

2022

# Perceptions of Campus Climate as a Selection Criteria for African American Freshman Enrollment at a Predominately White Institution

Kevin Bradley  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kevin Bradley

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

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Abstract

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Enrollment at a Predominately White Institution

by

Kevin Bradley

MS, Morgan State University, 2004

BA, Morgan State University, 1997

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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April 2022

## Abstract

Declining enrollment of African American 1st-year students at a predominately White institution (PWI) may indicate an unwelcoming campus culture. For the last 5 years, African American 1st-year enrollment has decreased at a local PWI. The purpose of this study was to better understand how the campus climate may influence the enrollment decision making process for African American 1st-year students. Using critical race theory and rational choice theory as the conceptual framework, this study examined how African American 1st-year student perceptions of campus climate at the local institution influenced their decision to enroll and how their experiences are shared to others. Using a basic qualitative research design, 11 African American 1st-year students were interviewed. While these students were not aware of racist incidents on campus prior to enrolling, African American 1st-year students were able to describe positive elements of the university's academic climate once on campus. Post enrollment decision, these students felt comfortable and safe at campus events and locations that provided engagement with other African American students. While there were some negative 1st-year experiences, these students indicated that they would encourage other African Americans to attend the local institution to benefit from the available resources. To increase the awareness of the institution's administration and staff towards students of color, a 3 day professional development conference was developed to empower school officials to cocreate a safe and welcoming environment. Exploring the role that campus climate plays in the decision-making process for African American students created clear positive social change implications to improve inclusion and increase welcomeness in predominantly White academic settings.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my wonderful wife, Dianne and our four amazing children: Jasmine, Taevon, Daniel, and Ariell (goddaughter). Your constant love was appreciated and needed while I was on this challenging, yet rewarding, experience. I was able to make it across the finish line because of the strength and support that you gave me. I love you and I thank God for each of you. I am a blessed man because I have you in my life!

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

In an era of declining incoming 1st-year student enrollment, higher education administrators are looking for ways to increase diversity on campus. A local university in a northeastern state in the United States (hereafter referred to as Alpha Xavier University, AXU, a pseudonym) is categorized as a predominantly White institution (PWI). A PWI is an institution of higher learning where most of the students are White, although, there are other races represented in the student body (Nicole, 2015). Between 2009 and 2014, the number of new first-time 1st-year students entering the public and private institutions of higher education in the northeastern state where the study site is located decreased by 14%, which is nearly 5,700 students (Popovich, 2015). Based on these enrollment trends, insight into African American student perceptions of campus climate in their enrollment decision could help inform interventions to increase welcomeness on campus for new students of color.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), spring 2021 1st-year student enrollment numbers are demonstrating the same level of overall decline as the fall 2020 trend as undergraduate enrollment is down 4.5% compared to spring 2020. Between 2009 and 2014, African American students accounted for 35% of public high school graduates in the same northeastern state; however, they were under-represented among first time college 1st-year students with 33% representation taking place in 2009 before dropping down to 31% in 2014 (Popovich, 2015). One year later in 2015, African American students would account for 36% of high school graduates in the

same northeastern state; however, this population only represented 12% of the fall 1st-year class at AXU with 474 African American 1st-year students out of 3,939 total freshmen (Alpha Xavier University Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment, 2020; Richman, 2018).

Campus climate is defined as “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities and potential” (Rankin, 2005, p. 17). Rankin reported that campus climate has an impact on an institution’s academic development and students’ engagement in campus life. The state of the study site is home to 55 colleges and universities ranging from 2-year community colleges to 4-year public and private institutions. AXU offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in over 90 areas of study. Exploring the role that campus climate plays in African American incoming 1st-year decision making could have positive social change implications and increase diversity on campus.

AXU’s peak African American 1st-year student enrollment occurred in 2016 with 554 students before they would experience a decline in new student growth from 2017 (447 students) to 2020 (487 students; Alpha Xavier University Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment, 2020). My investigation revealed that some of the declining rates of African American 1st-year student enrollment numbers at the study site may potentially be linked to perceptions of the university’s campus climate. In interviews, students identified specific spaces on campus where they did not feel safe, and the findings indicated that students were aware of campus incidents that could have

impacted their decision to enroll in a PWI yet were mitigated by the strong academic reputation of the institution that served as the local study site.

AXU's vice president and provost acknowledged that recent racially motivated incidents on the campus may have caused their African American 1st-year new student counts to decline (Richman, 2018). These events include the 2017 murder of an African American student from another institution, by a European American, AXU student, in what was prosecuted as a hate crime in 2019. This former AXU student was found guilty of first-degree murder although the judge dropped the hate crime charge. Because of this event, AXU officials created and distributed a Campus Climate Survey for their students. According to the results of the 2018 Campus Climate Survey, when sorted by race, African American AXU students as a demographic group indicated feeling the least safe on campus (Atelsek, 2019). In the same survey, these students also mentioned that they had experienced offensive or biased conduct with racial bias being the most frequently reported at 12.5% (Atelsek, 2019).

In a 2016 incident, university police broke up a predominately African American graduation-week party using pepper spray which raised concerns regarding use of force on campus. In 2017, several White supremacist fliers were found on the AXU campus three separate times in a 3-month period. In addition, AXU has seen an increase of hate incidents reported to state police from 12 in 2016 to 28 in 2017 (News Editorial Board, 2018). A preliminary report on campus climate found that 33% of students said that AXU's response to hate-bias incidents need to improve (News Editorial Board, 2018). Some African American 1st-year students who I surveyed described feeling that AXU did



not promote a safe and welcoming environment for them to enroll, thus, creating a gap in practice at the local study site as these students enrolled despite their safety concerns.

According to Lewis and Shah (2019), research focused on the educational experiences of African American students who attend PWIs reveal a noticeable theme in that this body of work centers on campus climate. While university officials have indicated that diversity is a strength of the school, African American 1st-year enrollment numbers have drastically declined since 2017 (Richman, 2018). Of all the institutions in the state's university network, AXU had the lowest percentage of new African American student enrollments (Richman, 2018). Declining enrollment numbers of African American students indicates that the institutional climate may not support demographic diversity well (Cooper et al., 2016). The diversity of a college institution is important to the African American student experience especially as it relates to inclusion (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018).

### **Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to explore African American 1st-year students' perceptions of institutional climate to better understand recent enrollment trends at AXU. Examining the perceptions of African American 1st-year students of campus climate as a selection criterion for enrollment may reveal elements of campus climate that influence student decision making. Campus climate describes the university's living, learning, and working environment as it pertains to students, faculty, and staff (Alpha X University, 2018). Institutions measure climate to ensure that subsets of the learning environment are reporting (a) that they feel physically safe on campus, (b) that they experience

welcomeness as they engage with faculty, and (c) that all learners know how to seek support if they feel at risk.

As seen in Table 1, AXU saw a significant decline in African American 1st-year enrollment in 2018 with 344 students, which represented 7.3% of the undergraduate class of 2022 (Atelsek, 2018; Richman, 2018). This representation of African American 1st-year students is the lowest AXU experienced since the Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment began collecting this student data in 1992 (Atelsek, 2018). While AXU would have an increase in their African American 1st-year new student count in fall 2019, the 11.1% racial representation of these students was still the fourth lowest the university has had, further contributing to the school's downward African American enrollment trend (Atelsek, 2019). No other minority student group at AXU has demonstrated this type of enrollment inconsistency; therefore, exploring the role that campus climate plays in African American 1st-year decision to enroll in the local institution could help initiatives to increase student diversity on campus.

**Table 1***Alpha X University Freshman Enrollment by Race: 2014-2020*

Race	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
American Indian or Alaska Native: U.S.	4	5	5	2	8	2	1
Asian: U.S.	725	723	783	836	908	971	976
Black or African American: U.S.	521	474	554	447	344	476	487
Foreign	162	100	194	241	199	97	109
Hispanic: U.S.	360	366	397	317	335	320	357
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: U.S.	7	5	1	4	0	1	1
Two or More: U.S.	196	165	211	171	223	195	242
Unknown: U.S.	41	61	71	60	254	192	193
White: U.S.	2,114	2,040	2,337	2,065	2,443	2,032	1,947
Grand Total	4,130	3,939	4,553	4,143	4,714	4,286	4,313

*Note.* Alpha Xavier University Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment, 2020

With AXU experiencing their lowest African American 1st-year student enrollment numbers in recent years, understanding how students perceive campus climate information and how these perceptions influence their enrollment decision is important. As administrators seek to enroll and retain diverse students, enrollment trend data, as seen in Table 1, points to African American student decision making as distinct from other subsets of the student population. The perceptions of this student audience helped to create a project that focuses on enhancing institutional welcomeness on the AXU campus environment towards the goal that more African American students will want to enroll and matriculate at AXU.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Belongingness:* Refers to how students perceive themselves fitting in at a college or university as it pertains, but not limited to, to their degree program, student life experiences, university organizations and activities (Landeem et al., 2017). This study

helped to determine if students' perceptions of AXU's campus climate affected how they felt connected to the university.

*Campus Climate Survey:* A questionnaire that is completed by students, faculty, staff, and/or administrators at a college or university that provides important insight into the campus experiences and perceptions of the respondents (Stewart, 2019). Topics covered in the survey can include classroom experiences, use of student services, interactions with others on campus, and participation in activities. For this study, Campus Climate Surveys were used as a tool to help determine the extent of 1st-year students' experiences at AXU.

*Cultural responsiveness:* The method and practice of understanding and consideration for the diverse student backgrounds and values at a higher education institution (Cunningham, 2019). This study attempted to uncover AXU's cultural awareness of their African American 1st-year students to appropriately respond to their needs and concerns.

*Enrollment:* In the context of my study, enrollment refers to the total number of undergraduate students at a higher education institution. The college or university may use a variety of methods to recruit and retain new students including, but not limited to, prospecting, direct mail, campus tours and financial rewards including, but not limited to, financial aid, grants, scholarships, and work study (Gilstrap, 2020). My study reviewed the perceptions of campus climate by AXU 1st-year students to determine if this is affecting the university's enrollment numbers.

*Freshman student:* An individual who is experiencing their 1st year of higher education, usually after high school, where they enter a new level of academic learning and personal responsibility (Kirker & Stonebraker, 2019). This study focused on the perceptions this audience had on the campus climate at AXU and if it helped in their decision to enroll in the school.

*Microaggressions:* Subtle yet offensive statements or actions that are intended for a marginalized group of people (Stapleton & Croom, 2017). For this study, I determined how these comments affected AXU 1st-year students and their perceptions of the institution.

*Welcomeness:* Refers to the atmosphere inside and outside of the classroom that let students know if the university faculty want to engage with them or not (Card & Wood, 2019). I used this in my study to determine the 1st-year students' sense of belonging at AXU.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study addressed the decrease in African American student enrollments at AXU focusing on the perceptions of African American 1st-year students regarding campus climate to determine if perceptions of the climate influenced their decision to enroll at the institution. As a member of the Northeastern states system of universities, AXU school leaders found themselves in unfamiliar enrollment territory as they had been experiencing an ongoing decline in African American 1st-year student enrollment. Academic leadership is looking to improve relationships with African American 1st-year students that may encourage and sustain future new student enrollment growth.

Understanding the campus climate on AXU's campus may be an important step toward ensuring their future success and the success of their students (Viewfinder, 2018).

While this topic has been explored broadly, a gap in practice at the local site regarding the implications that campus climate has in the enrollment decision making process for incoming African American 1st-year students was important to explore. Allen (2020), Druery and Brooms (2019), and Parker et al. (2016) explored campus climate at PWIs, however, they only focused on the perceptions of African American male students. Griffith et al. (2019) and Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) also examined campus climate perceptions by expanding the participant pool to include African American female students; however, they focused exclusively on upper class students (junior and senior students). Because of the limited research pertaining to African American 1st-year students' perspectives on campus climate at PWIs, my study explored the gap in practice at the local study site.

This study contributed to existing literature by revealing ways that institutions like AXU can better support future African American students. While students may not have immediate access to AXU campus climate data before they enroll, student perceptions of campus climate may impact the enrollment decision making process. The participants had awareness and safety concerns in advance of the enrollment decision. These negative incidents on campus were in part offset by the rigorous academic reputation that the institution has and the formation of a strong African American community on the AXU campus. The implications for positive social change include the

potential impact of targeted campus climate enrollment programs that may inspire renewed interest in African American 1st-year students wanting to enroll at AXU.

### **Research Questions**

Student demographic diversity has become increasingly valuable to institutions of higher learning as many schools have started to include diversity language in their mission statements (Phillips, 2019). Diversity can be viewed as encompassing a broad range of ideals, intentions, programs, outcomes, curricula, and other elements while reflecting on how the racial, cultural, religious, and social economic differences of the student body can improve the learning environment at the institution (Haring-Smith, 2012; Philips, 2019). Campus climate surveys measure how welcoming an institution is to diverse populations, and how the institution handles diversity can have an influence on the success of African American students (Hall, 1999; Harper, 2013; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). School officials have noted that African American 1st-year enrollment has decreased in the last 5 years at a predominately White institution (AXU) that served as the study site.

The following specific research questions helped guide the study.

RQ1: How do African American freshmen student perceptions of campus climate influence their decision to enroll in AXU?

RQ2: How do African American freshmen student perceptions of campus climate influence how they describe their experiences at AXU to others?

## Review of the Literature

I conducted a literature search from two databases including Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Education Source, provided by the Walden University library. Key terms used throughout the search included: *African American/Black students*, *campus climate/campus environment*, *critical race theory in higher education*, *freshman/first year college students*, *higher education/college/university*, *PWI/Predominately White Institution*, *racial divide*, *rational choice theory*, *stereotypes*, and *support services/student support*. I used the key words: *African American/Black students*, *higher education/college/university*, and *PWI/Predominately White Institution*, *racial divide* in Education Source. I searched *African American/Black students*, *campus climate/campus environment*, *critical race theory in higher education*, *higher education/college/university*, *PWI/Predominately White Institution*, *rational choice theory*, *stereotypes*, and *support services/student support* in ERIC.

