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# Racial Identity, Student Engagement, Student Satisfaction, and Persistence in African American Students Attending Predominately White Institutions

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# Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Antoinette Drakeford

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

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by

Antoinette Drakeford

M.A., Walden University, 2019

M.A., Norfolk State University, 2013

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Abstract

African American college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), such as Old Dominion University, face challenges including experiences with microaggressions and limited engagement opportunities, which may affect their persistence. The purpose of this study was to examine whether racial identity and microaggressions moderate the relationship between student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at a PWI. Cross's theory of nigrescence served as the theoretical framework for understanding African American racial identity development. A quantitative, non-experimental design was employed. Data were collected from 50 African American undergraduate students using standardized instruments measuring racial identity, microaggressions, engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. Analyses were conducted with JASP using a multivariate linear regression model. Results revealed statistically significant findings ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that racial identity positively moderates the relationship between racialized experiences and outcome expectations, particularly persistence. These findings suggest that the development of a strong racial identity may serve as a protective factor for African American students navigating racially challenging environments at PWIs. For African American students, fostering supportive environments, including mentorship programs, role model visibility, and community-building initiatives tailored to African American students. Such interventions may enhance engagement, satisfaction, and persistence for students of color at PWIs.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

According to a 2022 study, African American students graduate from college within four years at a rate of 24.34% in Virginia compared to 61.02% of Asians, followed by 41.21% Whites (US Census, 2023). That is a significant gap for African American graduates and indicates there could be barriers preventing the success of African American students. For African American students attending predominately white institutions (PWI), additional challenges will likely affect college persistence. For instance, at PWIs, the environment may not adjust to minority groups (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Chen & Hamilton, 2015; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Love, 2009; McClain & Perry, 2017; Mwangi et al., 2018). Even with the inclusions of specific spaces to foster racial/ethnic student's well-being there may still be a racially charged environment. For example, Harwood et al. (2012) conducted a study at a PWI examining residence halls on campus. They noted that one PWI attempted to integrate students to create a more diverse living environment and foster a sense of belonging, and inclusion, engagement. They found, however, that the dormitories that housed racial ethnic students were vandalized, and students experienced racial jokes and racial slurs (Harwood et al., 2012).

On the other hand, at Drake University, a PWI in Des Moines, Iowa, the Crew Scholars program was developed to improve African American students' experience through academic support, leadership development, and community building (Wallace, 2019). The program supported African American students and other students of color and emphasized the impact of culture on the student's experience at the university. Wallace

(2019) showed increased retention from the first year to the second in African American students.

Even though there have been successful programs supporting African American students, they still are not immune to negative interactions, including microaggressions from other students, faculty, and staff (Mwangi et al. 2018). Indeed, Lige et al. (2016) speculated that harm from microaggressions, including microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations, likely impact both racial identity and overall development, as well as racial ethnic students' persistence in college at predominantly white campuses.

Exclusion, a lack of diversity, miseducation about race and ethnicity, and a lack of support for students of color, especially African American students, have been shown to negatively impact the student experience (Chavous et al., 2018). Various researchers (Bennett et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2012; Lige et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2018) have examined how microaggression negatively impacted the experiences of African American college students. They found that African American students at PWIs were not supported, not engaged, and often excluded as they were among the minority of the student population.

Few studies have examined the relationship between racial identity, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. Chavous et al. (2018) theorized that racial identity among African American students is crucial to college adjustment and influences their identity impacting their college experiences. They suggested that racial identity may support adaptive responses to defend against microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations, thereby improving African American student enrollment persistence.

Lige et al. (2016) mentioned in their research that the more an African American student identified with African American culture, the greater the likelihood they would persist at a PWI in the face of racial aggression. Racial identity has also been shown to be a factor in the persistence of African American students as the more they align with their culture, the more they are confident in who they are, which increases their chances to thrive in the face of adversity (Gordon, 2018; James & Mokuria, 2017; Wallace, 2019). Researchers (Hoston et al., 2019; Pittaway, 2012; Tight, 2019) have found that African American student engagement and student satisfaction play a protective or positive role in persistence at PWIs. For African American students at PWIs, racial identity impacts students' engagement and satisfaction and determines if they want to remain at their current university (Griffith et al., 2017; Harper, 2012; Lige et al., 2016; Wallace, 2019). As related to this study, the independent variables are racial identity and microaggressions. The dependent variables are student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. The moderator variable is racial identification (i.e., assimilation, self-hatred, and Afro-centricity), as identified as three scales of the five from Cross's scales he identified as stages of racial identity.

To date, there has been a gap in the literature concerning the relationship between racial identity (defined by Cross's stages of racial identification), microaggressions, and their influence on student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. There is a need to understand the concern of African American students having negative experiences at PWIs due to microaggressions, among other negative experiences. The impact of microaggressions may result in the African

American student having a negative college experience or transferring to an HBCU. The positive social change as a result from the current study includes an increased sense of awareness concerning the African American student experience to create a safer space, have more resources at PWIs for African American students, and develop resources to foster their personal growth.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: background, problem statement, the purpose of the current study, the research question, the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study. The chapter ends with a summary.

### **Background**

To further explore this topic, Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022) conducted a study with African American students attending a PWI. Their findings indicated that the lack of representation among faculty and staff, limited campus activities tailored to African American students, and insufficient education about African American history significantly decreased engagement, satisfaction, and overall comfort for these students. These results highlight how structural and cultural gaps within PWIs may contribute to a less supportive environment for African American students, ultimately influencing their sense of belonging and persistence.

Strunk et al. (2018) noted that African American students at PWIs often experienced microaggressions throughout their matriculation, which helped shape their experiences. As with most students, they make sense of their environment and develop who they are through their experiences, positive or negative; however, without having

support being the minority, they may feel ostracized. The impact of microaggressions on African American students creates a hostile and unwelcoming environment which in some cases has led to campus protests and unrest among African American students on PWI campuses (Chavous et al., 2018). Microaggressions impact how African American students interpret their role on campus, which may lead to internalizing those negative stereotypes impacting their engagement and satisfaction with the university (Strunk et al., 2018). Prior studies (Love, 2009; McClain & Perry, 2017; Tight, 2019) indicated factors that contributed to African American students remaining at PWIs along with possible solutions to create more resources and support for African American students; however, they did not mention how a sense of racial identity plays a role.

Identifying students' stages of racial identification, particularly assimilation, self-hatred, and Afro-centricity, may provide insight into how African American students view themselves in the context of their educational environment. Douglass et al. (2015) found that developing a racial identity fosters stability across diverse situations and influences psychological adjustment throughout life. A healthy racial identity can help students navigate microaggressions, feel comfortable within the university setting, and remain engaged both academically and socially, thereby supporting their success.

Despite this, a gap exists in the research regarding whether African American students' level of racial identification is associated with their ability to cope with racism and discrimination at their institution. Lige et al. (2016) found that group identification among African Americans is linked to higher self-esteem, suggesting that a strong racial identity could serve as a protective factor in racially challenging environments. This

development may also influence whether African American students persist at a predominantly White institution (PWI) or transfer to a historically Black college or university (HBCU).

Current literature has not fully examined the relationship between racial identity, experiences of microaggressions, and their combined influence on student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how racial identity functions as a factor in student success and retention within predominantly White academic settings.

