time." Several participants stated they strategically planned to attend their residencies with students they met at other residencies.

When speaking about student to student interaction, several participants referred to positive and negative experiences in group work or assignments requiring collaboration. Participants 2, 5, 6 and 7 cited group work assignments which prompted different levels of engagement, both positive and negative. The other participants stated they have not been required to collaborate on any assignments as of yet. Participant 5 expanded on her positive and engaging group work experience:

> There was one group project where we were placed into groups that required a lot of interaction…making sure we're on the same page. We had to divide the work up evenly, and then bring it all together to make it one cohesive project. Normally, because of our busy schedules, this would have been extremely frustrating, but it was such an organized assignment, which made for a positive and productive flow.

Participant 6 shared that there were numerous opportunities for collaboration in

several of her courses, but the most engaging experiences were when after she formed relationships with other students. In line with this, Participant 6 shared a specific course which had weekly opportunities for group work. She emphasized this experience engendered a strong sense of engagement and encouraged long lasting relationships with other students. She shared:

> The instructor would post different cases and you had to choose either A or B. Whoever selected the same case had to stick together for the week and work through everyone's perception of the case. We had to work through counter arguments and eventually come together to make a decision on the case. Most of the time we decided to call or Facetime, because it was much easier, and we could go back and forth a little easier. It was also a big plus to be able to feel like you were in a "real class."

Although the a few of the participants made positive references while discussing group work, Participant 2 struggled to find anything positive to say about her experiences with a group project. She acknowledged that she was the only "brown" person in the group and has an obviously ethnic name. "I don't know if race had anything to do with it, but I felt like I was part of the group, and then not part of the group after we did our first virtual session." Participant 2 further elaborated on her negative experience by stating: "There were times when we had to roll play in order to complete the assignment. I pretty much had to roll play both sides of a scenario because the other two students had their own personal meeting and completed the assignment. I was angry because it was super last minute, and I had no idea I would have to complete the work alone." Participant 7

highlighted a similar experience, stating accountability was a huge issue when it came to group assignments:

> It was like, everyone (in the group) disappeared until the night before the assignment was due. I am a timely student, so I would give them multiple opportunities to complete their portion of the assignment, but I still ended up completing the work by myself. It seemed like everyone wanted to be interactive during the planning session, and then again once the assignment was submitted. It was a little unmotivating for me.

This theme relates to how students engage with other students in online course rooms. I have determined participants rely heavily on interacting with other students, as well as maintaining those relationships over time. Based on the data, students perceive only the positive interactions to be meaningful sources of engagement.

**Theme 3: Course Delivery and Design**

All 7 of the participants mentioned specific elements in their learning experiences that were focused on course quality and delivery. Participants made note of well-organized course requirements that allowed for highly impactful and engaging opportunities. In terms of opportunities for engagement, participants considered residencies, discussion boards, great use of technology and real-world assignments. For example, every participant confirmed that the connections made while attending residencies were a major part of feeling connected and engaged in their programs. Participant 1 shared her experience:

> I asked to present my study while I was at the early proposal stage. I had my three chapters already written, and they wanted to give examples of what happens, what

> this looks like and do it almost like a, like a mock a presentation when you're doing your proposal presentation for your committee. I think that set me up for success because one, I love public speaking, and I was asked tough questions which prepared me for my oral presentation. I got to personally meet and have lunch with my Chair. That lunch validated my presence as a student and made me feel so connected to my chair.

As noted by Participant 7, "you don't really feel like a true student until you attend your first residency. I mean, you know you're a student, but you feel like you're a student after attending a residency." He went on to say his first residency experience was virtual, and very engaging. Participant 7 said, "I was a little worried about not be able to attend a face-to-face residency for my first experience. My cohort was so encouraging the entire time and she gave us so many conversation "prompts" to encourage an engaging environment." Participant 2 articulated how encouraged she felt after attending each residency and mentioned the long-lasting friendships she made while she was there. She stated:

> After speaking to my cohort about my potential research topic, she was able to introduce me to my current chair who offered to speak with me while we were there. He allowed for me to pick his brain, and by the end of the evening, I had a working topic and a Chair! Over the next few days, I was able to expand on my topic using questions and feedback from other students.