While the predominant race of students at most PWIs is White, there has been an increase in enrollment diversity to include African Americans to help reduce the racial divide in higher education (Clayton, 2020). In this study, I sought to determine how African American freshman student perceptions of campus climate might influence student enrollment at AXU. My initial review of the literature indicated that a variety of nonacademic factors, including a hostile institutional climate and racism on campus, play an important role in African American students' decision to enroll at a PWI (Baber, 2012; Thomas et al., 2007). African American students who experience a racially hostile campus climate at a PWI often feel alone and isolated, which can be a serious concern for



a new freshman who is transitioning to the institution (Baber, 2012). Compared to their White counterparts, African American students who attend a PWI often have a difficult time making the transition to college due to welcoming and belonging issues, which can place them at a greater disadvantage when it comes to social integration with others (Clayton, 2020; Eakins & Eakins, Jr., 2017).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research problem was considered through critical race theory (CRT) and rational choice theory (RCT). CRT is a social sciences framework that examines culture as it relates to race, racism, and society. Due to concerns of the advancements in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, CRT was developed to provide individuals with marginalized identities the opportunity to express themselves through a lens to analyze White supremacy in the United States (Hiraldo, 2019; McCoy, 2015). At that time, civil rights legislation was established with the intent of promoting total equality. “In its inception, the CRT offered a withering critique of integrationism and exposed the hope of racial equality for Blacks in America as nothing more than a mere illusion” (Curry, 2012, p. 1). CRT focuses the experiences of African American students, “normalizes racialized experiences, and provides a systemic context for institutional oppression” (Lee, 2018, p. 77). CRT recognizes that systemic racism is not a belief of the past, however, it acknowledges that the historical effects of slavery, segregation and African Americans being treated as second-class citizens continues to play a role in how African Americans are perceived in the United States (George, 2021). For this study, I intended to use CRT

in the data analysis process to determine how AXU African American freshman student perceptions of campus climate influenced their decision to enroll at the school.

CRT provides an integral piece in helping researchers understand the social inequalities that exist within the walls of higher education (Hiraldo, 2010). Solórzano et al. (2000) indicated that using the CRT framework for education-related studies will be different from other CRT frameworks, as it will make race the prominent feature to challenge traditional societal paradigms such as gender and class by highlighting how these factors divide and impact African American communities. Williams et al. (2018) used CRT as the framework in their study to examine the ways race influences experiences and challenges that African American doctoral students face and perceptions of welcomeness and belonging on campus. Mwangi et al. (2018) used the CRT in their study, as it helped to create opportunities to understand racially minoritized populations. Hall (2017) and Solórzano et al. used CRT as the framework in their respective studies as they examined the campus climate perceptions of African American students who were attending PWIs. Since AXU is a PWI, CRT provided the appropriate framework for this study to help determine African American freshman student perceptions of campus climate as a selection criterion for enrollment in the institution.

RCT is a social and economic framework that explores and describes the thought process by which decisions are made (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020). The origins of RCT can be traced back to the eighteenth century with sociologist George Homans, the creator of the exchange theory (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020). According to RCT, “individuals are motivated by their personal wants and goals and are driven by personal desires” (Crossman, 2019,

para. 2). As individuals go through the decision-making process, they must anticipate the outcomes of their actions; therefore, they will decide the action that aligns best with their personal goals and will provide them with the greatest reward (Crossman, 2019).

McKinney et al. (2019) used RCT in their study to understand why students were withdrawing from certain community college courses. Daniel and Watermann (2018) also used RCT in their study to investigate whether changes in students' evaluation of higher education benefits and costs affected their enrollment decisions. RCT was beneficial to my study as it helped to understand if the perceptions of the campus climate at AXU by African American freshman is hindering new student enrollment. Students of color navigating predominantly White institutional spaces are in the best place to describe safety and the effect of various racist exclusionary practices that decrease welcomeness for learners.

## **Review of the Broader Problem**

### **The Racial Divide in Higher Education**

Beginning in the early 1600's, higher education institutions in the United States were created with student enrollment being exclusive to White men. These institutions were responsible for creating an intellectualized racial divide that fostered a sense of White superiority (Jones & Williams, 2006; Patton, 2016). Attending a college or university was viewed by White students as a prestigious honor that would provide both academic and professional advantages over their minority counterparts. As a result, the admissions process for these students would be both competitive and selective.

From 1936 until the 1830s, the foundation of higher education that was laid would prohibit African American students from being able to enroll in any institution of higher learning (Karkouti, 2016a; Harris, 2020). African American students were subsequently denied the same educational opportunities as their White counterparts primarily because they were being viewed as slaves and were considered intellectually inferior (Lewis, 2004). African American students would continue to experience institutionalized racism in the United States as governments in both the north and south would introduce and pass several laws designed to restrict them from attending higher education institutions, thus, creating limited inferior educational opportunities (Karkouti, 2016a).

In the nineteenth century, there were few institutions in the United States that would open their doors to welcome African American students. Bowdoin College in Brunswick, ME would be the first college to have an African American graduate while Oberlin College in Oberlin, OH would be the first to openly admit African American students (Waite, 1996). The decision by Oberlin College to enroll African American students 2 years after the school was founded by two New England Congregationalist ministers was extremely significant in that they openly challenged the laws of that time and the perceptions that African American students could not handle the academic rigors of higher learning (Waite, 1996). Despite the efforts of Oberlin College, African American students would earn their undergraduate degrees from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as these institutions were founded to provide African American students with alternative options to higher learning (Karkouti, 2016a).

Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, founded in 1837, is the oldest HBCU in the United States.

While the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in 1865, African Americans would continue to experience discrimination especially as it pertained to higher education as PWIs were still not welcoming to African American students despite the changes in the law. During the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, there was a significant push to integrate PWIs with unions and African American societies on these campuses (Poussaint, 1974). Over the last 50 years, PWIs have implemented a variety of diversity enrollment initiatives as a response to various federal legislations including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1965 Higher Education Act and student protests of the late 1960s (Patton et al., 2019).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Higher Education Act were both signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a historical legislative moment in the civil rights movement as it outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. It would later include sexual orientation and gender identity. Part of the law prohibited racial segregation in schools, which would be significant for African American students looking to attend higher education institutions. Racial segregation in schools may have been against stated policy, yet many campuses have noted that minority groups often seek the company of other students of color on campus. These spaces, while more diverse than majority White spaces, are still more representative of African American students than other parts of campus.

Ensuring inclusivity on campus has been the effort of several laws including the 1965 Higher Education Act that provided financial resources to students including financial aid, scholarships, and work study while also providing institutional support such as continuing education programs and libraries. This law was perceived as a benefit to African American students, as it would provide financial assistance to help mitigate the high costs associated with attending college. These advancements in higher education would give way to student protests that demanded that further change be implemented at the student level since African American students were enrolling at PWIs on a limited basis at that time. While these protests allowed more African American students to attend PWIs in greater numbers, PWIs were not necessarily prepared for student interventions.

There would be significant enrollment growth for African American students as they began to enroll at colleges and universities at rates that had not been seen before, with many attending PWIs (Allen, 2020; Chavous et al., 2018). From the 1860s to the 1950s, due to segregation, only 10% of African American students enrolled in PWIs (Jones & Williams, 2006). By 1990, in contrast, African American student enrollment at PWIs would increase to 79% (Jones & Williams, 2006). From 2000 to 2016, African American women would experience an enrollment increase from 35% to 39% (Haynes, 2019). In 2016, African American female students would represent 39% of the student body at PWIs (Haynes, 2019). Between 2018 and 2020, African American students in the United States represented between 10 and 15% of the undergraduate student body (Allen, 2020; Sato et al., 2018).

### **Stereotypes of African American Students on Predominantly White Campuses**

Historically, White Americans have used racial stereotypes as a method to categorize non-Whites (Neal-Jackson, 2020). The stereotypes of African Americans being dumb, ignorant, lazy, and rebellious can be linked back to slavery as a method to keep slaves in bondage to make them subservient to their White owners (Johnson, 2020). Racial stereotypes are defined as the “projected thoughts and beliefs that members of one racial group hold about another racial group” (Torres & Charles, 2004, p. 116). When perceived to be “the truth” by White students, these over-generalized beliefs can have a lingering, unfavorable, and damaging effect for African American students on college campuses (Neal-Jackson, 2020).

African American men have been labelled by society as dangerous criminals and gang members, which has caused some people to be fearful of being around them, while African American women have been stereotyped as unapproachable, angry, and loud (Jackson and Hui, 2017; Neal-Jackson, 2020). African American women have also been called “model minorities” because of their perseverance from a variety of circumstances (Apugo, 2019; Haynes, 2019). This “model minority” stereotype of African American women has been culturally approved by White society (Apugo, 2019). These types of stereotypes follow African American students to college which can affect their overall experience on campus.

African American men at PWIs, for example, are perceived to be athletes, unintelligent, and sexually promiscuous deviants (Allan, 2020). These stereotypes perpetuate how African American men are treated by their White peers, thus allowing

them to be racial profiled, which further invalidates their position and intentions on campus (Allan, 2020). African American female students at PWIs are stereotyped as being strong willed and resilient; however, these compliments are used to downplay the racism these students experience on campus (Hayes, 2019). Code-switching is “an identity-shifting mechanism used to mask, alter, or soften one’s authentic racial and/or ethnic identity to accommodate the culture of a particular environment” (Apugo, 2019, p. 54). Code-switching for African American women at a PWI can lead to a negative race-related experience that can affect their ability to learn and progress academically.

Being an African American student at a PWI brings its own unique set of challenges. African American students at a PWI may be perceived by African American students at non-PWI institutions as trying to assimilate to White culture or trying to “act White” (Bourke, 2016). By default, African American students at PWIs are expected to serve as the chief representative for the race and are also looked to provide a universal perspective on all things pertaining to the African American culture (Mills, 2020).

African American students who attend a PWI describe dealing with racial microaggressions that cause academic and social issues while matriculating (Chavous et al, 2018; Givens, 2016; Green et al., 2018; Jackson and Hui, 2017; Johnson, 2019; Mills, 2020; Patton, 2016). Some of the microaggressions that African American students deal with include not being selected for study groups and organizations because of their race, having an unwanted spotlight placed on them in the classroom, having little to no cultural representation available on campus, and having blatant direct statements made to them about their race (Preston-Cunningham et al., 2016). Mills (2020) also indicated that



African American students also are subject to environmental racial microaggressions that can include tokenism, segregation, and lack of representation.

Jones and Reddick (2017), Mills (2020), and Preston-Cunningham et al. (2016) suggested that having to be subjected to daily microaggressions ends up having a negative impact on the academic performance of African American students at PWIs. Subsequently, African American students are considered anomalies primarily because they must demonstrate a different work ethic than their White counterparts (Harris, 2020; Ottley & Ellis, 2019). These challenges further perpetuate the racism that African American students face at PWIs.

### **Racism on PWI Campuses**

At the time of this study, there have been several racially themed incidents that suggest that PWIs have not ensured a climate of welcomeness for African American students on campus. African American students at PWIs experience a much more hostile campus environment than those who attend a HBCU (Allen, 2020; Barber, 2012; Faison & McArthur, 2020; Reeder & Schmitt, 2013).

In 2015, Dejianna Ahanonu, an African American student at the University of Montana, had the phrase “Run home MONKEY!!!!” spray painted on her windshield on top of an upside-down map of Africa (Montana Kaimin, 2016). Ahanonu was one of 76 African American undergraduate students on the University of Montana campus which had nearly 8,000 total undergraduate students (Montana Kaimin, 2016).

The University of Oklahoma has had a couple of high profiled incidents on their campus. In 2015, the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity were recorded in a 10-second video,

using racial slurs, indicating that African American men would never be admitted into their organization (Staff Reports, 2015). Based on the video, the fraternity would be disbanded by the organization's national office. In January 2019, Olivia Urban, a then member of the Tri Delta sorority at the University of Oklahoma, was recorded using racial slurs while in blackface (Allen, 2019). Blackface is where a non-African American performer uses black makeup to represent African Americans in a racially insensitive stereotype. Urban would be removed from the sorority and expelled from the university.

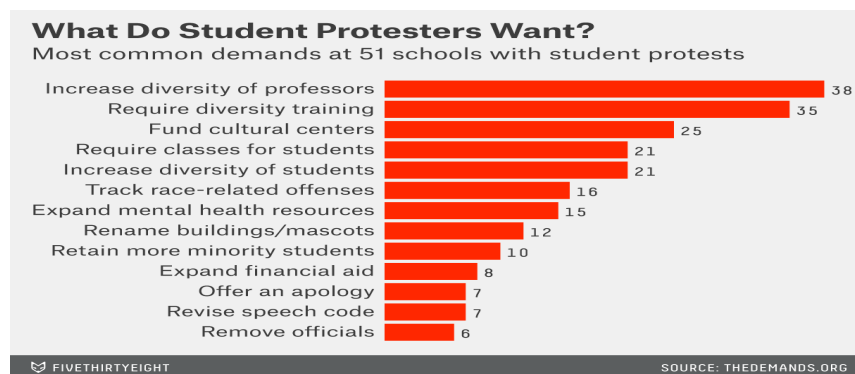
In 2015, the University of Missouri president, Tim Wolfe, would resign after several racially charged incidents took place at the school, including when a swastika, which was drawn with human excrement, was found in one of the residence halls on campus (Wortman et al., 2015). In June 2020, Jerry Falwell, Jr., President of Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA, tweeted a picture of Virginia governor, Ralph Northam in blackface, in response to the social-distancing guidelines that were given by the governor regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Williamson, 2020). Liberty University, which is the largest Christian college in the world, did not initially remove Falwell, Jr. from his position, although there were several African American Liberty alumni and students who recommended that his termination take place. Falwell, Jr. would eventually take an indefinite leave of absence before resigning in August 2020.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, there were over 50 protests that focused on raising awareness on racism on PWI campuses (Ware, 2016). These protests led to the formation of The Demands website, which is a formal list of demands represented by over 75 schools. This website was created to help bring an end to systemic and structural

racism on college campuses (The Demands, 2016). Figure 1 highlights some of the common themes that were outlined by this group:

### Figure 1

#### *Common Demands at 51 Schools With Student Protest*



*Note:* From “Here are the Demands from Students Protesting Racism” at 51 Colleges” by L. Libresco, 2015 (<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/here-are-the-demands-from-students-protesting-racism-at-51-colleges/>).