Racial identity is the process of self-exploration where the individual seeks out information about their racial group (i.e., belonging to the African American culture) and commits to understanding its meaning to them (Douglass et al., 2015). According to Cross's theory, African Americans can either assimilate into the mainstream culture, develop a sense of self-hatred, or create their own Afrocentric identity (Cross, 1991). With assimilation, the individual will adopt pro-American attitudes and not consider or notice how race could play a role in their life (Krueger et al., 2021). The African American student, according to Durkee et al. (2022), could also adopt the "acting white accusation," which instills that White cultural traits are superior and civilized as opposed to the minority culture, which is inferior and uncivilized (Durkee et al., 2022). The African American student will shy away from embracing their own culture for possible fear of not "fitting in" and adopt the mainstream culture as their own. On the other hand, African American students may develop a sense of self-hatred, which stems from the negative stereotypes created by other cultures. This self-hatred stems from the notion that

they may not want to identify with the African American culture and develop a sense of self-hatred (Cross, 1991).

One's racial identity creates a sense of self and impacts how the individual functions and identifies with others (Cross, 1991). Moragne-Patterson and Barnett (2017) noted that little is known about preventative measures to lessen the impact of microaggressions experienced by African American students at PWIs. However, Robertson and Mason (2008) speculated that having a solid racial identity could safeguard against the impact and influence of microaggressions on African American students. They hypothesized that if the individual has a strong sense of self, the African American student may know how to navigate their environment when confronted with microaggressions and may have the internal strength not to let the negativity impact their life. A sense of racial identification could increase persistence, student engagement, and satisfaction as the individual is more comfortable with who they are and can navigate their environment to create positive experiences and combat negative ones. Creating a welcoming environment, supporting African American students, and having resources they will need to be successful should increase the likelihood of engagement and satisfaction with the PWI, where they will want to complete their education at the university with a positive learning experience and to create a healthy sense of who they are.

The gap in the literature that was examined was the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, and their influence on student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. The current

study examined those exact variables and also addressed the need for safe places and resources for African American students who attend a PWI to foster their racial identity. By addressing the needs of African American students at PWIs concerning the importance of racial identification, the student will develop a sense of self and learn to adjust to their environment where they are the minority and how that shapes their experiences. They may develop the skills needed to navigate any possible microaggressions they may encounter.

### **Problem Statement**

James et al. (2016) suggested that African Americans attending PWIs may feel invisible and ignored by faculty, peers, and staff associated with feelings of exclusion and segregation. Others have hypothesized that a well-developed sense of self via racial identity as it relates to assimilation, self-hatred, and Afro-centricity could transform those negative comments and experiences into motivation or inspiration to succeed in the face of adversity (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019). There has been research on racial identity development among African American students attending PWIs (Dortch, 2020; Lige et al., 2016; Ritchey, 2014). However, the role racial identity plays with student engagement, student satisfaction, persistence, and coping with microaggressions has not been examined.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study examined as mentioned previously the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. The independent

variable was microaggressions. The dependent variables were student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. The moderator variable is racial identification (i.e. assimilation, self-hatred, and afro-centricity) as identified as three scales of the five from Cross's scales he identified as stages of racial identity. The moderator variable of racial identity was used to determine if three of Cross's stages moderate a relationship between the variables.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

Overall, it was hypothesized that, for African American students who attend PWIs, understanding how racial identification (i.e., assimilation, self-hatred, and afro-centricity) and microaggressions may play a role concerning their engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. The specific research question and the associated hypothesis related to the proposed research is listed below:

RQ: Does racial identification and microaggressions moderate a relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence from first-year to fourth-year students at PWIs?

H<sub>0</sub>: Racial identification and microaggressions does not moderate a relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs as identified by first-year to fourth-year students.

H<sub>a</sub>: Racial identity and microaggressions does moderate the level of student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs as identified by first-year to fourth-year students.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theoretical framework for the study was Cross's theory of nigrescence identity model. Each stage Cross describes illustrates how the individual either accepts their "*Blackness*" or rejects it (Cross, 1991). Depending on which stage the individual is in may relate to their ability to be comfortable with their "Blackness" and adapt to racial aggressions they may experience (Ritchey, 2014). The notion is that the higher the stage the African American student is in, may predict their ability to overcome adversity and continue maturing at the university as they are engaged and satisfied with their overall experience. If their level of self-acceptance is high enough, they will be better suited for the challenges they will inevitably face at the PWI and will persist rather than withdraw. By developing an understanding of who they are, they will know how to adjust and navigate negative experiences by their student counterparts and excel at the PWI.

Cross's theory of nigrescence was appropriate for the current study as it was mentioned in previous studies show a solid and positive racial identification, defining their purpose and values, leads to persistence and improves educational outcomes among African American students (Gordon, 2018; Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Student engagement and student satisfaction also can be explained through Cross's nigrescence identity model as a higher level of racial identification correlates with an increase in self-worth and confidence (Lige et al., 2016) as they know who they are and how to navigate stressful situations where they would feel uncomfortable otherwise. The current study investigated how developing a racial identity plays a role in creating a solid sense of self where

African Americans can combat the racial climate at a PWI and continue their education at the university, as shown through student engagement and student satisfaction.

### **Nature of the Study**

For the current study, a quantitative logistical regression model via a multivariate linear regression analysis was used to measure the impact of racial identification on student engagement and student satisfaction and if there is an influence from microaggressions with these variables. This research design is to uncover the relationship between predictor/independent variables and an outcome/dependent variable (Creswell, 2014). A logistical regression analysis showed if the stages of Cross's racial identity influence student engagement and student satisfaction, which in turn impacts persistence. To measure microaggressions, the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) was utilized to measure the level experienced. To measure student engagement, the Student Engagement Scale (SES) was used. To measure persistence, the Academic Persistence Scale (APS) was used and to measure the stage of racial identification the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) also known as the Cross Social Attitude Scale was used. The data obtained was from a PWI in the southeastern region of Virginia (Old Dominion University).

Initially a MANCOVA was going to be used to analyze the data collected. Upon further evaluation of the hypothesis and research purpose, it was clear that approach was not appropriate to capture the needed data. The goal of the current study was to examine the relationship between racial identity and microaggression and its influence on student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. It did not require a comparison of

means test to compare mean differences across groups. A MANCOVA as it is a comparison of means test, and the MANCOVA was not able to determine relationships between the variables.

To explore the relationship, a multivariate linear regression analysis was utilized to examine the data. A multivariate linear regression analysis showed the interactions between the variables and if there was a relationship between those variables. The regression analysis allotted for the exploration of how the independent variable and moderator variable (microaggressions and racial identity) predicted a relationship between the dependent variables (student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence). The regression model also addressed the potential directionality of relationships of the variables along with examining the moderating effects of racial identity with experiences of microaggressions. Using multivariate linear regression, the data analysis aligned more with the overarching purpose of the study and the research question.

### **Definitions**

*Microaggression:* Microaggressions are considered deniable acts of subtle racism that are frequently reinforced through stereotypes and based on the inequality of social norms also referred to as microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations (Harris et al., 2019; Williams, 2020a).

*Nigrescence:* A term coined by William Cross to explain the development of Black identity where the individual can make the distinction of having a Eurocentric or an Afrocentric identity (Cross, 1991).

*Persistence:* For the purpose of the current study, persistence pertains to the students' continued enrollment at a university continuing their first year to fourth year (Babineau, 2018).