Participant 7 spoke to the value of attending all of the sessions and staying engaged throughout the entire residency. He stated he attended his first residency with the intentions of "getting it over with" and checking it off his program requirements. He

shared: “On the last day of the residency, I noticed there were groups of students have discussions in the hallways, by the drink stations and in the cohort groups.” Participant 7 mentioned he felt “a little left out” and it was because he didn’t take advantage of any opportunities to interact with other students or faculty. He went on to say, he took every opportunity to stay actively engaged in the remaining three residencies. Participant 7 said: “I make it a point to mention this to other students every chance I get.”

In speaking about course delivery, several participants cited weekly discussion requirements and having well-defined course expectations. Participant 4 noted, “I appreciate when I look at the course requirements, and there are clear opportunities for interacting with my classmates.” Participant 3, too, believed that discussion boards were contributed to his sense of belonging in the course room. He shared: “When the discussion is centered around real-world scenarios, I notice the students are actively engaged throughout the entire week.” Participant 3 acknowledged that students seem to stay actively engaged when the discussion questions require their professional input or opinion. However, two participants stated they feel least engaged when their classmates do not return the same level of response in their discussions. Participant 2 stated: “There’s nothing more frustrating than when you write an entire paragraph in response to another student’s post, and they respond to your post with something simple like, “I agree” or something like similar.”

This theme focused on the engagement opportunities present in a well-designed and delivered online course room. I have determined participants appreciate a course which has clear and concise discussion requirements to include specific dates. Based on

the data, students appreciate opportunities to use what they learned in the course and apply it to engaging conversations with their course mates.

**Theme 4: Pushing Through Barriers: Student Performance and Characteristics**

Pushing through barriers, was a recurring theme throughout all of the participant responses. Participants cited several characteristics required for successful engagement in an online learning environment. According to all 7 participants, effective time management is an essential characteristic of a successfully engaged student. Participant 3 described his daily challenge as a doctoral student enrolled at an online university:

> Work-life balance, right? I am enrolled in an online program for a hundred different reasons. I run a farm. I go to school full-time. I work a full 40 hour or more work week. I have a wife and three kids. There's always something for the alarm clock the next morning. It's all about juggling and prioritizing…accepting that good enough is good enough.

Several participants stated their performance as a student was challenged the most when they were pregnant or had children. Two participants had two children during the course of being enrolled in their programs. Participant 5 discussed the barriers of being a person who "works full time and had a baby" while working to earn her doctorate degree. She shared that if it wasn't for her Chair reaching out to her, she may have dropped out of the program all together. Participant 5 stated:

> When I learned I was pregnant, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to take some time off. Working full time and also, and then having a family, that's a huge shift in your life when you haven't had a child before. All of a sudden, your priorities shift, and this was a huge challenge for me. After speaking with my Chair, she

> encouraged me to stay enrolled, that she would work with me on revising my submission dates.

Several of the participants cited specific challenges which reduced or increased their inclination to stay motivated in an online course room. Interviewees mentioned the significance of maintaining their own drive to stay dedicated to educational goals, even when life steps in the way. Life demands was a recurring theme when it comes to working adults learning online. Participant 2 shared that she often became overwhelmed with so many things and wondered if she was wasting her time. “I often questioned my motivation to be some version of a successful learner.” Participant 1 similarly shared that she had moments that severely challenged her motivation to succeed in online learning:

> I think the biggest barrier for me is I am not the most patient person. I am also a professor myself, so sometimes I would get in my head and say, I don't understand why this professor hasn’t answered, me if I answer my students within 24 hours. My patience is low and when I have a question in my head, and my anxiety can start because then I started thinking about the, what ifs, what ifs, what ifs. Whereas if it was in person, I can talk to the professor after class…I need an answer right now.

Here is another participant who expressed the same frustrations regarding being an online student and staying motivated. Participant 4

> I think that's the biggest barrier is that you have to afford them the timeframe to answer. I understand why it's there, but you know, when you are a doctoral student and time is money and you are trying to get this question answer, because

> you literally need that question answered before you can do anything else. That one thing is stopping you. Why are you not answering me? I'm sorry. I have to follow up again, but I need an answer. So, I think that was the biggest barrier of just being patient and knowing that you need an answer before you move on. You can't get that answer as quickly as you could… theoretically in person.