African American students have also had to deal with opposition from the majority community when they suggest recommendations that can improve campus climate or challenge structural racism at PWIs (Jones & Reddick, 2017). This has led to some legal ramifications, such as the 1996 ruling of *Hopwood v. Texas*, which was the first successful challenge to a university’s affirmative action policy since 1978’s *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. This ruling indicated that Texas University would no longer be permitted to use race as a factor to recruit a diverse student body (Jones & Reddick, 2017).

## **Welcomeness and Belongingness**

The climate of a college campus helps to establish the institution's identity while also trying to connect the students, both individually and collectively, to the social system that lies within the school (Bourke, 2016; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). The campus climate of a higher education institution can impact learning for African American students, and some students use campus climate to decide which college or university they want to attend (Comeaux et al., 2017). A welcoming campus climate can have a positive affect for the entire university community as a whole and helps create an atmosphere that foster learning and positive engagement (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). An institution's campus climate, however, can be severely impacted when minority students feel culturally isolated or unsupported (Antonio et al., 2012).

Cedric Jennings is an African American student from Washington, D.C. whose story was told in the biographical novel *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* by Ron Suskind. The narrative chronicles the journey from his last 2 years attending Ballou High School, a crime-infested school in Washington, D.C., to his 1st years attending Brown University, a prestigious Ivy League school in Providence, RI (ASHE, 2015). Jennings was able to overcome insurmountable odds including being raised in a single parent home, being bullied by other students, and having his father, who was a drug dealer, incarcerated. Jennings would overcome these adversities and would enroll in a summer school program for minority students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Jennings was told by a White professor at MIT that he was not MIT material and that he was not academically strong enough to be

enrolled in the program although he had a 4.19 grade point average (Chun & Evans, 2015). That same professor would, however, encourage Jennings to apply to Howard University, a HBCU, located in Washington, D.C. Not taking that recommendation, Jennings would apply and be accepted at Brown, where he would acknowledge that he did not have anything in common with either the White students who were enrolled in the school or the middle-class African American students (ASHE, 2015).

Some African American students have indicated that they felt that being Black, or a person of color, was an important asset during the application process, but quickly noticed when they became students, it was no longer important anywhere else on campus (Basile & Black, 2019). These same students have been promised by recruiters that there would be a considerable amount of support for African American students only to discover that was not the case (Basile & Black, 2019).

Students at PWIs who live on campus are experiencing, sometimes for the first time, living with people from a diverse cultural background (Haynes, 2019). African American students find that living in these shared spaces can be stressful and an unwelcoming experience (Haynes, 2019). Some White dorm leaders on PWIs see on-campus dorm rooms as White spaces that will tolerate African American students for a temporary timeframe (Haynes, 2019). African American students' sense of safety is heightened while White students, on the same campus, do not have those concerns about their physical safety (Harris, 2020). African American students at a PWI, more than likely, will have to identify designated areas on the campus where they feel safe (Harris, 2020).

The campus climate at PWIs may also cause African American students to not express their views on controversial topics and keep them to themselves for fear that their views will be perceived as offensive. In a 2020 study, 62% of college students acknowledged that the campus climate at their university prevented them from expressing themselves on things they believe (Niel, 2021). These students who participated in this study were asked about their thoughts on the 2020 presidential election between Donald Trump and Joseph Biden as well as the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **Student Racial and Ethnic Identity and Belonging**

PWIs initially excluded African American students from attending their institutions. This practice laid the foundation and created the mindset that these students did not belong at mostly White schools (Harris, 2020). Although African American students may decide to enroll at PWIs, students of color have indicated that they feel more comfortable being around other students who have similar cultural backgrounds (Apugo, 2019; Jackson & Hui, 2017). To accommodate this, African American students may begin to use certain coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of being a minority at a PWI. Examples of this may include joining African American centered student organizations such as Greek letter fraternities and sororities.

While there has been a considerable amount of research done over the last 2 decades regarding students' sense of belonging in college, few studies have been conducted on how campus environments help or hinder belonging and matriculation among racially diverse college student groups (Museus et al., 2018). In the United States, African American students at PWIs have expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration

with how they are treated at specific institutions (Eakins & Eakins, Jr., 2017). The primary reason for this is a consistent lack of student and faculty representation of color on these campuses. Therefore, African American students who decide to enroll in a PWI must be prepared for the challenges that come with finding a supportive and engaging academic and social support system (Sato et al., 2018).

First-generation African American students who attend a PWI, and whose parents have not attended college or earned a college degree, may experience culture shock and isolation on campus (Havlik et al., 2020). The transition from high school to college may initially be difficult and challenging for these students as they deal with individual and systemic racism. African American undergraduate women are more likely to describe an overwhelming sense of fear when they try to navigate the PWI campus culture, thus, making the process of feeling accepted seem unattainable (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017).

Campus environments that are culturally engaging, relevant, and responsive to the needs of the minority student community have been found to be a noticeable campus belonging predictor for students who are White as well as students of color (Museus et al., 2018). In this context, cultural relevance refers to how colleges and universities are connected to the cultural background and identities of their minority students while cultural responsiveness focuses on how a campus support system effectively addresses the needs of their culturally diverse student body (Museus et al., 2018). For PWIs to enroll more African American students, it will be extremely important for these students to feel welcomed at these institutions (Hall, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Although African American students have matriculated at PWIs since the 1960's, the challenges these students face when beginning their college journey continue to remain prevalent today (Lewis et al., 2021). The negative experiences African American students have at PWIs can also have a direct impact on how they view the campus climate at the institution (Lewis et al., 2021). The primary aim of this study is to offer a conceptual understanding of the perceptions that African American freshman students have at a PWI and how their experiences influenced their decision to enroll.

## **Implications**

The perceptions of AXU's campus climate by African American freshman students may be connected to the institution's new student enrollment growth. Through this study, I intended to better understand how these students' perceptions of campus climate may have influenced their decision to enroll at AXU. I hope that this study will provide insight to the AXU executive leadership team to develop a 3-day professional development training for academic advisors, student success coaches, and first term faculty as a method to better support African American freshman students on campus. This training could help the AXU faculty and staff create an inviting campus for future African American freshman at the institution, which could increase sustainability for enrollment growth (Morukhu et al., 2021).

## **Summary**

In Section 1, the local problem of decreasing African American freshman enrollment in the last 5 years at a PWI was described in the context of this investigation.



African American freshman students at PWIs can have a challenging first- year experience as they try to adjust to campus life while finding their place in the institution. A negative campus climate at a PWI can deter African American students from wanting to enroll at the school, which could pose a new student enrollment growth risk for this minority student population. Using CRT and RCT as the theoretical framework for this study may reveal the influence that campus climate has on African American freshman student perceptions and how these students describe their 1st-year college experiences to others.

## Section 2: The Methodology

The qualitative research design was logical in answering the question of how African American freshman student perceptions of campus climate influenced their decision to enroll at a PWI. For my study, I interviewed 11 African American freshman students who attend AXU. A qualitative interview design allowed the participants to explain why they chose to enroll at a PWI, share their 1st-year experiences, and explain how they perceive the campus climate at the institution.

### **Research Design and Approach**

For my study, I used a qualitative design that focused on interviews, as it is consistent with exploring student attitudes about their campus climate experiences at AXU. Quantitative research studies have an emphasis on measurement and relationship between two or more independent and dependent variables (Heiselt & Sheperis, 2010). In quantitative studies, the focus is on the relationship between these entities, not the processes that are involved. “Qualitative research includes broad, open-ended questions that answer the *how* or *what* about a particular phenomenon” (Heiselt & Sheperis, 2010, p. 190). In my study, I wanted to understand the perceptions that African American freshman students have regarding campus climate at a PWI. A quantitative analysis would limit the descriptive responses of the participant’s experiences at AXU. A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study, as it allowed me to examine the perceptions of these students and interpret the meaning behind the results.

In selecting a qualitative study for my research, I considered five types of qualitative approaches including basic, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and

phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Radu, 2019; Reeves et al., 2013; Sturman, 1997). In doing this, I took into consideration the goals, purpose, and intended direction of my study and decided that basic was the best approach for me to use.

A case study can be defined as “the exploration of an individual, group, or phenomenon” (Sturman, 1997, p. 61). This approach would be limiting to my study in that it would not be possible to classify the results. In an ethnography study, observations and documentary data are collected to provide a complete description of a social phenomenon (Reeves et al., 2013). This method would not have been appropriate for my study because student observations would have needed to be done over an extended period and it would also be necessary to interview other researchers who have studied the culture at AXU, which would have been challenging.

Grounded theory, which was founded by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, is a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). The purpose of my study is not to develop a theory about African American freshman students’ perceptions of campus climate at PWI. Therefore, this approach was not the appropriate design for me to use. A phenomenological research approach attempts to provide insight into a phenomenon (Radu, 2019). This process can take some time and requires broad, in-depth interviews with the participants. I wanted to ask the African American freshman students several

questions about their perceptions of campus climate at AXU; therefore, this method was not the best one to use.

I selected a basic qualitative design as the research approach that I used for my study because it is used by researchers who want to determine “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Since the purpose of the study is to understand the perspectives of African American freshman students at AXU, a basic qualitative approach allowed me to gain insight on how these individuals are handling this human phenomenon.

### **Participants**

For this study, I interviewed 11 African American freshman students who are currently enrolled at AXU to obtain their perspectives. The aim of this research study was narrow in scope; therefore, this study needed the least number of participants as the intended participant range (between 10 and 15 students) would be able to provide sufficient information to answer the study’s research questions (Malterud et al., 2015). I sent study invitation emails via LinkedIn Sales Navigator InMail credits to potential research participants (Appendix B). As a membership benefit, LinkedIn Sales Navigator allows individuals to make outreach to out-of-network connections (LinkedIn, 2021). Invitations were also emailed to various African American student groups at AXU with the intention that the organizations would share the details of the research study with their members. In addition, social media invitation letters were placed on various social media websites that were not directly affiliated with AXU (Appendix C).

Individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study were sent a Research Consent Form, which outlined the details of the study and requested consent via email. Participants were provided with the Interview Protocol in advance so they could review the questions that were going to be asked (Appendix D). Interviews were scheduled using Calendly, which is an online scheduling platform. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary safety protocols, interviews were conducted with all participants over the phone and were recorded using an Olympus VN-701PC digital voice recorder. Interviews were also recorded and transcribed using Otter. Completed interviews were stored using a password protected storage device. Participants were emailed a written transcript of their interview to review for accuracy.

### **Data Collection Process and Instruments**

In a qualitative research study, the primary objective is to investigate or explore a human-phenomena and the methods that are used attempt to answer questions such as “What is the meaning of...?” or “What is the experience of...?” (Horbal, 2018). Participant interviews are data collection methods that help qualitative researchers gather information about the participant’s experiences, views, and beliefs as they relate to the research questions the study is trying to answer (Carter et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2009). Being the sole researcher for this study, I was the primary data collector and collected and analyzed the data to find patterns and identify themes that helped to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2007).

The interview protocol is the data collection instrument I used for my study (Appendix E). For this study, I conducted virtual interviews with the participants on a

date and time of their choosing. I asked the participants 11 identical open-ended questions that allowed the respondents to provide information to fully express their experiences and perceptions of campus climate at AXU (Turner, 2010). The first nine questions that were asked helped to answer the first research question in the study, while the last two questions helped to answer the second research question.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a particularly important part of a qualitative research study, as it allows the researcher to review and categorize the data that has been collected (Flick, 2014; Thorne, 2000). “Qualitative Data Analysis is the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (Flick, 2014, p. 5). During this process, interviews were transcribed live using online transcribing software, Otter. Once the transcription process was completed, I e-mailed a copy of the transcript to the participants for them to review their responses.