*Predominately White Institutions:* As defined by Bonilla-Silva & Peoples (2022), predominately white institutions are higher educational institutions that come with a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and a set of traditions that surround and are built from White history relating to white supremacy as the expense of other cultures and races and started "integrating" other populations in the late 1960s and 1970s.

*Racial Climate:* Racial climate is defined as the environment at the university composed of stereotypical views, exclusion from campus activities, networks, and support, (Love, 2009).

*Racial Identity:* Racial identity is described as the beliefs and attitudes associated with being African American and belonging to the African American race individually, and collectively, along with the perception of other ethnic groups (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

*Racial Identity Development:* For the purpose of this study, racial identity development is described through William's Cross nigrance model where the individual matriculates through the five stages of racial identity development: the pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/commitment stage relating to how they view themselves as "black" (Cross, 1991).

*Student Engagement:* Student engagement is the level the individual is involved with the university to include having a sense of belonging, participation in university

activities, class engagement, feeling valued, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015a; Pittaway, 2012).

*Student Satisfaction:* Student satisfaction refers to the overall satisfaction of the services provided to the students (i.e., classes, extracurricular activities, social events, support, and access to resources) relating to their expectations of the university (O'Neil & Palmer, 2004).

### **Assumptions**

With the current study, I made several assumptions. I assumed that the African American student might leave the university because of a negative experience related to not feeling as though they belong due to their racial background, not feeling engaged with the university because of experienced microaggressions, and not feeling a sense of belonging. Other reasons for leaving the university could be a financial strain, family concerns, or other personal issues. To include the financial strain, family concerns, and other personal issues would lean towards qualitative data versus quantitative and more so based on experiences which can vary from person to person. The goal was to see a relationship between the abovementioned variables rather than uncover shared experiences.

I also assumed that the student willingly chose to attend a PWI versus an HBCU. Lastly, many African American students have not developed a racial identity before attending a PWI. If the student has not developed a racial identity, I measured their level of microaggression experiences. If they have experienced and identified some form of microaggressions, they in turn have some sense of racial identification.

The extent they relate to their racial identity will be captured through the CRIS as some racial identification will be shown. Those experiences showed some racial awareness where they become aware that they are part of the minority population and may have already experienced microaggressions without being aware. Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) mentioned that minority youth with positive outcomes have higher academic achievement than those without (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). They also mentioned in their article that racial identity during adolescence is an important milestone for those of color. During early adolescents, there is a pressure to conform to a particular identity to “fit in” rather than learn who they are and be themselves (Idrus et al., 2021). It was also mentioned in research (Ritchey, 2014) that everyone is supposed to fit in with the mainstream identity, which does not fit the mold if the individual is outside of the mainstream culture. From prior research, there was an indication that there was no support for the development of an African American identity before attending college (Mwangi et al., 2018).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The study was delimited to the undergraduate African American student population at Old Dominion University. According to College Factual (2023) the African American student population at Old Dominion University is 7,027, which makes up 28.9% of its student population (College Factual, 2023). The research question for the current study was to determine if the student’s level of racial identification and the presence of microaggressions impacts the student’s engagement and satisfaction with the university concerning persistence as identified by first-year to fourth-year students.

### **Limitations**

The potential limitations of the current study were that I would not be able to assess the personal experiences of African American students on the PWIs campus and how those experiences impact their racial identity development. As mentioned previously, racial identity development also includes social interactions with their environment, and I will not be able to pinpoint those experiences in the current study. I will not be able to assess how their experiences at the PWI impact their stage of racial identity development either. I also would not be able to determine if there is a difference between males and females concerning developing a racial identity.

### **Significance**

The current study found there are still concerns surrounding African American students attending PWIs to where they feel their learning environment is not welcoming or accepting of them. Also, to determine if racial identification plays a role in developing a sense of self to assist in overcoming those concerns. The goal is to ensure success for African American students while attending a PWI to overcome barriers. If they are aware of who they are, they may develop a better sense of self, or if not, they may struggle with developing a sense of self or assimilate and adopt the identity of the majority culture. Although there was the possibility that this would come about, uncovering the outliers who adopt the mainstream identity as their own is different from the intention of the current study.

The positive social change that the current study highlighted is the importance of developing a racial identity. The stages outlined in Cross's nigrescence theory may

explain how successfully developing a racial identity will improve the chances of the student re-enrolling at the PWI, even with experiencing microaggressions or encountering negative experiences. The activities and resources offered at a PWI often cater to the majority population and may not include activities or interests similar to those of the African American student body.

The first positive social change from the current study explained and highlighted the importance of racial identity among African American students and added to the current literature to support the need for more diversity, support, and resources along with “safe places” for the African American student (James & Mokuria, 2017; Love, 2009). Secondly, the positive social change that came about was because of how the study related to female and male African American students’ level of racial identity and how that serves as a predictor for them to persist at the university while combating microaggressions. If they are operating at a lower level of achievement, the institution could look at whether enough support is in place to support their racial identity development. Lastly, the study was needed to support racial identity development for African American students at PWIs. Microaggressions and exclusion from the majority culture appear to be an upward battle at PWIs even with developing support and programs, and no matter the setting, microaggressions may exist.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I provided an introduction and the background of the current study. I explained how racial identification and the impact of microaggressions play a role in student engagement and student satisfaction from African Americans attending a PWI. I

also provided the purpose of the current study, and the research question related to the purpose of the study, including the variables that will be measured. I discussed Cross's theory of nigrescence and how this theory relates to the current study. I defined the nature of the current study and the defined essential terms. I provided the study's assumptions, scope and delineations, and limitations. The significance of the current study included racial identity and how that may serve as a predictor for them to persist at said university and remain engaged at the university while combating microaggressions. The results of the study should inform PWI policies to include educating and supporting the African American student population as well as a majority student population to be more welcoming and create a healthier learning environment.

Chapter 2 contains the literature review, including the literature research strategy used to locate articles related to the current study. An in-depth discussion of the theoretical foundation and an exhaustive literature review of articles related to the critical variables of the study will also be discussed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The problem examined was how crucial developing a racial identity is and how a racial identity plays a role in student engagement, student satisfaction, persistence, and coping with microaggressions. This topic had not been examined in detail as there is a gap in research outlining the relationship between racial identity (defined by Cross's stage of racial identification), microaggressions, and its influence on student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. This quantitative study examined the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs.