This theme focused on pushing through the barriers which are often present in the lives of adult students attending an online university. According to the data, participants overwhelmingly cited time management as being the biggest barrier in staying successfully engaged in an online learning environment. Effective time management strategies seemed to be a constant mission to overcome the specific challenges for many of the participants. Undoubtedly, motivation and dedication were presented as constant barriers which seem to be present throughout the entire course of their online learning experience.

Table 3

*Themes, Meaning, and Example Evidence*

| Themes | Meaning | Example Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Positive interaction Between Faculty and Students | The data revealed students felt most engaged when faculty members displayed a passion for interacting with students. | Participant 1 is in the final stage of her dissertation. She spoke about the phenomenal and consistent interactions she had with her professors. She also agreed that her least engaging experience was in in a course where the professor was vague and inconsistent with feedback. |
| The Value of Student to Student Interaction | It was evident in the data that the student to student connections were the most frequently identified source of positive engagement. | The fourth participant discussed the thought provoking discussions he had with other students, which he attributed to feeling like he was in a traditional brick and mortar school. |
| Course Delivery and Design | In terms of functionality, participants often made reference to engaging discussion boards, clear course expectations and attending then required residencies. | Participant 3 made several mentions regarding the course expectations. He felt like the required discussion board assign-ments helped students stay engaged. |
| Overcoming Student Barriers | Participants identified similar characteristics they felt were beneficial for achieving academic goals. | All of the participants made note of the ability to manage time and maintain motivation. |

*Note.* The study's research question was: How do online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention?

## Summary of Findings

This research study was intended to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. This was done with the contest of engagement, and the research question was derived from theory of institutional departure. A qualitative research approach was applied in order to develop a deep understanding of the perceptions shared by seven participants. Based on the analysis, there were four clear themes which emerged from the data-- positive engagement between faculty and students, the value of student to student interaction, course delivery and design, and pushing through barriers: student performance and characteristics. Overall, the participants appeared to interpret their experiences in their learning environments to be either engaging or unengaging. Chapter 5 presents the interpretation of the findings and recognizes the limitations of the study. I will also discuss the recommendations for future research and implications for social change.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative generic study was to gain insight into the perceptions of multiracial doctoral college students in regard to student engagement and achieving academic goals in an effort to address the documented problem of low retention rates of multicultural college students in distance education (Hubain et al., 2016). This scholarly focus on multiracial doctoral students comes as many higher education institutions are noticing an influx of multiracial students yet remain challenged on the best practices for recruiting and retaining those students (Harper, 2016). Despite the limitations of research on this rapidly growing population, multiracial students attending colleges and universities disclose a vast array of unique experiences (Freeman et al., 2016). More specifically, researchers highlight a sense of belonging and acceptance as key phrases when interpreting the unique experiences of multiracial students in higher education. Accordingly, it is essential to make a place where multiracial students feel recognized and included within their learning environments (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Exploring and understanding the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students attending the selected university is necessary in order to collect information that can be applied to the development of programs used to successfully recruit and retain those students. When it comes to providing services in higher education, Harris and Linder (2018) noted student engagement as the key component of any support program for multiracial students. It is here where those providing the services truly benefit from having a better understanding of the familiarities and perceptions of multiracial students in higher education (Clayton, 2018). Consistent with this theme, Banks and Dohy (2019)

stated that creating a space where individuals can feel accepted is often acknowledged and celebrated as an essential part of inclusion.

The seven participants for this study were doctoral students who attended the selected university at the time of the interview. Each participant self-identified as a multicultural, native-born domestic student who had completed at least one required academic residency. A qualitative generic design was used to gain a better understanding of the opinions, beliefs and reflections of the participants' experiences in distance education (Zohrabi, 2013). In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Following this, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are provided. Finally, social implications and a summary are provided as well.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure was the theoretical framework to interpret the findings from this study. Tinto (1993) established that a student's ability to be successful and be engaged by a university is achieved by providing appropriate integration methods into formal and informal academics and social systems. Consistent with these themes, researchers have proposed when a student maintains regular engagement in their educational programs, they experience higher levels of satisfaction, which in turn leads to a greater chance of retention (Kahn et al., 2017; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Participants in this study shared their personal accounts which attributed their academic accomplishments to the effectiveness of their online universities' student engagement. In addition, participants stressed the importance of the positive interactions they have with their peers and faculty members within the course room and outside of the

course room. According to Wagner (2015), Tinto's model works more effectively when academic and social integration are developed simultaneously. Participant responses included the perceptions of how effective their university was in student engagement and the positive impact it on their academic achievements. According to the literature, when a student becomes successful in their educational goals, they are noted to have academic achievement within their current program (Rockinson et al., 2016).