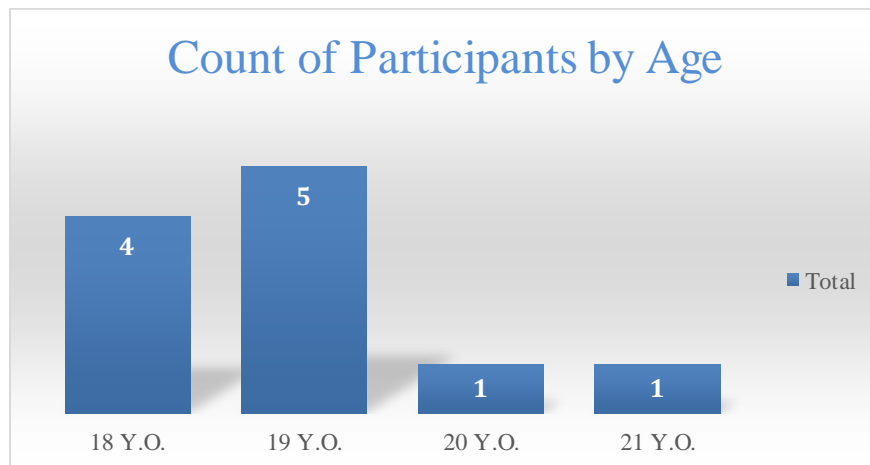
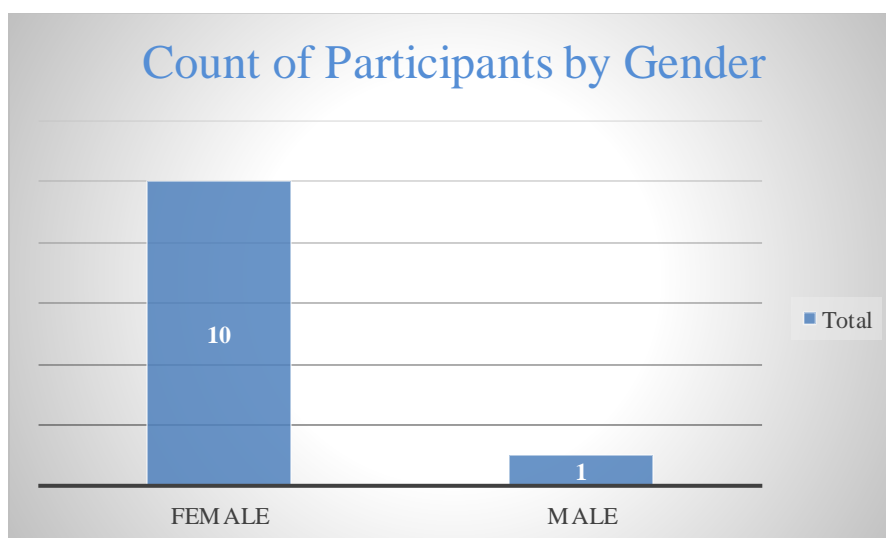
In a basic qualitative research study, “coding is the process of making sense of the data by succinctly describing what the data are telling the researcher [and] involves labeling fragments of the data in such a way that each piece of data is categorized and summarized” (Buckley, 2010, p 121). The coding process is an integral part of qualitative research that uses interviews and allowed me to dissect the data to analyze, interpret, and understand the facts to identify themes and the relationships between them that materialized from the information (Buckley, 2010; Medelyan, 2020; Parameswaran et. al., 2020). During the initial or open coding process stage, I reviewed each of the

participants' interview transcriptions to search for all possible important and recurring words and/or phrases. After the initial data coding was conducted, I then segued to focused coding, which helped me to develop categories to group the initial codes into larger sections based on emerging themes (Buckley, 2010). I created an electronic codebook that identified the codes from the study written, defined, origin identified, and importance clarified (SAGE Research Methods, 2019). I used that information to compare the codes and themes that had been uncovered to my research questions and the conceptual frameworks that are being used for the study.

Using CRT and RCT as the conceptual framework, I anticipated the initial themes to be racism, relationships, and routines (Benveniste et al., 2019). When asking the African American freshman students about their perceptions of the campus climate at AXU, I anticipated the themes to include cultural isolation and resilience (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Any emerging themes were discovered as I went through the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Results**

Eleven African American freshmen who currently attend AXU were interviewed for this research study. As seen in Figure 2, the highest participant age represented in this study was 19 years old, followed by 18 years old. Ten of the 11 participants in this study were female freshman students (Figure 3).

**Figure 2***Count of Participants by Age***Figure 3***Count of Participants by Gender*

Participants were asked a series of questions that provided an opportunity for them to discuss the factors that influenced their decision to enroll at AXU, their knowledge about the academic and social campus climate prior to enrolling in the

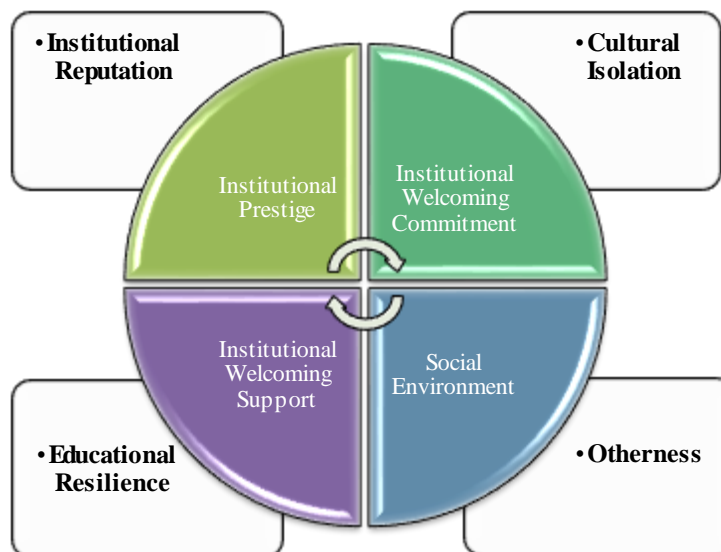


institution, and their thoughts on the school's efforts to support African American freshmen students. I used the tenants of both CRT and RCT to help comprehend the data. CRT provides people of color with opportunities to share and validate their personal stories, which ultimately puts a spotlight on how their experiences connect with race (Hiraldo, 2019). RCT considers that individuals are fully aware of their options, and they place those selections in an order that allow them to make the best decision that fits their needs (Tran, 2022). The participants were able to provide insight on their freshman year experiences at AXU while also sharing their rationale as to why they decided to enroll in the institution.

Based on the participants' responses, the focused codes that were uncovered included institutional prestige, institutional welcoming commitment, institutional welcoming support, and social environment. As highlighted in Figure 4, the four focused codes then collapsed to four emerging research themes: (a) institutional reputation, (b) cultural isolation, (c) educational resilience, and (d) otherness.

**Figure 4**

*Research Focused Codes and Themes*



The institutional prestige of a college or university can have an influence on potential students as they weigh their options on where they would like to enroll. According to O'Meara and Bloomgarden (2011), colleges strive to improve their academic offerings to remain competitive in the higher education marketplace. As one of the focused codes for this study, AXU's institutional prestigiousness is associated with the school's overall reputation, which was an emerging theme. An institution's reputation provides students with a perceived value on the quality of the education that can be obtained by enrolling at the school (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009).

The leadership at colleges and universities have a responsibility to ensure that the institutional welcoming support that is provided to their students is committed on being student-centered (Heagney & Benson, 2017). This support is essential for all students especially freshmen who are entering college for the first time. A campus that has a

student-focused support system can help their student's educational resilience, which considers all the institutional factors needed to ensure a positive student experience (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). A campus that does the opposite can cause their students to become isolated, which forces them to seek support elsewhere. The emerging themes of educational resilience and cultural isolation is significant in this, as AXU is a PWI which has had a recent challenge with connecting with African American freshmen students.

The social environment for first year college students is vital to their adjustment to college life (Foulkes et al, 2021). "Social environment stands for social, cultural, sporting, and entertainment facilities and resources that are offered to students in a campus environment" (Kethuda, 2021, p. 54). A positive, welcoming social environment for African American students on a PWI can create a sense of otherness, another emerging theme, among these individuals (Kethuda, 2021). Cultivating and maintaining healthy peer-to-peer relationships on the AXU campus can have a positive influence on the wellbeing of the research participants (Foulkes et al., 2021). The ability to develop these types of personal connections along with the institutional reputation of a college or university can play an important part in a student's enrollment decision making process.

### **Emerging Theme 1: Institutional Reputation**

One of the most important academic decisions an individual will make is where to attend college. Participants in this study shared that when they were selecting colleges to attend, the institutional prestige, location of the school, and the attractiveness of paying in-state tuition, were some of the major factors that influenced their decision to enroll at AXU. Seven research participants knew a good amount of information about AXU's

academic climate knowledge prior to enrolling while four knew more about the social climate of the school. Information about the academic and social school was obtained through conversations with alumni, current students, family, and friends.

The AXU website, campus tours, and social media also provided the participants with important information. One participant said that AXU was “nearby, closer to home,” “economically affordable” and “had a lot of good reviews overall with people saying it was a good school”. Another participant indicated that AXU’s “prestigiousness, especially in this area, and the program of study that I was trying to do and how it fit my career goals” played an important part in their decision to enroll in the institution. Another participant shared that “academically, I knew it was a good school, one of the best schools in [the state].” Based on these responses, the reputation of AXU had a significant impact on the participants decision to enroll in the school.

### **Emerging Theme 2: Cultural Isolation**

Participants were asked to share their thoughts regarding the level of engagement AXU provided to them as African American freshmen students. Respondents shared that AXU has an African American freshman student focused event at the beginning of the school year that serves as their orientation to the institution. Cultural isolation at AXU occurs when post-orientation, few events targeting African American students on campus are available. Because campus has specific locations geared African American students, these environments serve to ameliorate the isolation that students described. In fact, it is in this cultural center where most of the respondents indicated that they feel the safest on campus. Results were split with half of the participants thinking that AXU’s engagement

with African American freshman students is good and the other half thinking the opposite. One respondent indicated that they “feel like it’s a good amount of engagement” from the university while another agreed that they “feel like the level of engagement is pretty good in a sense [that] we are given resources that help us.” A respondent, who refuted the notion of university engagement, indicated that the school does not “do that good of job. I don’t think they cater to us at all.”

Interestingly, a respondent who mentioned that they “think that there is pretty good engagement by AXU” would later acknowledge that the “Black community are the people that create the programs, not really AXU.” This revelation further supports another respondent who noted that AXU tried to “ignore or be oblivious to the fact that there is a huge gap in the diversity, and they try to ignore the fact.” Outside of the one event at the beginning of the school year, it appears that AXU leaves the responsibility of creating African American student-centered events up to the student clubs and organizations themselves. This creates a sense of cultural isolation and left African American freshmen students in a bubble where they must come together to make sure these students have the resources, community support, and security students of color need to be successful on campus.

### **Emerging Theme 3: Educational Resilience**

Participants indicated that AXU has an African American freshman student event during the first week of school to provide an orientation to campus and to prepare students of color to get acclimated to the school. One participant indicated that by attending this event, they “really felt like [it created] a sense of belonging” while another

participant mentioned that “there were a lot of opportunities to get to know other freshman.” Another participant mentioned that “AXU does have a pretty good Black community that shows incoming freshmen that they are welcomed, and they do have a safe place.” This participant further added that AXU has “many events going on for all different types of Black people, [if] you’re a Black Caribbean, or a Black African, they have many different organizations and programs that go on.” This support system is beneficial to AXU African American freshman in that it provides a safe space for them among their peers.

#### **Emerging Theme 4: Otherness**

Participants described a situation that they experienced that may have drawn attention to the fact that they are an African American student at AXU. While the circumstances that were mentioned were different, a common theme among the participants is that they are reminded, daily, that they are a minority on campus. One participant mentioned that when walking into their classroom, they “would be the only African American in the class.” Another participant expressed the same sentiment by saying, “I’m literally the only Black student. Sometimes I don’t have anybody that I can relate to, and I feel like the other races are talking about things that they know about, and they can relate to, and I don’t have anyone who looks like me that we can talk about [certain things] in a classroom environment.” Another participant indicated that when they walk around AXU’s campus, they see “[White] people shift over to the side as I walked by or some [White] people don’t move at all when I’m walking by as if they don’t even recognize that I’m a person.” Several participants indicated that they do not

feel safe on the outskirts of campus or at events that our sponsored by White organizations including fraternities and sororities. It is experiences like this that reminded the participants that they are African American freshman students at a PWI.

**RQ1: How do African American Freshmen Student Perceptions of Campus Climate Influence Their Decision to Enroll in AXU?**

Based on the responses, one-third of the research participants were not aware of AXU's social campus climate prior to enrolling, and more than half of the participants, were able to describe positive elements of the university's academic climate and programmatic rigor. While most research participants were aware of racially charged events that had taken place at AXU, these incidents did not negatively impact the individual student's decision to enroll. In fact, five participants mentioned the same event (the killing of a Black non AXU student by a White AXU student) in some variation when I asked them about the campus. While participants indicated that these events made them *anxious, nervous, or turned off* by the university, the events that occurred on AXU's campus did not keep them from enrolling in AXU.

Once enrolled at AXU, participants felt comfortable and safe at campus events and locations that catered community engagement with other African American students. More than half of the research participants indicated that they had experienced some negative first year events with three participants who reported that they had a good first year experience while two mentioned that their experience was okay.

**RQ2: How do African American Freshmen Student Perceptions of Campus Climate Influence How They Describe Their Experiences at AXU to Others?**

Most participants indicated that they don't share their negative personal social experiences at AXU with others. Instead, they tended to focus on the positive experiences they have encountered. Despite some negative interactions that the participants experienced during their freshman year, surprisingly, the majority indicated that they would encourage other African American students to attend AXU. The reasons for this may be attributed in part to AXU's academic reputation and the available student resources, which some students suggested might not be readily available at a HBCU. The participants also indicated that the supportive African American student community is another reason for this decision as they believe that the community itself can help new students flourish.

**Summary**

For African American students, the freshman year experience at AXU is an intriguing mix of an inviting campus culture and an atmosphere of uneasiness. The African American students who I interviewed indicated that while there is a welcoming culture among their fellow peers, being the only minority student in a classroom or at an event, can cause feelings of isolation. Although these African American freshmen students knowingly enrolled in a PWI, the need to have a supportive mini HBCUesque community on campus is critical for their 1st-year success.



### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

Based on the findings of the analysis of the data collected through participant interviews, I created a professional development project for increasing awareness among school officials on campus. This project could provide crucial information necessary to create a more welcoming and safe campus climate for African American 1st-year students at AXU. From my data analysis, I discovered that some of the leading reasons participants enrolled at AXU were (a) institutional prestige, (b) geographical location, and (c) ability to pay in-state tuition. Most of the participants indicated they were aware of racially charged incidents that had taken place on the campus, but those events did not deter them from enrolling.

Participants indicated that while AXU sponsored a focused freshman orientation event at the beginning of their college journey, subsequent events for African American students, hosted by the university were nonexistent. Despite having an overall negative freshman year experience, most participants would recommend that other African American students attend AXU due to the supportive peer environment and the resources available at the institution.

The professional development event that I created for this project could aid the AXU staff and faculty in student cultural acumen, student safety engagement, and other student support services to align to the areas articulated by the study participants. To help support the goal of this study, which is to improve the overall campus climate for African American freshman students at AXU, I have incorporated best practices from the

literature. The professional development event could be made available to all incoming AXU African American freshman students and led by AXU staff and faculty.