Prior and current research has discussed issues that are within the African American student body at PWIs that show how they are often overlooked, ignored, or are not valued as students (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019). Then other studies have discussed that a developed sense of self (racial identity) assists African American's navigate negative experiences and turn them into motivational moments to be successful amongst adversity (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Dortch, 2020, Kumar et al., 2019; Lige et al., 2016; Ritchey, 2014). This chapter discussed prior and current research examining how racial identity among African American students is a crucial element of development. Racial identity development should be fostered over a course of the individual's life especially during their adolescence. Racial identity within African

American students may assist with coping and navigating negative experiences (microaggressions) that will occur while they are matriculating through a PWI.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy was between 2010-2023, as in light of the events in recent years, more research has been conducted on the African American student population. In collecting information for the literature review, I used the following search engines: SAGE Journals, ScholarWorks, ResearchGate, PsycEXTRA, EBSCO host, Semantic Scholar, and ProQuest. I used the following keywords: *African American students at PWIs, racial identity, racial identity development, racial climate, nigrescence, social support, African American's experiences at PWIs, persistence, student satisfaction, microaggressions at PWIs, retention of African American students at PWIs, and student engagement.*

Presentations that included similar research that were based on peer-reviewed articles, studies, and peer-reviewed articles were examined (Kumar et al., 2019; Wallace, 2019). Dissertation research was not included since it is not a peer-reviewed article. The main focus of the literature search strategy was to search keywords related to factors that have been investigated regarding African American students' racial identification, the experiences of African American students who have attended a PWI, and the difficulties they have had related to race or developing a racial identity.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation of the study was William Cross's theory of nigrescence, which was developed in 1971 which he later published in his book, *Shades*

*of Black*, in depth in 1991. Cross (1991) stated that Black identity is fluid, and African Americans develop identity by how they live and interpret their sense of self in relation to their environment and interactions with their environment. The term nigrescence derives from the French word, which translates to “the process of becoming black,” which Cross used to describe the Black Movement in the late 1960s (Cross, 1991, p. 147). Cross sought to shift the focus of his theory from a Eurocentric view of African Americans toward a positive view of understanding one’s “Blackness” through the African American’s own perception (as cited in Bimper et al., 2013, p. 11). Thus, in Cross’ theory, nigrescence refers to the African American’s transition toward developing a sense of what it means to be an African American within the context of society. Cross (1991) theorized that nigrescence occurs through racial identification in five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/commitment. Cross theorized African Americans would progress through each stage and reach self-actualization. Cross also mentioned that there is a conflict or an obstacle they face at each stage to eventually overcome and reach that stage of self-actualization (Cross, 1991). Cross also noted that the individual may become stuck in a particular stage and not progress as they will remain at that stage throughout life unless they resolve their internal/external conflict.

Since Cross’s original publication of the theory in 1971, updates have been made to further explain the process of racial identification (Cross, 1991) among the African American community. To avoid overlapping between stages, Cross eliminated the immersion stage, thereby reducing the nigrescence theory from five stages to four. The

reason for the change was to simplify his theory to make it applicable to researchers and educators; the latter two stages shared commonalities (Cross, 1991). A description of each of the four stages (pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization stage) is provided below, along with a critique of research that utilized nigrescence theory.

The pre-encounter stage notes that the African American's first interaction with an individual or experience brings conflict concerning their race to their attention (Cross, 1991). The second stage is the encounter stage, where the African American experiences the race conflict personally or is somehow connected to a racial event that conflicts with their current beliefs about their own race, and they seek to interpret the meaning of their own race. In the third stage, immersion/emersion, the African American, by conducting their own research to find those answers to the racial event/conflict, create a new reference of what it is to be an African American from their personal experiences. The final stage is the internalization stage, where African Americans develop a connection with themselves and others in the African American community and accept who they are as African Americans in society. Some individuals may not reach all stages and may remain at one stage as mentioned previously.

At the pre-encounter stage, theorized by Cross (1991) to occur in early adolescence, the African American is less aware of "Black culture" than at other stages and assimilates to White standards. The individual does not have a sense of racial identity as they may have adopted White Westernized ideologies that are immersed within their culture (Ritchey, 2014). They share no group identification with other African Americans

(Robertson & Mason, 2008), so they may conform to their environment to “fit in” (p. 69), even with possible pressure from their African American peers. They may be branded as an “Oreo” and not accepted by those in their own culture (Holmes et al., 2000, p. 45). Ritchey (2014) also discussed that there is the assumption of an inevitability of African American self-hatred because African American communities could never reach White success.

The pre-encounter stage also comes with the individual’s struggle to adopt a mainstream identity or identify with their African American community (Ritchey, 2014). There is also the internal struggle of remaining true to oneself or fitting in. The individual at this stage may not hold Afrocentric views as they have yet to include those values of their identity as African American (Cross, 1991). The pre-encounter stage occurs when African Americans transform beliefs established within the context of mainstream (White) society. During this stage, the African American individual examines their prior beliefs and thoughts, and there is a shift in the person’s view of themselves within the context of society. Either the individual will start to look further into their “Blackness” or accept the dominant culture within their environment (Cross, 1991).

About the pre-encounter stage as it applies to one’s educational environment, Ritchey (2014) noted there is little emphasis concerning race at the beginning of this stage as the individual has not yet begun to realize how race impacts their life. African American students are exposed to negative stereotypes and how the majority culture views African Americans in an educational setting at the beginning of their educational journey. As they exit the pre-encounter stage, the individual has realized how race plays a

role in their life, whereas before, they did not see how significant it was to their life experience. For example, African American students may believe that they “stand out” in certain settings (i.e., in higher education) and may feel they do not fit in and now understand the reason may be because of their race (Ritchey, 2014).

Chavous et al. (2018) noted how Cross’s theory, although very effective at describing the process of racial identification, had little research to support it. They mentioned how African American students face racial discrimination and racial microaggressions due to the unwelcoming climate at PWIs. They mentioned how Cross’s theory assists with information on how the context of the African American’s experiences plays a role in their racial identity development. Chavous et al. (2018) examined how African American college students’ racial identity beliefs changed during their first year at PWIs. In particular, they examined variations in students’ racial identity based on their overall identity, personal group, and affective beliefs about society’s view of their group. To do this, they classified students’ racial centrality (importance of race to overall self-concept), private regard (group pride), and public regard (perceptions of others’ views of Blacks) as a cluster of factors that could influence racial identity beliefs.

Chavous et al. (2018) hypothesized that students’ campus race-related experiences would align with racial identity changes across their identity development. To test their hypothesis, Chavous et al. assessed 309 African American first-year student and first-year transfer students from three PWIs in the Midwest. Participants were given online surveys once in the fall and again in the spring/summer of their first year as a follow-up

concerning racial and gender identity, faculty and peer relationships, campus academic and social experiences, and academic beliefs.

In particular, participants in Chavous et al. (2018) completed the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity ([MIBI]; Sellers et al., 1997, as cited in Chavous et al., 2018) subscales (racial centrality, private regard, and public regard) to assess their level of racial identification. The MIBI was derived from Cross's theory of the pre-encounter stage as the MIBI encompasses ideology of either a nationalist or an assimilationist ideology, and both include how the individual identifies race as relevant to their identity, how the individual defines themselves as a racial being and includes their beliefs, opinions, and attitudes associated with how they relate to their race (Cross, 1991). A modified version of the Daily Racial Hassles Scale and a questionnaire were also administered to rate participants' academic abilities. Participants self-reported their grade point average in the fall, spring, and summer. The researchers found race-related experiences aligned with racial identity changes across their identity development as significant (Chavous et al., 2018). Chavous et al. (2018) also found centrality cluster membership was predicted by college racial composition, intergroup contact with Whites, and racial climate perceptions. They also found that race-related experiences at an interpersonal level ( $\chi^2(12, N = 296) = 56.88, p < .001$ ) and institutional level ( $F = 2.60, p < .001, N = 298$ ) significantly impacted African American students' belief about the importance of race and what it means to be African American.