## Interpretation of the Findings

The significant findings of this study are interpreted in relation to data collected from the participants, the research question, and previously reviewed research as discussed in Chapter 2. The findings from this study established that effective engagement practices have a positive impact on the academic achievements of multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. This is consistent with research that highlights the importance of establishing opportunities of inclusion within the existing programs and services within the university (Linder, 2018). In terms of research on meeting the unique needs of multiracial students, the value of an engaged learning environment is well supported (Good et al., 2013). While many learning institutions offer programs that address the present concerns of student retention, there is still an overwhelming need for multiracial comprehensiveness, which is currently unmet in many colleges and universities (Macrander & Winkle-Wagner, 2016). As the participants described their perceptions of engagement and academic achievements within their individual programs, four main themes emerged: positive engagement between faculty and students, the value of student to student interaction, course delivery and design, pushing through barriers: student performance and characteristics.

When examining the impact of how student engagement applies in online learning, it is significant to understand the definition of student engagement as perceived by online students (Taylor & Dunn, 2015). In this study, participants define their academic achievements as successfully progressing through their programs by completing coursework, attending residencies, securing their dissertation committee, and having an approved proposal. The findings from this study also highlighted the importance of student engagement in online doctoral programs. This study identified specific methods of engagement that are perceived to be the most effective to multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. For the purpose of the following interpretation, focus will be placed on the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of their university's engagement and the impact it has on their academic achievements. I discuss the findings based on my research question: How do online multiracial doctoral students perceive the effectiveness of online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention?

According to Wood and Ireland (2014), teaching methods in high education are more effective when student engagement is a principle factor. Student engagement has been identified as a significant element of student success (Dunstan et al., 2018). Throughout the interviews, participants stated they appreciated the relationships and connections they have with faculty and describe this to be a factor in their perceptions of engagements and achievements. All seven participants noted the significance of receiving constructive and extensive feedback and value professors who took the time to go above and beyond standard expectations. One participant stated, "Most of my positive experiences came from professors who were always there and who always responded to

class discussions." Consistent with this theme, greater retention is achieved when educational programs offer continuous engagement which are often linked to higher levels of student satisfaction (Kahn et al., 2017).

While students attending traditional universities have many opportunities to network and engage with other students and faculty, online students' experiences are much different (Berry, 2017). Several participants noted faculty accessibility as being a strong characteristic of positive engagement. Most indicated the lack of accessing a professor to be an unengaging learning environment, which was attributed to be a significant obstacle to successful learning. Along with this, participants valued faculty members who were engaging and passionate when responding to emails, weekly discussion boards, and occasionally personal phone calls. The value of engaging practices which are commonly associated with traditional learning environments is well supported by Redmond et al. (2018). All of the participants indicated an appreciation for faculty who allow accommodations for students experiencing life constraints. One participant discussed the positive outcome she had with a particular faculty member who was willing to work with her and stay engaged throughout a challenging period in her life. She attributed her ability to stay enrolled and succeed in her program to her professor's willingness to go above and beyond.

According to Armellini and DeStefani (2015), engaged students often demonstrate a sense of satisfaction and ultimately exhibit higher levels of learning and personal development. It is evident in the interviews that student to student connections were the most frequently identified as a positive source of engagement. Every participant made note of multiple occurrences where the relationships with other students in an

online learning environment was perceived to be a noteworthy source of engagement. Four participants referred to the connections they made while logged into the course room, and six referred to their positive experiences outside of the course room. Among the examples of student to student interaction, thought provoking conversations within the discussion boards and rich engagement opportunities while attending both face-to-face and virtual residencies were the most consistent references to positive engagement.