Based on the findings of my research, African American freshman students at AXU indicated the importance of more university-sponsored events geared towards African Americans. These activities would help to improve perceptions of the campus climate at AXU for African American students. This information can be shared with AXU staff and faculty to help them create a more welcoming environment for these matriculating students.

These activities could also help AXU's marketing department create a strategic marketing approach that could improve the institution's Net-Promoter Score (McKnight et al., 2019). The Net-Promoter Score is used in higher education to measure how students' word-of-mouth experiences, both positive and negative, affect enrollment growth (McKnight et al., 2019). This could be an important tool for AXU as they strive to reconnect with their African American freshman population and increase enrollment through word-of-mouth referral. AXU would like to positively benefit from this initiative as they anticipate their African American freshman students could be inspired to speak favorably about the institution to other potential students.

### **Rationale**

In fall 2020, there were over 2.5 million African American students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021). With over 17.6 million students of various racial and ethnic groups enrolled in higher education institutions during this same period, African American students

accounted for 14.7% of the total number of enrollments (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021). Also in 2020, there were over 710,000 African American 1st-year students enrolled in colleges and universities, accounting for 17.5% of the total number of all 1st-year students (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021). This indicates a racial divide for African American students when it comes to enrollment in institutions of higher education.

Based on my analysis of the data collected from participant interviews, I created a professional development plan for my project to increase school official capacity around the importance of inclusion, belonging, and welcomeness on campus. This project is intended to address the disconnect between the leadership team at AXU and the overall psychological and physical safety needs of the African American freshman student community at the institution. This professional development activity could provide the AXU staff and faculty with insight on how to build a welcoming and safe campus climate for the African American student body. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all components of the professional development activity will take place virtually.

### **Review of the Literature**

Professional development is important for higher education employees, and high-quality transferable skill development is the goal of higher education leadership. The leaders of an institution must ensure that all staff and faculty are trained on the latest industry strategies to help provide students with a positive college experience (Bedford et al., 2021). Professional development should be continuous to motivate employees to

remain competitive in an ever-changing climate, and as new skill gaps are identified, the training could be expanded and involve more stakeholders.

This study contributes to the education field by providing insight into African American freshman students' perspectives regarding campus climate at a PWI. There has been limited research in this area, and in this study, I explored the current gap in practice that might be contributing to decreased enrollment. A major finding in this study was the importance for African American freshman to feel safe, both physically and psychologically, on a PWI campus. The study participants indicated the necessity for AXU to provide meaningful and engaging activities for the African American student population. One participant stated, "More events [need to be] created by the university to help Black students get acclimated in different ways." Another participant shared, "The university could be a little bit better about connecting students with those resources" to provide adequate support. More engagement from the university would help ensure that African American students feel welcomed on campus.

For this literature review, I focused on (a) important aspects of overall safety on a PWI campus, (b) the cultural isolation and educational resilience opportunities that individual African American students have faced at a PWI, (c) the relationships that African American students create and build while attending a PWI, and (d) the institutional responsibility administrative leaders at PWIs have to provide a welcoming atmosphere for African American students. Using Education Source, ERIC and, Google Scholars databases, I searched for scholarly resources using key terms including *African American students*, *campus climate*, *Clery Act*, *college*, *college administrators*, *cultural*

*awareness, cultural isolation, institutional reputation, professional development, PWI,* and *student safety*. Peer reviewed articles provided me with insight on safety and welcoming support on a PWI campus for African American students.

### **The Clery Act of 1990**

The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, also known as the Clery Act, was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on November 8, 1990. The Clery Act was named after Jeanne Clery, a 19-year-old Lehigh University student, who, in April 1986, was raped and brutally murdered by Joseph Henry, another Lehigh student (Latham-Staton et al., 2021). Initially, Clery was slated to attend Tulane University, located in New Orleans, Louisiana, however, her parents decided that she would be safer enrolling at Lehigh, which is in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Latham-Staton et al., 2021). Clery's murder was one of 38 violent crimes that occurred at Lehigh, and none of these incidents regarding campus safety were made public (Latham-Staton et al., 2021). Because they were unaware of the crimes that had occurred on Lehigh's campus prior to enrolling their daughter in the school, the Clerys successfully sued the university and were awarded \$2 million. This lawsuit served as the foundation for the Clery Act.

According to the Clery Center (2022), the Clery Act requires all colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid programs to report campus crime data, provide support to victims of violence, and publicly outline the safety policies and security measures they have put in place to improve campus safety. All colleges and universities must:

Publish an Annual Security Report (ASR) containing campus crime statistics going back three calendar years, (b) maintain a crime log that is easily accessible to the public, (c) provide crime statistics for occurrences both on campus and on public areas adjacent to campus, (d) issue warnings regarding serious or ongoing threats within a timely manner, (e) develop a policy covering emergency response, notification, and testing, (f) maintain and publish an annual report for fire data, and (g) devise a policy and procedure code for missing student reports.

(Latham-Staton et al., 2021, p. 430)

By October 1st of each year, institutions must publish and distribute their ASR to current and prospective students and employees.

The types of campus crimes that were initially required to be included in institutions' ASRs were aggravated assault, alcohol use violations, arson, burglary, drug-related violations, motor vehicle theft, manslaughter, murder, robbery, and weapons possessions (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2020). In 2014, dating violence, domestic violence, rape, and stalking were required to be added to institutions' ASRs (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2020).

Participants in my study were aware of racially charged incidents having taken place on the AXU campus, but no one indicated that they received their information from viewing AXU's Clery Report. One participant acknowledged they were "aware of people hanging nooses off light posts" and "a murder case that was being investigated for possible racial factors." Another participant indicated they had "heard of a hate crime

towards a Black person when they were stabbed on campus.” Another participant said, “I found out information about a Black student who didn’t go to AXU...he came to visit [the university] and he was killed by a White supremacist student on our campus.”

Despite being aware of these events prior to enrolling at AXU, the participants indicated this information did not affect their decision to enroll. One participant said, “I think those events definitely turned me off, but they weren’t impactful enough for me to not enroll at all.” Another student said, “I didn’t really take [the racial events] into consideration because, honestly, a hate crime can happen anywhere.”

### **Institutional Violations of the Clery Act**

Since 1991, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has monitored and enforced the Clery Act (Latham-Staton et al., 2021). Colleges and universities not compliant with the Clery Act can be required to pay a large fine to the DOE for each violation and could lose their federal financial aid funding (Aborn, 2022; Sutton, 2022). In 2019, the fine for a single violation of the Clery Act was over \$57,000 (Aborn, 2022).

In 2018, the University of Montana (UM) was initially fined close to \$1 million for violation of the Clery Act before the DOE reduced it to \$395,000 1 year later (NBC Montana Staff, 2019). UM was fined for omitting important crime statistics for the years 2012 through 2015, which caused their ASR to be incorrect and misleading (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; NBC Montana Staff, 2019). UM is making monthly payments to satisfy the fine and is expected to be finished paying by January 2024 (NBC Montana Staff, 2019).

Eastern Michigan University (EMU) was fined \$350,000 in 2008 for neglecting to share with the public the 2006 murder of 22-year-old student Laura Dickinson by fellow

student Orange Taylor III (Goldman, 2007; Larcom, 2008). EMU's initial statement about Dickinson's death acknowledged that the student had died of natural causes and that foul play had been ruled out (Goldman, 2007). Upon further investigating, it was determined that EMU failed to tell Dickinson's family the truth about her murder for 10 weeks (Goldman, 2007). The DOE found EMU to be negligent in their actions. After this incident, top EMU leadership were removed, including the president, the vice president of student affairs, and the public safety director (Larcom, 2008). EMU settled a lawsuit with Dickinson's family for \$2.5 million.

Other notable institutions have also been fined for violations. Pennsylvania State University received the largest fine in the history of the Clery Act at \$2.4 million. Virginia Tech was also fined by the DOE for failing to comply with the law (Aborn, 2022). AXU has not had any reported violations of the Clery Act.

### **The Importance of Institutional Reputation**

Enrolling at an institution of higher education is a major milestone that can solidify the aspirations an African American student wanting to attend college (Minor & Benner, 2018; Warren & Bonilla, 2018). Enrollment in a college or university can help a student build an academic foundation that can lead to future career opportunities (Minor & Benner, 2018). The college decision-making process for African American students involves a variety of influential adult stakeholders, including parents, family, friends, high school teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors (Davidson et al., 2020; Warren & Bonilla, 2018). As a student counsels with their support system, the reputation



of the institution can be an important factor that can influence the student's enrollment (Bakrie et al., 2019).

According to Bakrie et al. (2019), the reputation of a college or university involves a collaborative effort among internal and external stakeholders that underscores the achievements of the institution and how those accomplishments align with the mission of the school. While there are a variety of methods that institutions use to reinforce their image, the goal of the school's reputation is to establish trust, prestige, and academic integrity among current and future students (Bakrie et al., 2019; Ruiz de Sabando, 2018). The academic reputation of AXU is widely known throughout the northeastern state where the school is located, and this reputation played a significant role in the participants' decisions to enroll there.

One of the participants indicated that AXU "is a school that's number one in computer science. We have a lot of students [at AXU] get into medical school." Another participant stated, "At AXU, I did my research. It's one of the top 50 schools." When asked to discuss the factors that influenced their decision to enroll at AXU, one participant indicated "the academic rigor of the career path that [they are] trying to choose" was a major factor, while another mentioned that the school "had a lot of good reviews overall with people saying it was a good school." Another student indicated that AXU's prestige "was a factor in [their enrollment] decision."

### **Student Safety**

Student safety is another important aspect of the overall college experience. Colleges and universities want parents and students to know that their institution is a safe

place to attend, learn, study, and graduate (Doss et al., 2020). It is especially vital for these schools to mitigate any safety concerns, as several institutions' buildings, offices, and classrooms are easily accessible by the public (Doss et al., 2020; Maier & DePrince, 2020). To accomplish this, the university leadership, faculty, and staff along with campus police must be aligned with the safety mission of the school.

For African American students on a PWI campus, safety can be problematic (Maffini & Dillard, 2022). African American "students face many risk factors that can influence their psychological well-being and campus safety including racial hostility and aggression, self-segregation, and microaggressions" (Maffini & Dillard, 2022, p. 2). In this study, a participant shared that they "feel the least safe probably any time where it's just me in the middle of a whole bunch of White people." Another student shared that they feel "the least safe when I'm on the outskirts of campus, specifically where the off campus Greek houses are...specifically White Greek house, not Black Greeks." Therefore, African American students are faced with a dichotomy between safe and non-safe locations on a PWI campus primarily because they are the minority. This is something that their White counterparts do not have to experience at the same institution as White students perceive that the campus is more welcoming, thus adding to a higher satisfaction in their college experience (Flint, 2021).

A participant indicated that when "walking around [the AXU campus] seeing [White] people shift over to the side as I walked by or some [White] people don't move at all when I'm walking by as if they don't even recognize that I'm a person" is an experience that reminds this student "every day that I'm a Black person at a PWI". Being

singled out in this manner can create threatening locations around campus for African American students. This type of cultural isolation can cause these students to suppress their emotions while they try to find a healthy balance between belonging and inclusion.

### **Cultural Isolation of African American Students at a PWI**

“Marginalization of people of color is an everyday occurrence experienced by most people of color in a variety of situation” (Robinson et al., 2019, p.41). In the early stages of their higher education experience, African American undergraduate students at PWI’s come to the realization that racial oppression is something they will experience as they matriculate at the institution (Morales, 2021). This is due in part because PWI’s represent a microcosm of the larger United States of America society where certain prejudices against African Americans continue to exist and those prejudices are subsequently carried over to the higher education student experience despite these institutions attempts to diversify their campuses to be in alignment with rising national social movements such as Black Lives Matter and systemic racism (Reed et al., 2021; Trolan & Parker III, 2022).

The term “*diversity*” has become a buzzword whose meaning has become diluted and has caused colleges and universities to stray from its original meaning without fully tackling the issue (Small, 2021). In this study, one of the participants shared that she, along with some of her Black peers from high school, entered AXU as freshman engineering students. The participant acknowledged that based on their high school transcripts and SAT scores, she felt that none of them should have never been admitted to the engineering program. “I feel like [AXU African American students] were just pawns

used as diversity and I think that AXU knows that in the end, [these African American students are] probably not going to last,” said the participant. “It’s like [AXU] put us [in the engineering program] to bring the [enrollment] stats up a little bit. The majority of us did not last [in the engineering program]. I only know one person who is still doing it. And so, after that, I had to change my major and I guess we all had to change our majors,” the participant continued.

“The African American student experiences at a PWI can be contentious and may not fit the university’s idea of a holistic experience.” (McCall & Castles, 2020, p. 588). One participant mentioned that the 2020 Presidential “election definitely made things harder at AXU for Black students.” The participant went on to say that “if I was going to AXU during the time where people didn’t have to vote for or against Trump and during the time where we weren’t in a pandemic, I think my experience [would have] been a lot different.” Another participant stressed that “I believe that [AXU leaders] try to ignore or be oblivious to the fact that there is a huge gap in the diversity...They try to make it seem like everything’s okay.” Another student agreed that AXU has “diversity trainings and all these different things, but it feels very hollow, like, nothing is really groundbreaking, or changing and it doesn’t really feel safe.”

Students of color have a harder time adjusting to campus environment at a PWI (Turner Kelly et al., 2021). Another study participant described an experience at AXU that “definitely gave me weird feelings” where “I was walking back to my dorm my first year and there was this group of White boys just talking, and when other people walked by, they continued talking. When I walked by to get into my room, they were completely

silent, and I believe they moved away.” Another participant mentioned a similar incident who detailed walking by “[these White sororities] and they were talking to everybody else. I felt like they weren’t really paying attention to me. They would say hi to the girl behind me, that was not African American, or the girl in front of me [who was not African American], but they wouldn’t really socialize with me or talk to me or try to get my attention to know more about their sorority.”