Although Chavous et al. (2018) yielded helpful information based on Cross's theory of nigrescence and the pre-encounter stage, in particular, they noted that their

sample was composed mainly of African American women and that more research is needed on the experience of African American men. Another limitation they highlighted was that the friend group only mentioned White friends as opposed to those of similar or another race. Having a more varied friend group and examining how that could increase or decrease racial centrality would be beneficial. Chavous et al. (2018) also included only first-year students and by expanding the timeframe, could show whether racial centrality decreased or increased along with academic motivation. Overall, despite the limitations, Chavous's et al. (2018) use of Cross' theory allowed the researchers to explore the importance of racial identity development among African American students concerning stability, changes, and adjustments.

After the pre-encounter stage of racial identity development comes the encounter stage. Cross (1991) theorized that the encounter stage was characterized by questioning one's relation to being an African American and what being an African American means to them. The individual will then seek to question what they know about African American culture and seek out information that is meaningful to them. Cross discussed how African Americans are either influenced by a personal experience or hear about an experience that spurs inquiry into how being an African American led to a particular outcome, either negative or positive. The second stage is when the African American individual experiences a racial event personally or is in close proximity to the event where they want to seek out how that event changed their view of their race.

The encounter stage focuses on the individual's active examination of White values and racial stereotypes associated with African Americans, like that they have poor

study habits and all play sports, which the individual may have once valued at the pre-encounter stage (Harrison et al., 2002). As mentioned above, this stage occurs in two parts: experiencing an encounter or personalizing it as the events unfold by the individual directly experiencing the event first-hand or being influenced by the event from another source (Cross, 1991).

The first part of this stage is the event that constructs their view of race (experience), and the second, personalization, is when the individual takes a stance resulting from the event's personal impact on them (Ritchey, 2014). The individual has an eye-opening experience, for example, witnessing or experiencing racial slurs or stereotypes or learning about one that challenges their beliefs. Once made aware of opposing beliefs, they learn more about their "Blackness" within the context of the events or sequence of sets of an event. It is when those specific experiences take on new meaning to the individual as the event singles out the African American individual in a specific way, initiating the development of the meaning of a racial identity and the journey defining what being African American means to them (Ritchey, 2014).

Cross (1991) referred to developing a racial identity as a "metamorphosis" as the African American develops their sense of "Blackness" (p. 199). The sequence of events over the course of this transformation may act as a catalyst to change the individual's thinking as opposed to their once Westernized way of thought (Robertson & Mason, 2008). At PWIs, racial discrimination may occur once the African American student experiences feelings of alienation or feels undervalued, which could translate to the student learning how they fit into that environment. During that time, the encounter starts

to awaken a sense of “Blackness” and what it means to be an African American student on a PWI campus.

Frequently, this stage may bring about guilt, shame, anger, and anxiety about this discovery directed toward others and internally of who they are in a cultural context. The most emotional aspect is denying their prior sense of identity and the acceptance that “the pre-encounter person is dying; the Black, American, or “Afrocentric” person is beginning to emerge” (Cross, 1991, p. 201). As it relates to the encounter stage, now the African American student learns about how their race has a significant role in their life experiences. For instance, at a PWI, the African American student may be directly confronted with how others view their minority culture and may see how race plays a role in their personal development.

In one area, Harrison et al. (2002) utilized Cross’s theory of nigrescence to explain the development of African American adolescents’ racial identity and its relationship to sport as it relates to the encounter stage (Harrison et al., 2002). African Americans are overrepresented in specific sports and physical activities, and the researchers wanted to research what factors influence sports and physical activity choices. They found, by synthesizing prior research from a meta-analysis, that race was often misconstrued or ignored concerning multicultural issues and diversity and wanted to explore whether race impacted sports and physical activity preference. To explore this topic, Harrison et al. (2002) first defined identity development as a socialization process influenced by experiences with the individual’s family, community, school, and other social groups. They concluded that African American youth see specific images or sports

related to success within their culture (i.e., basketball, football, and track), which translates to “Blackness” and a way of achieving that success. African American students in this situation are now learning that, as African Americans, certain sports may define “Blackness” in a way.

Harrison et al. (2002) also noted how African American youth go through a stage where they define themselves within the person’s context and the social significance of being attached to a specific racial group. They integrated Cross’s theory with their own to outline the stages the African American youth navigate to understand how the development of racial preferences impacts their choice of sport as they develop a racial identity. They noted how the individual is either assimilated, deculturized, or miseducated and how that leads to them developing Afrocentricity or not becoming more Afrocentric, which may influence their choice of sport and physical activity.

Robertson and Mason (2008) stated that athletic participation assists with social adjustment among male African American students. The social adjustment that occurs at this stage is at the encounter stage; the African American student encounters conflict with their prior beliefs about their race and now questions how that impacts them socially. With that notion, Harrison et al. (2002) mentioned how sports and physical activities could be related to racial identity attitudes and found how they relate to specific stages of Cross’s theory of nigrescence.

Although Harrison et al. (2002) provided insight into developing a racial identity among African Americans, they did not specify which stage of racial identity development contributed to which sports were chosen over others. The researchers hinted

that at the immersion stage, the individual was more likely to choose three specific sports, as noted above; however, they did not state the influence at the other stages. At other stages, the individual may pick a different sport. For example, at the pre-encounter stage, the individual may choose tennis or golf as they attempt to assimilate to the White standard, as those may not be sports typically chosen by many African American youths at that time.

Harrison et al. (2002) attempted to use Cross's theory to see if it influenced African American sport choices among the youth as Cross's theory assist with understanding African American racial identity development and the development of other identities in other domains, such as athletic identity (Harrison et al., 2002). The exposure to defining their race through their own experience or from the experiences of others plays a role in their racial identity development. They found the perceptions of the African American youth exposed to certain stimuli, such as rappers and athletes, and how that influences how they develop their own identity. The African American youth chose to seek out more information that aligned with rappers and athletes because that is what they see that defines success among the African American community. They then chose to pursue those goals as that was what they were exposed to. Cross noted that once an individual is exposed to someone or an event related to their race they are curious about, they will seek more information to learn more about the subject (Cross, 1991). It is crucial to understand how these perceptions are created, as any type of exposure may spur the start of developing a racial identity.

Transitioning to the final stage of Cross's theory, the immersion/emersion stage, as mentioned above, Harrison et al. (2002) gave an example of African American youth at this stage as it related to their examination of their "Blackness." They may choose basketball, football, and/or track as a means of immersing themselves in African American culture, since it is stereotypical of African Americans to play these sports. Activities that are perceived as "Black" are appealing to individuals at the immersion stage as they attempt to surround themselves in what they believe to be a part of stereotypical African American culture and avoid sports that are stereotypically regarded as "White" (Harrison et al., 2002, p.123). Harrison et al. discussed that African Americans' identity is salient with sports, as many African American individuals are shown positively as athletes. This article mentioned one reason there is an overrepresentation of African Americans in particular sports (i.e., football, basketball, and track), as those sports are mainstream sports that were shown to be "popular" among the African American community (Harrison et al., 2002, p. 129).

As shown above in the immersion-emersion stage (Cross, 1991), the individual creates a new reference of what it is to be African American. Based on their experiences and interactions in prior stages, Ritchey (2014) mentioned that this stage is where the individual has not yet started to change but has the drive to change. Once they learn more about their culture, the individual seeks more information as there is an intense drive to become more involved with their African American culture.