Overall, participants suggested the interactions they had with other students were critical to the success they had within their programs. Dunstan et al. (2018) found that students in online learning can often feel isolated, so having a strategic plan to reduce such feeling can be critical to student success. McFarland et al. (2017) similarly stated that student supports systems can be remarkably transformative for online doctoral student. All of the participants referred to the long-lasting friendships and support groups that were encouraged in course rooms that fostered student engagement. Dika and D'Amico (2015) provided examples of successful academic connection in a university course room and found required weekly discussions often encouraged student relationships which sometimes extended to connections made outside of the course room.

Throughout the interviews, a common theme was that the participants relied heavily on interacting with other students, as well as maintaining those relationships over time. Overall, the participants perceived only the positive interactions to be meaningful sources of engagement. All seven participants reported a positive sense of engagement when working with their cohorts throughout their experiences at a residency. In fact, in terms of significant and positive interactions, participants discussed the relationships they have maintained from the start of the first residency, all the way through the last. Two

participants referred to their support group as “family” and another participant noted his group purposely scheduled all of the remaining residencies so they could attend together. Overall, research has shown to highlight the significance of maintaining engagement in an online doctoral program (Kahn et al., 2017).

In general, when compared to students attending a traditional university, online students typically yearn for lessons which encourages them to be engaged and interactive with other students (Yu et al., 2019). Some online universities struggle to provide a feel of community, which according to research, is often thought of as fundamental to overall student success (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2016). All of the participants recognized experiences which were related to how their online experience allowed them to work effectively with other students. Each participant cited multiple examples of their appreciation of course functionality, with one key area being a well-organized course design. More specifically, participants referred to engaging discussion boards, clear course expectations, residencies, and great use of technology and real-world assignments. For example, every participant established that the connections they made while attending their residencies were major contributors to feeling engaged and connected in their programs.

Researchers found that many professors found collaborative assignments, opportunities for social interactions such as discussion boards and virtual chats, to be effective ways to promote engagement withing the course room (Bolton & Gregory, 2015). Overall, students felt most engaged when they had opportunities to actively collaborate with other students. Several participants referred to the ability to share their perspectives through engaging course room discussions. Three participants made note of

the collaborative assignments they had to complete where they felt most connected for real-world situations. However, two participants stated they felt least engaged when their peers were not equally receptive to collaborating on a challenging and time-consuming discussion board or assignment. One participant said, “There’s nothing more frustrating than when you write an entire paragraph in response to another student’s post, and they respond to your post with something simple like, “I agree” or something similar.”

According to Bagaka et al. (2015), the adjustment of becoming an online student is often very stressful, making it vital to provides services intended to lessen the stressors related to students at the doctoral level. Moreover, researchers have shown, as opposed to traditional learners, online students are required to take on the additional responsibilities as well as maintaining self-sufficiency (Dixon, 2015; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018). In addition, educational researchers describe the adult online student as a 25 and older, non-traditional student with distinct challenges which include, family, jobs and other stresses which are time consuming (Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2016). Pushing through barriers was a recurring theme throughout all of the participants’ responses. All of the participants mentioned multiple challenges they had to overcome in Sue and Sue an effort to have a successful outcome in an online learning environment. According to (2016), although adult learners have multiple reasons for pursuing a degree online, they must contemplate life demands prior to setting academic goals.

When compared to traditional students, adult learners face various hurdles that might imped their ability to make progress toward achieving academic goals (Banks, 2018). Adult learners identify different life demands which are commonly outlined as work, family and other obligations they must commit to in addition to attaining their

educational goals (Fielding, 2016). Conversely, each participant acknowledged effective time management as an essential characteristic of a successfully engaged student. Every participant noted several instances where their performance as a student was challenged due to poor time management. Life demands often serve as motivational factors for achieving academic goals, but may also have a negative impact on progress, given the restraints of online learners (Bettinger et al., 2017). Several students stated their performance was most tested when they were either pregnant or busy with their other children. Three participants listed new jobs or obtaining a second job as potential barriers to managing their time. Effective time management strategies seemed to be a constant barrier which seemed to be present throughout the entire course of their online learning experience. Despite the challenges, the primary purpose for pursing an online degree is to allow the adult learner to maintain their jobs, families and have multiple opportunities to complete the work when and where they can (Cellini & Koedel, 2017).

## Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study is the lack of generalizability to a larger population. As Sims et al. (2018) suggested, qualitative studies are unique and challenging to replicate. This research included only seven interviews of multiracial doctoral students at one online university. The sample size was limited due to the convenience and availability of qualified participants. Ideally, a higher participation rate from several online universities would allow for more diverse feedback. Conversely, the university selected for this study has a high population of multiracial doctoral students, which represents the population concerned in this research.

The second limitation of this study is that there were no questions asked about the participants' previous educational experiences. Though some participants talked about it briefly while discussing how they came to be a student at the selected university, specific questions may have provided more detail. Finally, the data collection process might have been another limitation due to the weakness of collecting qualitative data. According to Almeida et al. (2017), it's possible some participants may not have been truthful when sharing their experiences, whereas a quantitative survey would have allowed for responses without participant subjectivity.

## Recommendations

As there is an inflow of multiracial doctoral students, it is essential for key stake holders to focus on essential practices pertaining to the recruitment and retention of such students (Harris & Linder, 2018). Current graduate recruitment strategies for diverse students are commonly centered around general factors influencing a student's decision to enroll, and the best practices to recruit diverse students (Dieker et al., 2014). For multiracial students, this translates to factors such as institutional quality, the consideration of social factors in online programs, and the representation of students from underrepresented groups (Nyguyen & Ward, 2017). In terms of social factors, all of the participants made note of their appreciation for the multiple opportunities for required engagement within their programs. More specifically, when asked if they could describe any specific activities they believed contributed to their academic success, every participant mentioned the required weekly discussions and residencies.

According to Harris and BrckaLorenz (2017), one of the commonly listed factors of student success and academic achievement in an online setting is student engagement.

Accordingly, Redmond et al. (2018) suggested that college graduation is a likely outcome of students who are more engaged than those who are not. Researchers have also shown when students are engaged, they are better able to manage stress in their academic environments, more specifically, the unique challenges which come in an online doctoral program (Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Based on the participants' accounts and experiences, the results of this study were that multiracial doctoral students attending the selected university, perceived their university to be effective in terms of student engagement and academic achievements. All of the participants discussed the multiple opportunities for engagement which included residencies, in-course communication, collaborative opportunities, and purposeful relationships with members of faculty. Overall, participants expressed a level of satisfaction with their learning environments, and at no time did they feel like they didn't belong there. This is consistent with the research of Tankari (2018), whose findings in cultural orientation showed that a desire for sense of belonging and an engaged campus environment were two themes that were consistent throughout the research.

An initial recommendation for future studies would be to extend the scope of this study by conducting the research within a larger selection. While qualitative methods yield detailed data, there is a need to increase generalizability of the results. Providing data from research conducted at multiple online universities can contribute to the existing research which can be included when developing policies aimed at improving educational outcomes in multiracial doctoral students attending online universities.

Additionally, I would consider a quantitative follow-up of this study to expand upon the current findings. For example, I would include a statistical analysis on

individual variables that are strongly predictive for academic achievement in students who have already graduated. To achieve this, a recommendation would be to include several other demographic variables such as the educational background of family members, previous education experiences, financial challenges and the inclusion of monoracial groups to enhance cross-cultural comparisons. Potentially, a great deal of information can be gained when examining secondary data which is often used to discover which student engagement variables and student characteristics predict the academic achievement in adult students.

## Implications of Social Change

A search through the literature reveals there is a small body of literature that focuses on the educational outcomes of multiracial college students. More specifically, there is a knowledge gap in the research which sheds light on multiracial graduate students, and what student engagement may look like for this population (Macrander &Winkle-Wager, 2016). As mentioned in Chapter 2, racial identities can have a significant impact on the educational experiences of college students in academic environments (Anumba, 2015). Museus et al. (2016) posited racial identity plays a major role in how students relate to instruction, how they are treated by faculty, staff members and other students, as well as how they relate to the curriculum. While many learning institutions offer programs that address the present concerns of student retention, there is still an overwhelming need for multiracial comprehensiveness, which is currently unmet in many colleges and universities (Macrander & Winkle-Wagner, 2016).