In this study, one of the participants acknowledged that “I’m literally the only Black student [in my class]. Sometimes I don’t have anybody that I can relate to, and I feel like the other races are talking about things that they know about, and they can relate to, and I don’t have anyone who looks like me that we can talk about [certain things] in a classroom environment.” As a result of these types of experiences, African American students at PWI’s begin to make connections with other African American students on campus to develop important and meaningful relationships with their peers (Maffini & Dillard, 2022; Patterson, 2021).

### **Relationships Among African American Students at a PWI**

African American students at PWI’s will rely on each other to learn how to navigate on campus and then will pass on this knowledge to other students as a rite of passage (Maffini & Dillard, 2022). White students may not pay attention or fully comprehend the importance for Black students to fellowship in a manner that creates a sense of safety in a white space (Ohio & Brown, 2021). These spaces for African American students to come together provide a necessary although temporary escape from the anti-Black environment that can permeate at a PWI. One participant shared that

although AXU is a PWI, “they do have a nice amount of Black people that [attend] where I could get to know and surround myself around.” Another participant mentioned that “AXU does have a pretty good Black community that shows incoming freshmen that they are welcomed.” Having other Black students who have a similar narrative allows African American students to develop and build their own safe community on a PWI campus (McCall & Castles, 2020).

At PWIs, there is often a lack of on-campus activities that are geared towards African American students which can cause a disconnect from the overall college experience (McCall & Castles, 2020). This disconnect can cause African American students to have troubling experiences and second guess why they decided to enroll in this institution (McCall & Castles, 2020). When asked what type of support can AXU provide to assist future African American freshman students, one respondent shared that the university could have “more events created by the university to help Black student get acclimated in different ways.” This participant would further say that “Black students [have to get] used to being on this predominantly White campus, and these events would help them get used to campus.”

### **Belongingness For African American Students Post Covid-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic had a tremendous effect on higher education as institutions had to transition their students from face-to-face classroom instruction to an online learning modality (Thacker et al., 2022). This change also resulted in the temporary closure of several on campus environments which furthering presented challenges to first year student learners (Thacker et al., 2022). This was evident with the

African American freshman students at AXU who had to rely on building relationships with other African American students to create a sense of belongingness on the campus. One participant indicated that “with the Covid-19 pandemic, we didn’t really have in person programs. I got a lot of my information [about the school] through [African American] students that went here.” Another participant acknowledged that their freshman year “was very hard and difficult” because the pandemic caused “people to be less social.” This experience caused this participant to miss “out on so many opportunities to make friends” face-to-face although they were able to make friends online.

### **Educational Resilience**

Some minority students at a PWI feel that they have been placed in a situation that have made them to feel inferior then their White counterparts (Robinson et al., 2021). “The difference in experiences and belonging between White students and students of color, is not simply about levels of faculty interaction or involvement, but about how the space of higher education is produced and maintained and how Whiteness and coloniality are embedded in campus culture” (Flint, 2021, p. 562). African American students at a PWI must adapt more at these institutions to be successful, which is something that does not need to be done at a HBCU (Baker et al., 2021).

At a PWI, African American students must make necessary adjustments to have a positive and rewarding student experience (Baker et al., 2021). “Attending a PWI puts Black students, who may or may not suffer from transgenerational trauma, in an environment established by White supremacy and White dominance, leaving them

consumed with stress and fear that being hyper visible on campus will create an attributional ambiguity” (Boyd, 2021, p. 56). A participant mentioned that enrolling at AXU has “definitely been a culture shock especially coming from a [high school] environment where you’re the dominant race.” This student would continue by adding that “I’ve been put in situations that I’m not necessarily used to but [I’ve had] to adapt in order to learn and grow.”

### **Professional Development at a PWI**

Although African American students have made inroads regarding the diversifying of PWI campuses, many of these campuses continue to operate under the false notion that success can only be achieved by a generic White American model (Basile & Black, 2019). This perspective can change the trajectory of how African American students are viewed by White faculty and staff. At PWIs, there are some staff and faculty who are not cognizant of the best methods necessary to support African American students (Miller & O’Daniel, 2019). For White faculty and staff to be effective with both engaging and retaining with African American students at a PWI, they first must acknowledge their limitations that they may not understand these students’ cultures and challenge themselves to become cultural aware of this audience (Oates, 2019; Robinson et al., 2021).

With more African American high school students going to college, there is a need for a more diverse faculty (Robinson et al., 2021). This diverse faculty can have a direct impact on the success of these students and their ability to feel welcomed at the institution (Robinson et al., 2021). Taking the important steps to become culturally aware



of their African American students will help White staff and faculty members to not only improve their relationships with these students but also allow them to grow as professionals (Miller & O'Daniel, 2019). "Without nuanced understanding of student experiences from students themselves, faculty development activities and interventions may be off target" (Miller & O'Daniel, 2019, p.63). Institutions must be able to look at their current practices to make recommendations that will be able to manage indirect discrimination (Grinkevich et al., 2020).

College freshman students are impressionable, and colleges and universities have an institutional responsibility to help mold and shape these students academically, professionally, and personally (Grinkevich et al., 2020; Small, 2021). To better understand the African American students on their campus, AXU faculty and staff must participate in routine cultural sensitivity trainings that will allow them to address personal and organizational prejudices that deal with race and cultural differences (Small, 2021).

### **Project Description**

My study revealed that African American 1st year students at AXU, a PWI located in a northeastern state, have described their experiences on campus. The majority described an unsafe and unwelcoming campus environment outside of the minority peer community the African American students on campus have established. In their descriptions of navigating the campus, the following themes emerged: (a) institutional reputation, (b) cultural isolation, (c) educational resilience, and (d) otherness. While some of the themes that were most prevalent were also identified in the Literature Review,

many of the concepts involved potential avenues for improving student perceptions of safety and welcomeness on campus.

The insights provide an opportunity to scaffold into the orientation and onboarding process more explicit and direct involvement by school officials into the academic environment could have long term benefits for students of color who choose to learn in predominantly White settings. The culminating product is a set of interactive activities for a 3-day professional development conference titled Assurance by Understanding (employing the pseudonym into the project vision). The name of the conference is loosely derived from the name of the university that I provided in my study to mask the study site. Any school that wished to adopt or abridge the project would want to consider an acronym that aligns to the institution for branding purposes. The adoption of the acronym is an effort to demonstrate AXU's commitment to improve the welcoming environment for their African American students on campus.

The professional development event would allow all interested AXU officials to attend and participate in a set of unique freshman orientation activities aimed at increasing feelings of belongingness among first year African American students. The invitation will be extended to include administration, faculty, coaches, librarians, and operations staff. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the professional development event will be held virtually initially, and it could be conducted in person once it is safe for all involved. The project provides targeted professional development on increasing welcomeness and net promoter scores. This professional development would help ensure that all internal stakeholders are aligned and focused on providing a safe and welcoming

campus environment to AXU African American freshman students and their families.

Table 2 describes how this orientation could be executed and what resources would be needed to measure the learning objectives.

## **Table 2**

### *Assurance by Understanding Conference Agenda*

Learning Objectives- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation.

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Day 1- Increasing Awareness  
Length- 8 Hours

Topics

- Continental Breakfast
- Welcome Address
- Conference Objectives: Pework/Pre-Test Assessments Completed
- Session 1: African American Students at a Crossroad
- Break
- Session 2: By the Numbers- A Historical Review of African American Freshman Student Enrollment at AXU
- Lunch
- Session 3: Walk in my Shoes- What is it Like to be an African American Freshman Student at AXU?
- Break
- Day 1 Reflection: Awareness

The Assurance by Understanding Conference will begin with a Welcome Address by the AXU President. These remarks will highlight the importance of the event while also introducing the conference theme: Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation. The AXU Chief Officer of Diversity will serve as the host of the conference. The conference learning objectives are (1) To increase attendees' knowledge of the perception AXU African American freshman students have towards the school, (2) To accept responsibility for helping to improve the university's culture for AXU African American freshman students, and (3) To establish and encourage a positive campus environment for AXU African American freshman students. A Pre-Test Assessment will be given to evaluate the attendee's awareness on the subject. Session 1 which will focus on "African American Students at a Crossroads", will provide an historical account on the journey African American's have had in higher education. Session 2 will examine African American freshman enrollment trends at AXU for the last 25 years. This will show the rise and decline of African American student enrollment numbers and how they compare to other minority groups on campus. Finally, Session 3 will provide video testimonials from current AXU African American freshman students discussing the challenges they have faced during their first year at the institution. The testimonials will protect the identity of the participating students by using a video privacy shield.

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Day 2- Accountability  
Length- 8 Hours

Topics

- Breakfast
- Day 1 Recap Trivia Game
- Break Out Session: Group 1- AXU African American Student Association
- Break Out Session: Group 2- AXU Student Government Association

- Break Out Session: Group 3- AXU Police Department
- Break Out Session: Group 4- AXU National Alumni Association
- Break Out Session: Group 5- Local Non-Profit Company
- Break Out Session: Group 6- National Black Student Union
- Lunch
- Group Presentation
- Break
- Day 2 Reflection: Accountability

Day 2 of the conference will begin with an interactive trivia game that will focus on the material that was presented during Day 1. This is being done to help attendees retain the information and explicitly acknowledge the learning goals as a community. The premise for this day is Accountability. Attendees will be randomly placed into one of six groups for morning Break Out Sessions. Each group will be moderated by a member of the AXU Executive Leadership Team and will feature members from AXU student organizations, AXU Alumni Association, AXU auxiliary department, a local non-profit, and a national African American focused organization. Each group will collaborate to develop an event or program that is geared towards improving the campus climate for African American freshman students. The requirement that each group will follow is that the created deliverable must be scalable and ready to be implemented within three months after the conclusion of the conference. Each group will make a presentation using a SWOT analysis highlighting the event or program's internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external opportunities and threats. A repository of documents will be provided to support the articulation, development, and implementation of these events and programs will be available to all participants after the conference for ongoing collaboration.

Day 3-Affirmation  
Length- 5 Hours

Topics

- Continental Breakfast
- Day 2 Recap
- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation. Marketing Campaign
- Closing Remarks: Posttest Assessment Activity
- Brown Bag Lunch

The final day of the conference begins with a recap of the events and programs that were presented on Day 2. A Posttest Assessment will be given to evaluate the attendee's awareness on the subject. The Marketing Department will share the comprehensive details of their Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation. Campaign. The target audiences for this campaign includes both current and further freshman students. The Marketing Department will also explain the advertising budget that will be spent on the campaign as well as the Google Analytic information that will be spent on the campaign as well as the Google Analytic information that will be used to track website usage. Representatives from AXU's Admissions and Enrollment Departments will discuss how this campaign will be used during Recruiting Events. The AXU President will offer closing remarks to end the 3-day conference.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The project deliverable will be evaluated via feedback from the conference attendees and the use of a Day 1 Pretest, Day 3 Posttest focused on self-efficacy around supporting diverse learners (Tables 3 and 4). Evaluative feedback will be collected by a three-question anonymous survey, created using SurveyMonkey, that will be provided at

the end of the 3-day conference. Attendees will receive the survey via email sent to the email address that was used when they registered for the event. The survey will ask participants to evaluate the overall utility and applicability of the conference with the selections being *Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor*. The next question will ask attendees how relevant was the information that was presented to their current role at AXU. The choices for this question will be *Extremely Relevant, Relevant, Somewhat Relevant* or *Not Relevant to My Work*. An open text box will be available for the respondents to provide suggestions or comments on the conference. All participants will be encouraged to submit resources to be shared with the community in the repository.

The collected data will be shared at a debriefing meeting with the AXU President, Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Chief Officer of Diversity, Marketing Manager, and Admissions Manager. This meeting will review the overall effectiveness of this conference to determine the next steps AXU will use going forward to engage with their African American freshman students. The goal of this project is to increase the awareness of African American freshman perspectives of campus climate at AXU among the administration, staff, and faculty of the institution. Increased awareness could lead to holding the staff and faculty individually accountable to help mitigate the concerns expressed by this student population who agreed to participate in my study. The efforts discussed during this annual conference could help to improve African American freshman students' perceptions of campus climate at AXU as they begin to be encouraged that their collective voices are being heard, thus, fostering a more welcomed culture at this PWI.

**Table 3***Assurance by Understanding Conference Day 1 Pretest*

<b>Assurance By Understanding Conference</b> Conference Theme- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation Day 1 Pretest This questionnaire examines perspectives about issues important to racial and ethnic diversity at AXU. Your honest responses are very important in addressing these issues on the campus. Thank you for your participation. Instructions: Please read each item carefully. Circle your response. Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements: Strongly Disagree: 1 Disagree: 2 Neutral: 3 Agree: 4 Strongly Agree: 5 Not Applicable: NA	
1. Both my professional and personal experiences have led me to become more understanding of student racial/ethnic differences at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
2. Getting to know students with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from my own has been easy at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
3. In my role at AXU, I feel pressured to understand racial/ethnic differences.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
4. In my role, I strive to create a culture where students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds can be safe at AXU	1 2 3 4 5 NA
5. I believe that the AXU faculty uses examples relevant to students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds in their lectures	1 2 3 4 5 NA
6. I am comfortable when interacting with students of different	1 2 3 4 5 NA

racial/ethnic backgrounds.	
7. AXU has provided me with the tools and resources I need to be successful in working with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
8. AXU has done a good job providing programs and activities that promote student multicultural understanding.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
9. Student diversity is one of the reasons why I choose to work at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
10. AXU provides a welcoming campus culture for students of different/racial ethnic.	1 2 3 4 5 NA

**Table 4***Assurance by Understanding Conference Day 3 Posttest*

<p><b>Assurance By Understanding Conference</b></p> <p>Conference Theme- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation</p> <p>Day 3 Posttest</p> <p>This questionnaire examines perspectives about issues important to racial and ethnic diversity at AXU. Your honest responses are very important in addressing these issues on the campus. Thank you for your participation.</p> <p>Instructions: Please read each item carefully. Circle your response.</p> <p>Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:</p> <p>Strongly Disagree: 1</p> <p>Disagree: 2</p> <p>Neutral: 3</p> <p>Agree: 4</p> <p>Strongly Agree: 5</p> <p>Not Applicable: NA</p>	
1. After attending this 3-day conference, I have gained more	1 2 3 4 5 NA

understanding of student ethnic differences at AXU.	
2. Getting to know students with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from my own will now be easy at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
3. In my role at AXU, I feel pressured to understand racial/ethnic differences.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
4. I will strive to create a culture where students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds can be safe at AXU	1 2 3 4 5 NA
5. I believe that the AXU faculty uses examples relevant to students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds in their lectures	1 2 3 4 5 NA
6. I am comfortable when interacting with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
7. This conference has provided me with the tools and resources I need to be successful in working with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
8. AXU has done a good job providing programs and activities that promote student multicultural understanding.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
9. Student diversity is one of the reasons why I choose to work at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
10. AXU provides a welcoming campus culture for students of different/racial ethnic.	1 2 3 4 5 NA

### **Project Implications**

For five years, AXU has seen a decline in their African American freshman student enrollment numbers. Based on participant interviews, students shared specific locations on the AXU campus where they did not feel either physically or psychologically safe. These students also shared their perceptions of the campus climate at the institution. Using this information as the catalyst for change, implementation of the



project deliverable could provide AXU officials with new methods of connecting with both current and future African American freshman students.