Ritchey also noted that the individual would shift from their old worldview and develop an outlook with the new information they have learned about race, which would

create a shift in their thinking. African Americans create new interpretations of the world from the knowledge they have acquired, either from their experience or research. Ritchey (2014) and Cross (1991) referenced the “sense of rage” as a starting point for the individual to seek out information that discusses a “new culture” they did not know existed (Cross, 1991; Ritchey, 2014, p.102). That shift occurs after the individual encounters a threat and seeks more information about why that event is considered a threat. The African American then starts to focus on positive group attributes to create a solid connection to the African American culture to combat that threat (Cross, 1991).

In the final stage of Cross’s theory (Harrison et al., 2002), the internalization stage, the African American develops a sincere connection with and acceptance of African American culture. The individual now moves from the anxiety associated with being an African American towards acceptance and confidence in what it is to be African American in society. Cross (1991) described this stage as the individual shifting from hatred toward the majority to controlled anger involving systems designed to oppress and manifest injustices toward African Americans.

Harrison et al. (2002) also discussed information related to African Americans and the development of racial identity, and they added that during the internalization stage, the individual develops a sincere connection of love and acceptance of being African American and love and acceptance within the African American community. The individual develops a sense of self-love and acceptance of the African American culture and adapts a collectivist worldly view, and the individual will be comfortable with their

“Blackness.” The individual will accept their “Blackness,” allowing them to concentrate on issues beyond a personal sense of “Blackness” (Vandiver et al., 2002).

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) examined the relationship between educational spaces, where the individual grew up, and Black identity development. Participants included 40 male and female African American professionals, where 47.5% attended an HBCU and 50% attended a PWI. Of the 40 participants, 90% identified as Black, 2.5% as mixed race, and 7.5% as other. Spaces were defined as all Black, mostly Black, all White, primarily White, equally diverse, HBCUs, and PWIs. They utilized theories of racial identity development, including Cross’s theory of black development (nigrescence). They hypothesized that the space and place where African Americans grew up and received their education would be associated with a higher racial identity. In fact, they found a significant correlation between space and black racial identity with an ETA coefficient of 0.393. There was also a correlation between place and Black racial identity which was also significant but with a smaller effect, with an Eta coefficient of 0.0039 suggesting little to no correlational effect between place and Black racial identity. Participants completed the Black Racial Identity Attitudes Scale ([BRIAS]; Helms, 1990, as cited by Burrell-Craft & Eugene, 2021), and qualitative data which was collected by asking open-ended questions related to their racial identity development based on their various educational experiences.

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) examined whether the space and place where Black professionals grew up and received their post-secondary education related to their scores on the BRIAS. The found themes associated with educational spaces, the HBCU

versus PWI debate, and the stages of racial identity development explain how educational spaces influence Black identity development. They asked how African American professionals interpret their educational experiences related to Cross's theory of nigrescence. From the qualitative findings, most participants noted that a lack of diverse teaching staff hurt their development/experience.

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) found responses from the BRIAS that many participants noted they had a "racial awakening" to show the importance of maintaining Black educational spaces to support racial identity development. Their study also found that making sense and meaning about their identity is crucial for African Americans to understand how they navigate spaces, process information, and accept their "Blackness" in all capacities of life (Burrell-Craft & Eugene, 2021). Although the study yielded significant results, as mentioned above, they noted that some of their participants' experiences were participant's race related. However, many did not see how race affected their experiences.

A limitation of Burrell-Craft and Eugene's (2021) study was that they did not explore qualitatively why the individual chose to attend the PWI or HBCU or inquire about what the university could do to be more supportive of African American students. Considering the differences in responses of individuals from HBCUs and PWIs relating to racial identity stages would be beneficial. The benefits would be to discover if the students in each group at a particular stage could determine if reporting specific experiences may be an indication of lower stages of racial identity by not recognizing their race. Concerning the study, exploring those differences in the support African

American students at HBCUs have versus those at PWI can lead to the development of supportive measures to ensure the success of African American students.

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) utilized Cross's theory to explore the relationship between educational spaces, places, and Black identity development. They applied Cross's theory to their study as Cross's theory defines "Blackness" as a psychological connection with their race versus just applying to the color of their skin. Burrell-Craft and Eugene found Cross's theory best suited their study as it explains the shift and development of racial identity attitudes from the individual's experiences in life. Cross's theory explains shifts in racial identity over time as the individual experiences challenges related to their understanding of their race and how those experiences shape who they are. From developing a strong racial identity, individuals transition through the stages reaching the internalization often explore careers in helping others who may be oppressed, further influencing others at different stages to seek out information about what they define as being African American.

Relatedly, Johnson and Carter (2019) discussed black cultural strength from Cross's theory of nigrescence. They discussed the positive and affirming aspects of African American racial identity, racial socialization, and racism-related coping skills with communalism and cultural spirituality, may be associated with positive social and psychological outcomes for African Americans (Johnson & Carter, 2019). As mentioned previously, Cross's theory is a psychological connection with race where the individual organizes information related to race and how that information defines who they are as African Americans (Cross, 1991). Johnson and Carter hypothesized that having a solid

central-internalized racial identity, positive racial socialization, effective racism-related coping, cultural spirituality, and communalism would indicate Black cultural strength (i.e., a solid racial identity). They mentioned that individuals who connected with other African Americans to have a more developed racial identity were a strong predictor of developing a strong racial identity.

With that path of development, African American individuals can cope effectively with racism and discrimination (Johnson & Carter, 2019). Also, they found that individuals who had positive cultural internalization may experience less distress from the majority racial group. Learning how to cope with the view of the majority culture can decrease distress while developing a racial identity. Although the researchers noted that developing a racial identity has led to racism-related coping skills, further studies would benefit from using methods such as the CRIS that capture other aspects of racial identity and their feelings about other cultural groups (Johnson & Carter, 2019; Vandiver et al., 2002).

Johnson and Carter (2019) contributed to the body of research on the topic of racial identity, but identifying other indicators of racial identity such as same race peers, participating in African American related classes, and engaged in African American related clubs or societies would be beneficial. According to Cross's theory of nigrescence, the researchers noted using other assessments to measure racial identity, such as utilizing the CRIS. Another implication for further study could be how Johnson and Carter indicated examining the indirect factors that impact a healthy racial identity.

Although Johnson and Carter utilized Cross's theory in their study, it is not the only one used to explain or define racial identity development. For example, there is the model of ethnic racial identity (ERI) which is defined as the process that defines an individual's sense of self related to ethnic heritage and racial background (Williams et al., 2020b). This model addresses the African American's ethnic-racial awareness, affiliation, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge. This model similar to Cross's, captures racial development over a lifespan; however, defines development according to specific periods in an individual's life.

The ERI model discusses racial development that occurs during infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Cross's theory does not relate to specific periods in the individual's life but defines racial identity development in relation to an event occurring. The ERI model is not centrally focused on the individual and the individual may cycle through stages. With Cross's theory, an individual could remain at one specific stage but not cycle through stages.

Williams et al. (2020b) noted in their discussion of the ERI model is that this model has been applied to one developmental period and is it unknown if this model applies across multiple periods. In other words, some components of ERI may apply to a specific developmental period. Cross's theory does not align with a particular developmental period unlike ERI. If ERI was used in the current study, it would be difficult to determine if an individual is cycling through a particular stage. Also, which stage is more relevant is important to note as only during certain developmental stages as William et al. (2020b) noted, some components of ERI may become more or less relevant

based on individuals' connections with other social identities that may play a greater role than ethnicity/race. Accounting for those components would be difficult to capture.