Indeed, monoracial students and multiracial students may not share the same experiences or perceptions of engagement, even when they are in the same course room

with the same faculty member. Several researchers found that although multiracial undergrad students offered a number of reasons of why they were satisfied with their learning environments, a desire for a sense of belonging and an engaged campus environment were two themes that were consistent (Good et al, 2013; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). According to Tran et al. (2016), understanding and exploring how multiracial students make sense of their educational surroundings, can offer even the slightest necessary adjustment in an already engaging online learning environment. While it is evident that opportunities for engagement for online students are limited, Caruth (2017) highlighted opportunities for purposeful engagement such as required discussions, online clubs, and face-to-face opportunities such as residencies. Implied in the findings of this research is the notion that the participants attributed particular forms of engagement with their peers and faculty relationships as major contributors to their success in their online programs.

Based on the data collected from this study; I conclude that the participants perceive their university to be effective in terms of providing multiple opportunities for applicable and inclusive engagement, as well as provided strategies which help reduce disengagement and low participation. In this context, Bolton and Gregory (2015) argued that many universities often place the responsibility of finding engagement opportunities on the student. Accordingly, the participants in this study continuously made reference to the required weekly discussions and residencies as major contributors to feeling engaged and included, thus highlighting the significance of incorporating requirements for engagement within the curriculum. According to the data, participants found face-to-face residencies to be highly effective opportunities for activities which required them to stay

engaged with their peers, providing an environment which promotes inclusiveness. Beyond the obvious benefits of providing multiple opportunities of engagement, the participants stressed the importance of the positive connections they had with their peers outside of the required curriculum.

Exploring the engagement experiences of seven multiracial doctoral students, and understanding the engagement efforts of the selected university, can help the university and other educational institutions maintain or develop plans to increase multiracial doctoral student success. Data obtained from the interviews have implications for student affairs professionals, professors, and other key stakeholders. For some online learning environments, the results of this study may encourage the development of new programs or courses, but for many it can be used to enhance the existing programs or course already offered at the university.

## Conclusion

In this research, I explored the perceptions of multiracial doctoral students attending an online university. Participants reflected on how they perceive the effectiveness of their online universities' student engagement and academic achievement as they pertain to student retention. Research on the topic of the effectiveness of engagement in higher education typically reports successful outcomes in regard to academic achievement and retention rates. Nonetheless, researchers have referred to the instability in the overall educational experiences of multiracial students (Wanger, 2015; Yoo et al., 2016). As previously mentioned, when exploring the understandings of multiracial doctoral students, researchers have discussed the unique requirements when compared to their monoracial peers (Yee & Robinson, 2016; Wilton et al., 2017).

The results of this study support current research related to multicultural graduate students and the influence of student engagement in their academic online learning environments. More specifically, according to participant responses, feeling included and supported in their programs were essential to maintaining a status of enrollment. Though each participant presented a distinctive perception of satisfaction with their university, engagement practices and a sense of belonging were consistent themes throughout the research. Tinto (1993) posited that student success is often shaped by the individual and academic influences which emerge between students and faculty and the diverse groups which make up the all-inclusive system of the academic institution. Overall, given that student retention is a critical component in the success of colleges and universities, it is essential to improve upon the existing programs as well as establish new ones to better support the influx of multiracial students attending higher education institutions.

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# Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about your background and how you came to be an online student at the selected University.

2. What experiences in your online program as a whole stand out to you with respect to engagement? Please elaborate how this was a positive or a negative experience. What effect did it have on you?

3. Can you tell me about opportunities you have to interact with other students in the course room? How do the interactions impact your experience in the course room?

4. Can you describe experiences in your online courses when you felt deeply engaged? Were there times where you felt unengaged?

6. Describe any collaboration on assignments with other students in your online courses? Have the experiences been positive, neutral, or negative for you and why?

7. Can you describe your general experience with your professors in your online courses? How do the interactions impact your experience within the course room? Tell me about a time where an instructor stood out.

8. What barriers, if any, have you faced in being a successful and engaged online student?

9. Can you describe specific activities at a residency you have experienced that you believe contributed to your academic achievements?

10. What experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success? What about the experience aided your academic success?

Thank you for all that valuable information, is there anything else you would like to share before we end?