The project deliverable takes on the responsibility of educating AXU faculty and staff about the safety and inclusion concerns that African American freshman students have at the institution. This professional development event will increase awareness for AXU employees by helping them to become knowledgeable about these students issues so that they can better relate to them in their professional roles. Understanding the concerns of African American freshman students could lead to the development and implementation of additional welcoming programs which will further support this minority student population.

The project deliverable could also have a larger impact in how AXU markets and recruits to African American students. Based on the learning objectives of the project deliverable, the institution would now operate with a greater level of accountability in making sure that the marketing material that is sent to potential African American students convey a welcoming and inviting environment with the intent that this will help to encourage these students to enroll at AXU, thus helping to solve the current enrollment problem.

#### **Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions**

The project deliverable provides AXU leadership with guidance for positive change at the institution that could improve the local problem by educating administration, faculty, coaches, librarians, and operations staff on the best way to connect with African American freshman students. The project deliverable identifies the importance for student facing groups at the university to effectively interact with this minority student population. To address both the safety and welcoming concerns that were identified in the study, the institution must be deliberate in their efforts.

#### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of the project deliverable is in its comprehensive approach to educate the conference attendees. The project deliverable can be immediately implemented, and it addresses the needs of current and future AXU African American freshman students to provide them with a safe and welcoming campus environment. Another component of the project deliverable is demonstrating a clear commitment in increasing welcomeness with the inclusion of top university officials talking about the importance for all students to feel like they belong on campus. Having the AXU president provide opening remarks and the AXU chief diversity officer serve as the event host would help to demonstrate the seriousness of the subject matter. Their participation can also help to create buy in for those employees who may be skeptical of the conference's objectives. Newer employees will be able to begin their tenure at the university with a clear understanding of the direction the institution is taking with regards to student experiences for African American freshman students. Leadership as learners, modeling the ability to adapt to this

new initiative, could inspire engagement from all stakeholders including both new and existing employees.

The project deliverable also includes strategic partnerships with both on and off campus entities. This approach allows the university to foster an atmosphere of accountability that will be important in rebuilding trust among current African American freshman students. These relationships will be featured prominently in the marketing campaign which will help to gain trust for future students.

A limitation of the project deliverable is the timeframe for implementing Day 2's events/projects. AXU's attempt to host six tailored events within 3 months of the end of the conference could create an oversaturation of activities, thus; making it difficult to find room on AXU's calendar of events. In addition, trying to schedule so many events at one time could create conflicting priorities internally that may cause the focus to shift from developing a quality, meaningful function to putting out a rushed, thoughtless project for the sake of meeting the three-month deadline. In this case, African American freshman students, who are the targeted audience for these activities, may not get the best efforts from AXU, which could create further division and animosity.

Another limitation of the project deliverable is the budget that will be allocated for the marketing campaign. If there is not adequate funding for the duration of the campaign, this could affect the goal of attracting new African American freshman students. This could negatively influence the new student growth AXU is looking to obtain from this population.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

An alternative approach to address the problem of this study would be the implementation of an annual campus climate survey given exclusively to AXU's African American freshman students. This proactive step could allow AXU officials to better understand the perceptions these students have regarding the campus climate at the institution. AXU officials would be able to take the feedback that would be given by the participants and strategically begin to introduce new initiatives that are aimed at improving the campus climate for these students. AXU's efforts could then be evaluated on a yearly basis to determine the overall impact of the tactics that have been implemented. An annual campus climate survey will give AXU valuable insight so they can connect with these students.

Another alternative approach would be for the university to develop a policy white paper which would proactively identify the problem. By creating the policy white paper, AXU would be able to define and advocate the institution's position as the best method to solve the problem. This approach would help to establish a culture of transparency for the institution that will allow all stakeholders to see the seriousness of the issue and how the school intends to solve the problem.

### **Alternative Definition of the Problem**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, impacted many higher education institutions in the United States including AXU. The uncertainty regarding the transmission of the coronavirus among students, faculty, and staff forced AXU to suspend all in person student instruction and transition to online, virtual learning. At the

onset of this project study, AXU was experiencing a decline in African American freshman student enrollment. The pandemic ushered in a new set of enrollment concerns for both the institution and the students which added to the existing problem.

The pandemic caused AXU students to reconsider their freshman year experience, as some student may not have been interested in making the transition to online classes as that was not their original intent for learning. This change forced some students to either withdraw from the institution, request a leave of absence, or defer their start date. For those individuals who decided to take online courses, the freshman year student experience was completely different than those who began at AXU at the onset of this project study.

The AXU freshman student who enrolled at the school during the pandemic had to deal with new challenges such as conducting all school business virtually. These students were not able to experience campus life which as some the study participants indicated, caused anxiety and a sense of isolation. Campus life for these students now had to be navigated from the comforts of their home. This created a unique dynamic for AXU officials as they had to make sure that these freshmen were actively engaged. COVID-19 also played an important role in this study as all participants interviews had to be done virtually.

### **Alternative Solution to the Local Problem**

An alternative solution to the local problem could see AXU proactively acknowledge their institutional limitations with trying to connect with potential African American freshman students. Based on this admission, AXU would then seek to partner

with a local HBCU to create an accelerated joint hybrid program for African American freshman students for certain STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) related programs. Freshman students who enroll in this special opportunity would be able to take courses at both institutions and will be eligible to complete their undergraduate degree within 3 years. A key benefit of this hybrid program is that the students will earn their undergraduate degree from AXU while also earning either a program specific certificate or certification credential from the partnering HBCU.

This accelerated program would provide African American freshman students with a unique opportunity that will allow them to simultaneously attend a PWI and a HBCU. These students will be able to use the vast resources that are available at AXU while also being able to feel safe and welcomed at the HBCU. This experience will give these students the best of both worlds. This would not be possible if these students enrolled solely in a PWI or a HBCU.

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

Throughout this doctoral journey, I learned a considerable amount regarding the importance of becoming a scholar practitioner. In doing research on my topic, there was a considerable amount of information from a variety of sources regarding African American freshman students, higher education enrollment, and campus culture. Initially, I found the amount of material to be overwhelming; however, I was able to develop a system that allowed me to thoroughly review and analyze each article to uncover the pertinent material for my study. The more I delved in the subject matter, new perspectives on my topic began to emerge. This part of the process was both rewarding

and exhilarating. I was able to use my prior experience with Excel to help me keep my research organized which became essential in allowing me to clearly present my findings. I was able to gain a new level of appreciation for the processes that researchers go through.

As a higher education professional with a significant amount of experience, I have had the ability to work on projects that required solutions to current issues. Therefore, I knew that the learning objectives of the project deliverable would need to address the problem in the study. Identifying the step-by-step details of the project deliverable while considering the needs of both the internal and external stakeholders was new and enlightening.

Completing this doctoral process and the project deliverable has been extremely rewarding. The research that I have done could continue to support the needs of African American freshman students at PWIs to ensure that they feel both welcomed and safe at these institutions. This process has allowed me to grow as a higher education professional as I have been able to take the concepts that I have learned and apply them to my current role at a higher education institution. I will be able to transfer the knowledge that I gained as I continue in my professional career.

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

The positive social change of this doctoral study is aligned to the fact that African American freshman students at PWI could have their voices heard so that they can have a better 1st year student experience at these types of institutions. The research that I have done has put higher education administrators, faculty, and staff in a position to be a part

of the solution and no longer part of the problem. This can be very liberating and can possibly reenergize the entire campus. This study has the possibility of making minority students feel like they belong on a PWI campus.

Administration and staff at a PWI need to actively engage in the understanding process for them to increase their business acumen and grow as higher education professionals. To fully support the educational growth for their administration and staff, it may be necessary for the institution to provide these employees with required readings and to create an online repository of resources for them to be able to access as a follow up.

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

The potential influence for positive social change is significant at both the student and institutional level. The project deliverable could provide an opportunity for African American freshman students to feel more welcome at PWIs as the institution makes a concerted effort to address their welcoming and safety concerns on campus. The project deliverable solidifies that these minority students are important members of the PWI campus community.

The project deliverable challenges AXU to own their institutional shortcomings head on by having their administrators, faculty, and staff do some self-reflecting so they can make some sustainable changes to the campus conditions that African American freshman students are currently experiencing. This could enhance belongingness for these students at the institution and ensure that orientation experiences are fully aligned with the university's mission statement for a welcoming and inclusive environment.



Future research could look at the entire undergraduate life cycle of African American students to determine if PWIs have made continual improvements regarding campus climate and safety. Looking at the full undergraduate timeframe could help researchers determine how these students attrite at PWIs and if campus climate and welcomeness play a factor in their decision to stay enrolled and graduate at the institution.

### **Conclusion**

Having a safe and welcoming campus environment for African American freshman students is essential for continued and sustained enrollment growth. While this is critical for all types of campus environments, it is necessary at PWIs where these minority students have initially had challenges finding their way. There is a good amount of literature and research that has been provided to validate this critical point to enroll African American freshman students as it could help to contribute to positive social change.

The doctoral study provided an important opportunity to gather data from African American freshman students at a PWI. The data collected provided insights into their perceptions as minority students at these institutions. Detailed interviews provided a complete overview of their experiences which resulted in four themes emerging from the data including cultural isolation, educational resilience, relationships, and reputation. I developed the project deliverable in alignment with these themes. The result was the creation of a 3-day professional orientation that featured a pretest assessment, posttest

assessments and a new marketing enrollment campaign geared towards highlighting a welcoming campus for future students.

With the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, new student enrollment growth at colleges and universities could continue to challenge academic leaders. With fewer students enrolling in school during this time, this study is more important than ever as the findings could inform campus climate improvement efforts. Colleges and universities looking to reinvent and enhance their institutional reputation could enhance and expand orientation to ensure that their campuses remain attractive to all potential students. As the competitive landscape for student enrollments increases, college and university decision makers will need to ensure their campuses are safe and welcoming to all students. Now is the time for institutions of higher education to be first partakers of their mission statements and educate themselves on the needs of their African American students. It is imperative that institutions see the value in these students beyond fulfilling a diversity check off box. Now is the time for African American students at PWIs to be fully embraced as members of the higher education family.

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## Appendix A: The Project

My study revealed that African American 1st year students at AXU, a PWI located in a northeastern state, have described their experiences on campus. The majority described an unsafe and unwelcoming campus environment outside of the minority peer community the African American students on campus have established. In their descriptions of navigating the campus, the following themes emerged: (a) institutional reputation, (b) cultural isolation, (c) educational resilience, and (d) otherness. While some of the themes that were most prevalent were also identified in the Literature Review, many of the concepts involved potential avenues for improving student perceptions of safety and welcomeness on campus.

The insights provide an opportunity to scaffold into the orientation and onboarding process more explicit and direct involvement by school officials into the academic environment could have long term benefits for students of color who choose to learn in predominantly White settings. The culminating product is a set of interactive activities for a 3-day professional development conference titled Assurance by Understanding (employing the pseudonym into the project vision). The name of the conference is loosely derived from the name of the university that I provided in my study to mask the study site. Any school that wished to adopt or abridge the project would want to consider an acronym that aligns to the institution for branding purposes. The adoption of the acronym is an effort to demonstrate AXU's commitment to improve the welcoming environment for their African American students on campus.

The professional development event would allow all interested AXU officials to attend and participate in a set of unique freshman orientation activities aimed at increasing feelings of belongingness among first year African American students. The invitation will be extended to include administration, faculty, coaches, librarians, and operations staff. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the professional development event will be held virtually initially, and it could be conducted in person once it is safe for all involved. The project provides targeted professional development on increasing welcomeness and net promoter scores. This professional development would help ensure that all internal stakeholders are aligned and focused on providing a safe and welcoming campus environment to AXU African American freshman students and their families. Table 2 describes how this orientation could be executed and what resources would be needed to measure the learning objectives.

## **Table 2**

### *Assurance by Understanding Conference Agenda*

Learning Objectives- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation.

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Day 1- Increasing Awareness  
Length- 8 Hours

Topics

- Continental Breakfast
- Welcome Address
- Conference Objectives: Pework/Pre-Test Assessments Completed
- Session 1: African American Students at a Crossroad
- Break
- Session 2: By the Numbers- A Historical Review of African American Freshman Student Enrollment at AXU
- Lunch
- Session 3: Walk in my Shoes- What is it Like to be an African American Freshman Student at AXU?
- Break
- Day 1 Reflection: Awareness

The Assurance by Understanding Conference will begin with a Welcome Address by the AXU President.