Although the ERI model could have been used for this study, Cross's theory of nigrescence is appropriate to describe the salience of African American students and developing a racial identity while attending a PWI. Racial identity, including the meaning, significance, and connection to the individual's racial group, is crucial to developing a racial identity that informs the individual to recognize and engage with others. Vandiver et al. (2002) also mentioned that African American students who have a sense of racial identity have better coping skills in dealing with discrimination and isolation. Also, another study found that African Americans associated with membership in their group have higher self-esteem (Lige et al., 2016).

Another alternative theory that could have been used for the current study would be the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) which describes the content of the individuals' racial identity beliefs (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). In other words, the individual defines what it means to them to be an African American and how important having that identity is formed from race-related experiences. Butler-Barnes et al. (2018) utilized the MMRI theory in relation to African American adolescent boys and girls to highlight the importance of developing a racial identity when encountering racial discrimination. They also included parental racial socialization messages which were defined as racial messages related to cultural socialization. They noted the importance of adolescences developing a secure sense of self/racial self and how that impacts racial identity development. They examined the impact of school-based racial discrimination

experiences on racial identity development similar to the current study although utilizing the MMRI theory.

Butler-Barnes et al. (2018) found school-based racial discrimination was directly related to racial identity beliefs and noted that many experience racial socialization which are verbal and nonverbal message related to race, and personal/group identity. While utilizing the MMRI theory to describe racial experiences, they found African American boys and girls interpret specific race-related messages especially from their parents in reaction to school-based racial discrimination. Their race-related experiences either positive or negative, will influence their development of a racial identity and the importance of being an African American to the individual.

Contrary to Cross's theory, the MMRI does not explain racial identity development in stages, rather than in relation to the individual's race-related experiences. The MMRI indicates that development can occur at any time in the individual's life rather than occurring in stages. The MMRI does not explain any conflict that may occur to spur or hinder racial identity development where Cross's theory includes that factor.

Cross's theory of nigrescence provides a picture of how African Americans create a sense of who they are as African Americans in relation to race-related experiences. Cross's theory is applicable to the current study as each of the stages of Cross's theory outlines a particular time in an African Americans life, particularly during their college years, how they form their racial identity development. Contrary to prior studies that were mentioned above, the current study investigated specifically how African American students at PWIs develop racial identity and interpret microaggressions. Those

microaggressions coupled with student engagement and student satisfaction while at the PWI and could determine if they continue their enrollment. As mentioned previously, it is hypothesized that depending on the student's stage of nigrescence that microaggression impacts student engagement, student satisfaction and their level of persistence negatively. Cross's stages note that depending on the stage the individual is, would be how the African American student interprets their environment.

Overall, the above-mentioned research has discussed the importance of African American students developing a racial identity and the benefits associated. Although research has shown the importance, there still may be issues with assisting and supporting African American students along their journey towards racial identification. Racial identification from the above research mentions how each individual faces difficulties at each stage and how each stage influences the African American student (i.e. academically and socially).

With the research, developing a racial identity may influence how African American students engage with their environment and also how they are able to adapt and succeed under pressure and within a stressful environment. There is a gap in research in determining if the individual's level of racial identification impacts their ability to cope with racism and discrimination at their institution. This factor could also have an impact on their desire to engage with the university, influence their overall satisfaction with the university, and their desire to remain at said university.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables**

This section will discuss the key variables under investigation in the research and that influence African American racial identity development from students attending a PWI. The key variables are racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. Lastly, what will be discussed in this chapter is the experiences of African American students at PWIs related to the variables mentioned above. The environment at PWIs encompasses cultural norms and beliefs of the mainstream majority culture (Thomas et al., 2014). The negative stereotypes, negative racial beliefs, lack of support, and racist attitudes may contribute to the dissection of a positive racial identity, with potential negative outcomes including a lack of persistence in college and/or mental health challenges. Smith et al. (2016) found that African American students, males in particular, faced issues such as subtle-overt racial insults and being seen as “out of place” or not “fitting in” as part of the campus community (Smith et al., 2016, p.8).

#### **Identity Development**

Developing an identity is crucial for a young adolescent to become a successful, well-adjusted adult (Thelamour et al., 2019). For the current study, Cross’s theory of nigrescence conceives racial identity as occurring across four distinct stages specific to African Americans. With many developmental theories, William Cross included race and ethnicity in the identity development theory. Cross’s theory, influenced by the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s, shows how race and ethnicity play a role in developing a specific racial identity (Cross, 1991).

Cross's theory of nigrescence, as mentioned by Harrison et al. (2002), is a "resocializing experience that steers one's preexisting racial identity from Eurocentric to Afrocentric" (Harrison et al., 2002, p. 122). Cross's stages of racial identification discuss how the individual either accepts or denies how race plays a role in how they view themselves as it relates to being African American. At each stage, an internal or external conflict is an obstacle that will be confronted in order to progress. Those conflicts then challenge what the individual perceived as being an African American. These stages of racial identification describe how African American students adapt to an environment where they are the minority and have to navigate any challenges that may arise from being the minority at a PWI.

For instance, researching the impact of the multiple aspects of identity may show how ethnicity influences adolescents' views of the world and their development, and in doing so, the adolescent will know how to navigate the demands of social contexts effectively (Brittian, 2011). From Brittian's examination of research, they sought to understand how an African American adolescent develops an identity via a relational developmental systems theory. They wanted to examine the moderators influencing the relationship between discrimination and prosocial versus antisocial behaviors related to identity development. From referencing Cross's theory, Brittian found that during African American adolescents' identity development, they must define who they are solely on the meaning of their racial and ethnic group (Brittian, 2011).

Brittian also examined how there is a relationship between race-related stressors and how African American adolescents will cope with that experience either positively or

negatively, which could impact their racial identity development (Brittian, 2011). Like Cross, Brittian also discussed how race plays a role in development as there are race-related conflicts the individual will encounter. Brittian also mentioned that adolescents who may have had a negative experience might internalize those negative beliefs from others and exhibit antisocial behaviors or reject those models about African Americans and exhibit prosocial behaviors similar to Cross's ideals about racial identity development.

### **Racial Identity**

The goal of developing a racial identity is to find a healthy balance by engaging with others who are like-minded and the African American students knowing who they are racially and personally. Von Robertson and Chaney (2017) reported that participating in extra-curricular activities on PWI campuses may be a safe place for African American students. With this safe space, African American students will be able to thrive as they have a place where they can be themselves. The student becoming engaged with their university will create a network for them and provide resources for success. Pittaway mentioned that the student environment would be different as not all teachers teach similarly, nor will they have similar expectations for their students and themselves; however, they will be more aware of the importance of creating a safe, respectful, supportive learning environment (Pittaway, 2012). Many African American students believe they need to be more welcome and supported by the faculty and staff; therefore, their satisfaction with the university is low. If African American students are confident in

who they are and their role at the university, they will overcome the challenges within their environment to excel.

Ritchey (2014) noted that Black identity development is crucial as a positive racial identity correlates with academic and personal success. Without a strong identity, the African American student may not develop a sense of resiliency in the face of adversity and fall victim to racial discrimination. Harris et al. (2019) noted that students of color, including African American students, experience microaggressions and prejudice while attempting to follow college cultural norms of mainstream culture (Harris et al., 2019). Although the current study will include both males and females, developing African American's racial identity could defend against negative experiences, including racism and microaggressions encountered at a PWI. Developing a positive racial identity will, at the least, create a positive sense of self where the negativity they face will do less damage if they are secure in who they are.