These remarks will highlight the importance of the event while also introducing the conference theme: Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation. The AXU Chief Officer of Diversity will serve as the host of the conference. The conference learning objectives are (1) To increase attendees' knowledge of the perception AXU African American freshman students have towards the school, (2) To accept responsibility for helping to improve the university's culture for AXU African American freshman students, and (3) To establish and encourage a positive campus environment for AXU African American freshman students. A Pre-Test Assessment will be given to evaluate the attendee's awareness on the subject. Session 1 which will focus on "African American Students at a Crossroads", will provide an historical account on the journey African American's have had in higher education. Session 2 will examine African American freshman enrollment trends at AXU for the last 25 years. This will show the rise and decline of African American student enrollment numbers and how they compare to other minority groups on campus. Finally, Session 3 will provide video testimonials from current AXU African American freshman students discussing the challenges they have faced during their first year at the institution. The testimonials will protect the identity of the participating students by using a video privacy shield.

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Day 2- Accountability  
Length- 8 Hours

Topics

- Breakfast
- Day 1 Recap Trivia Game
- Break Out Session: Group 1- AXU African American Student Association
- Break Out Session: Group 2- AXU Student Government Association
- Break Out Session: Group 3- AXU Police Department
- Break Out Session: Group 4- AXU National Alumni Association
- Break Out Session: Group 5- Local Non-Profit Company
- Break Out Session: Group 6- National Black Student Union
- Lunch
- Group Presentation
- Break
- Day 2 Reflection: Accountability

Day 2 of the conference will begin with an interactive trivia game that will focus on the material that was presented during Day 1. This is being done to help attendees retain the information and explicitly acknowledge the learning goals as a community. The premise for this day is Accountability. Attendees will be randomly placed into one of six groups for morning Break Out Sessions. Each group will be moderated by a member of the AXU Executive Leadership Team and will feature members from AXU student organizations, AXU Alumni Association, AXU auxiliary department, a local non-profit, and a national African American focused organization. Each group will collaborate to develop an event or program that is geared towards improving the campus climate for African American freshman students. The requirement that each group will follow is that the created deliverable must be scalable and ready to be implemented within three months after the conclusion of the conference. Each group will make a presentation using a SWOT analysis highlighting the event or program's internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external opportunities and threats. A repository of documents will be provided to support the articulation, development, and implementation of these events and programs will be available to all participants after the conference for ongoing collaboration.

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Day 3-Affirmation  
Length- 5 Hours

Topics

- Continental Breakfast
- Day 2 Recap
- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation. Marketing Campaign
- Closing Remarks: Posttest Assessment Activity

- Brown Bag Lunch

The final day of the conference begins with a recap of the events and programs that were presented on Day 2. A Posttest Assessment will be given to evaluate the attendee's awareness on the subject. The Marketing Department will share the comprehensive details of their Awareness, Accountability, Affirmation, Campaign. The target audiences for this campaign includes both current and further freshman students. The Marketing Department will also explain the advertising budget that will be spent on the campaign as well as the Google Analytic information that will be spent on the campaign as well as the Google Analytic information that will be used to track website usage. Representatives from AXU's Admissions and Enrollment Departments will discuss how this campaign will be used during Recruiting Events. The AXU President will offer closing remarks to end the 3-day conference.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The project deliverable will be evaluated via feedback from the conference attendees and the use of a Day 1 Pretest, Day 3 Posttest focused on self-efficacy around supporting diverse learners (Tables 3 and 4). Evaluative feedback will be collected by a 3-question anonymous survey, created using SurveyMonkey, that will be provided at the end of the 3-day conference. Attendees will receive the survey via email sent to the email address that was used when they registered for the event. The survey will ask participants to evaluate the overall utility and applicability of the conference with the selections being *Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor*. The next question will ask attendees how relevant was the information that was presented to their current role at AXU. The choices for this question will be *Extremely Relevant, Relevant, Somewhat Relevant* or *Not Relevant to My Work*. An open text box will be available for the respondents to provide suggestions or comments on the conference. All participants will be encouraged to submit resources to be shared with the community in the repository.

The collected data will be shared at a debriefing meeting with the AXU President, Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Chief Officer of Diversity, Marketing Manager, and Admissions Manager. This meeting will review the overall effectiveness of this conference to determine the next steps AXU will use going forward to engage with their



African American first-year students. The goal of this project is to increase the awareness of African American first-year perspectives of campus climate at AXU among the administration, staff, and faculty of the institution. Increased awareness could lead to holding the staff and faculty individually accountable to help mitigate the concerns expressed by this student population who agreed to participate in my study. The efforts discussed during this annual conference could help to improve African American first-year students' perceptions of campus climate at AXU as they begin to be encouraged that their collective voices are being heard, thus, fostering a more welcomed culture at this PWI.

### **Table 3**

#### *Assurance by Understanding Conference Day 1 Pretest*

<b>Assurance By Understanding Conference</b>
Conference Theme- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation
Day 1 Pretest
This questionnaire examines perspectives about issues important to racial and ethnic diversity at AXU. Your honest responses are very important in addressing these issues on the campus. Thank you for your participation.
Instructions: Please read each item carefully. Circle your response.
Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:
Strongly Disagree: 1
Disagree: 2
Neutral: 3
Agree: 4
Strongly Agree: 5
Not Applicable: NA

1. Both my professional and personal experiences have led me to become more understanding of student racial/ethnic differences at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
2. Getting to know students with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from my own has been easy at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
3. In my role at AXU, I feel pressured to understand racial/ethnic differences.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
4. In my role, I strive to create a culture where students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds can be safe at AXU	1 2 3 4 5 NA
5. I believe that the AXU faculty uses examples relevant to students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds in their lectures	1 2 3 4 5 NA
6. I am comfortable when interacting with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
7. AXU has provided me with the tools and resources I need to be successful in working with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
8. AXU has done a good job providing programs and activities that promote student multicultural understanding.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
9. Student diversity is one of the reasons why I choose to work at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
10. AXU provides a welcoming campus culture for students of different/racial ethnic.	1 2 3 4 5 NA

**Table 4***Assurance by Understanding Conference Day 3 Posttest*

<p><b>Assurance By Understanding Conference</b></p> <p>Conference Theme- Awareness. Accountability. Affirmation</p> <p>Day 3 Posttest</p>
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<p>This questionnaire examines perspectives about issues important to racial and ethnic diversity at AXU. Your honest responses are very important in addressing these issues on the campus. Thank you for your participation.</p> <p>Instructions: Please read each item carefully. Circle your response.</p> <p>Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:</p> <p>Strongly Disagree: 1</p> <p>Disagree: 2</p> <p>Neutral: 3</p> <p>Agree: 4</p> <p>Strongly Agree: 5</p> <p>Not Applicable: NA</p>	
1. After attending this 3-day conference, I have gained more understanding of student ethnic differences at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
2. Getting to know students with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from my own will now be easy at AXU.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
3. In my role at AXU, I feel pressured to understand racial/ethnic differences.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
4. I will strive to create a culture where students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds can be safe at AXU	1 2 3 4 5 NA
5. I believe that the AXU faculty uses examples relevant to students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds in their lectures	1 2 3 4 5 NA
6. I am comfortable when interacting with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
7. This conference has provided me with the tools and resources I need to be successful in working with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
8. AXU has done a good job providing programs and activities that promote student multicultural understanding.	1 2 3 4 5 NA
9. Student diversity is one of the reasons why I choose to work at	1 2 3 4 5 NA

AXU.	
10. AXU provides a welcoming campus culture for students of different/racial ethnic.	1 2 3 4 5 NA

## Appendix B: Study Invitation Email

Project Title: Perceptions of Campus Climate as a Selection Criteria for African American Freshman Enrollment at a Predominately White Institution

Researcher: Kevin Bradley

Subject: You are Invited to Participate in a Doctoral Research Study

E-mail: My name is Kevin Bradley, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Declining enrollment of African American freshman students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) may indicate an unwelcoming campus culture. The problem for my study is that African American freshman enrollment has decreased in the last five years at Alpha Xavier University. This reduction in enrollment is important for the school's leadership as they strive to improve the institution's relationship with African American students. The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how the campus climate may influence the enrollment decision making process for African American freshman. My study will examine how African American freshman perceptions of campus climate influence their decision to enroll at Alpha Xavier University and how those same students describe their experiences at the institution to others. The results of this study could be used to create new interpersonal, academic, and social connectedness initiatives for African American freshmen students in similar settings.

I am seeking to interview African American freshman students who attend Alpha Xavier University about their thoughts and experiences about being a minority student at the school during a recorded interview lasting 1 hour. As a thank you for taking part in this research, participants will receive a \$10 gift card.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval number for this study is 07-27-21-0658449 and it expires on July 26, 2022. If you have any ethical concerns about the study or questions about your rights as a participant, please contact Dr. Leilani Gjellstad, Director, Office of Research Ethics and Compliance at [REDACTED].

If you are interested in being part of this study or would like more information, please contact me, Kevin Bradley, by phone [REDACTED], or e-mail-[REDACTED]. Thank you for your interest in this research.

Sincerely,

Kevin Bradley

## Appendix C: Social Media Invitation Letter

**“African American Freshman Student Experience at Predominantly White Institution” Research Study**

My name is Kevin Bradley, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Declining enrollment of African American freshman students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) may indicate an unwelcoming campus culture. The problem for my study is that African American freshman enrollment has decreased in the last five years at Alpha Xavier University. This reduction in enrollment is important for the school’s leadership as they strive to improve the institution’s relationship with African American students. The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how the campus climate may influence the enrollment decision making process for African American freshman. My study will examine how African American freshman perceptions of campus climate influence their decision to enroll at Alpha Xavier University and how those same students describe their experiences at the institution to others. The results of this study could be used to create new interpersonal, academic, and social connectedness initiatives for African American freshmen students in similar settings.

I am seeking to interview African American freshman students who attend Alpha Xavier University about their thoughts and experiences about being a minority student at the school during a recorded interview lasting 1 hour. As a thank you for taking part in this research, participants will receive a \$10 gift card.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval number for this study is 07-27-21-0658449 and it expires on July 26, 2022. If you have any ethical concerns about the study or questions about your rights as a participant, please contact Dr. Leilani Gjellstad, Director, Office of Research Ethics and Compliance at [REDACTED].

If you are interested in being part of this study or would like more information, please contact me, Kevin Bradley, by phone [REDACTED], or e-mail-[REDACTED].

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Sincerely,

Kevin Bradley

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Project Title: Perceptions of Campus Climate as a Selection Criteria for African American Freshman Enrollment at a Predominately White Institution

Researcher: Kevin Bradley

Start each recording: Project Title, Researcher, Date, Time, and Location:

1. "Thank you for taking the time to participate in my project study. I truly appreciate your insight into this subject that is very important to me."
2. "As part of my fulfillment of the requirements for my doctoral degree, I am completing this qualitative study to inform readers about the perception African American freshman students have regarding campus climate at a Predominately White Institution. I am focusing on the perceptions and experiences of African American freshman students who are experiencing their first academic year at Alpha Xavier University by learning more about what types of classroom experiences, student services, and campus activities did they anticipate when deciding to enroll."
3. "Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential if you disclose that information during the interview. My interview questions are open-ended and are meant only to guide the process."
4. "You will be eligible for a \$10 gift card for providing answers for the interview questions."

5. “The questions that you will be asked refer to your student experiences at Alpha Xavier University. This is being done as an ethical safeguard to prevent the identification of individuals who contribute to the study.”

6. I would like to provide you with the definitions for belongingness and welcomeness as it pertains to my study. Belongingness refers to how students perceive themselves fitting in at a college or university as it pertains, but not limited to, their degree program, student life experiences, university organizations and activities (Landeem et al., 2017).

Welcomeness refers to the atmosphere inside and outside of the classroom that let students know if the university faculty want to engage with them or not (Card & Wood, 2019).”

7. “Do you have any questions before we begin?”

8. Demographic questions: (NOTE: These questions will provide demographic details that will be shared in the results and will be shared in a manner that will not render participants identifiable).

- Question #1: What is your current age?
- Question #2: What gender do you identify as?

9. Interview questions: (NOTE: Questions 3-11 will help to answer Research Question #1. Questions 12 & 13 will help to answer Research Question #2).

- Question #3: Looking back to when you were picking out a school to attend, what were the factors that influenced your decision to enroll at Alpha Xavier University?



- Question #4: How much did you know about the academic and social campus climate at Alpha Xavier University prior to enrolling in the institution? How did you obtain this information?
- Question #5: How did the academic and social climate influence your decision to enroll at Alpha Xavier University?
- Question #6: As an African American student at Alpha Xavier University, College Park, where do you feel the most-safe and the least-safe on campus? Were you aware of racially charged incidents that had occurred on campus? How did those events effect your decision to enroll at Alpha Xavier University?
- Question #7: Please describe a situation you have experienced that may have drawn attention to the fact that you are an African American student at Alpha Xavier University. It is okay to share a positive or negative experience, a recent experience or an experience that happened long ago.
- Question #8: What do you think of Alpha Xavier University's efforts to support African American freshman students once you arrived on campus?
- Question #9: How do you feel about the level of engagement Alpha Xavier University provides to African American freshman students?
- Question #10: Based on your experience, what types of support could be provided by the university to assist future African American students acclimate to Alpha Xavier University as a new student?
- Question #11: What do you think of your freshman year experience at Alpha Xavier University's campus? Is there anything that could have made it better?

- Question #12: How do you describe your freshman year experience at Alpha Xavier University to others?
- Question #13: Would you recommend other African American freshman students to enroll at Alpha Xavier University? Why or why not?
- Question #14: Do you have any other information that you would like to share?

10. “This concludes the interview. I would like to thank you once again for your participation. In the next week, you will receive a written transcription of this interview by e-mail for you to review for accuracy. In addition, you will also receive information on your \$10 gift card for participating in this study.”

11. “Please feel free to reach out to me by phone at [REDACTED] or by e-mail at [REDACTED] if you have any questions about your participation in this study. Have a great rest of your day!”