DeCuir-Gunby (2009) stated that racial identity is the process of developing an understanding of oneself as a member of a specific group within this context, the scope of the African American population. With that in mind, the individual could go through stages to achieve a sense of a positive racial identity, as each set comes with unique challenges, which could disrupt their self-identity development. Also included is the role of racism and race in the lives of African Americans regarding their role in society and how to cope with racism (Johnson & Carter, 2019). Johnson and Carter (2019) examined the importance of African American racial identity as a predictive factor of psychological health by promoting aspects of Black racial identity. They derived their theory from

Cross's model of nigrance, similar to the current study, as they found that African Americans' perspectives on being African American develop by their relation to the racial group (Johnson & Carter, 2019). Identifying with one's racial group may assist with developing a racial identity as the individual may discover similarities among that group.

Johnson and Carter (2019) highlighted in their research that African American racial identity is created and molded by developmental stages, and individuals go through each; and how that defined how they identify with being African American, including self-hatred or self-acceptance. It is possible to determine how developing a positive racial identity could positively influence whether the African American student completes their education at the PWI versus transferring to an HBCU. Harrison et al. (2002) mentioned in their study that self-stereotyping has a self-protective factor that embraces positive traits and rejects the negative traits. Feeling connected with a group serves as a buffer against discrimination, and the individual feels confident and optimistic about themselves by focusing on the positive aspects of their identified group, possibly improving student engagement (Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

With the belief that African American students feeling connected increases confidence and optimism, the African American student's racial identity provides a buffer against negative stereotypes, racial discrimination, and poor adjustment and increases resilience. There have been numerous studies on how racial discrimination has played a role in the development of racial identification, which has led to self-hatred and a lack of self-perseverance (Cox, 2020; Lige et al., 2016; Stewart, 2014). What should be

known is what stage of racial development is most useful in preserving the individual's notion of being African American at a PWI to navigate discriminatory actions and statements to create a healthy environment for them to succeed.

Johnson and Carter's study uncovered valuable factors that reinforce the importance of developing a racial identity. Their study focused on identifying multiple factors associated with racial identity. Those factors were found to be an accurate representation of the African American student population as there were multiple aspects involved in developing a racial identity. To expand on their study, further studies should utilize other measures to measure racial identity such as the CRIS. The CRIS will capture multiple aspects of racial identification along with the individual's feeling about other cultural groups that may impact their own racial identity. Johnson and Carter did not discuss how the African American's current environment impacts their racial identity development even when that environment is contrary to their own cultural values. Examining how that factor plays a role in developing a racial identity among African American students will further uncover ways to foster positive racial identity developing for African American students at PWIs.

As mentioned earlier, Chavous et al. (2018) examined African American college students' racial identity beliefs during their first year at PWIs to uncover factors that contribute to how their experiences develop and change their racial identity over time and their academic success (Chavous et al., 2018). They noted a lack of consideration for how race-related college experiences influence the individual's racial identity development

and academic motivation. As mentioned above, individuals' experiences shape their racial identity, and how they interpret those experiences shifts their perspective.

Those experiences have either a negative or positive impact on that development process. They classified students' racial centrality (importance of race to overall self-concept), private regard (group pride), and public regard (perceptions of others' views of Blacks) as a cluster of factors that could influence racial identity beliefs. Chavous et al. (2018) hypothesized that students' campus race-related experiences would align with racial identity changes across their identity development.

Chavous et al. (2018) found the cluster of factors from racial discrimination, interracial friendships, and campus racial climate from the campus experiences of African American students. They sought to uncover if the African American student experienced microaggressions (negative experiences); those experiences would increase their level of racial centrality with lower private regard. In contrast, they hypothesized that positive experiences, positive group relationships, and a positive overall campus environment would increase and maintain a high private and public regard. Chavous et al. (2018) utilized Cross's theory of nigrescence relating to race-related encounters. They sought to examine how race-related encounters that could be negative (microaggressions, racial bias) or positive (friend groups, racial inclusions) impact African American students at PWIs (Chavous et al., 2018).

Chavous et al. (2018) found Cross's theory is appropriate to describe the salience of African American students and how developing a racial identity while attending a PWI. Racial identity, including the meaning, significance, and connection to the

individual's racial group, is crucial to developing a racial identity that informs the individual to recognize and engage. There is a gap in research in determining if the individual's level of racial identification impacts their ability to cope with racism and discrimination at their institution, could impact their want to engage with the university, and influence their overall satisfaction with the university. Vandiver et al. (2002) also mentioned that African American students who have a sense of racial identity have better-coping skills in dealing with discrimination and isolation.

Chavous et al. (2018) contributed to the growing body of knowledge associated with racial identity as prior research of being ignored, devalued, and excluded at PWIs. Their results were valuable; however, their study is not a representation of the general population. They noted that their study's population consisted of more women than men, although was a representation of the African American student population, there was no discussion of gender variance with racial identity. That gender variance may add another variable in how to support African American students to include gender differences. Those gender differences could result in further exclusion due to their gender. Exploring those differences would be beneficial toward supporting African American students at PWIs.

Racial identification is associated with the beliefs and attitudes of being African American and belonging to the African American race individually and collectively, along with the perception of other ethnic groups (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Racial identity within the African American culture is robust and positively related to being African American, along with the consciousness of the historical, social, and cultural context of

being African American within society (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Racial identity development is a process of self-discovery and can positively or negatively influence the individual. Being African American is more than just the color of one's skin; it is a shared experience of genetic material and personal experiences.

Racial identity development has many factors, including the roles and expectations of others, that influence the development of one's racial identity (Stewart, 2014). Racial identity defines who the individual is within the African American culture—their personal experiences within their environment and how they define those experiences. Specific experiences may be misinterpreted as the individual may not be secure with who they are, and those experiences could disrupt or spur their racial identity, depending on the experience. At a time when young adults crystallize the development of self and self-identity, at PWIs, African American students may encounter negative and racist stereotypes and develop negative racial beliefs (Bimper et al., 2013).

With the importance of racial identity for African American students at PWIs, it is crucial to note how student engagement and student satisfaction contribute to student persistence. McClain and Perry (2017) noted that even with the progress made toward the retention of African American students, there are still microaggressions and discriminatory actions against African Americans that prompt them to leave the university (McClain & Perry, 2017). Student persistence may be related to racial identity and student engagement as they are either more or less engaging with the university's faculty and peers and with campus activities. Student engagement translates to how

engaged a student is with their university, which makes them more likely to continue their education at the university (Tight, 2019).

An unhealthy racial identity could develop a sense of self-hate, as outlined in Cross's theory of racial identification. Those experiences also shape their racial identity as they may take on those negative experiences and personalize them, creating a negative sense of self. The notion is that the more secure the African American students are with who they are, the more comfortable they are with socializing with peers and faculty, or they will feel more comfortable seeking out those similar to them. Created will be a support system for them where they have the resources necessary to be successful at the university in the face of adversity. From the research mentioned above (Chavous et al., 2018; Lige et al., 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017), there is the theory that African American students will feel more at ease within the classroom and the school environment by fostering a positive learning environment and a willingness to find value beyond their status as students.

There is an overarching pattern with the above-mentioned studies that highlight the importance of developing a racial identity. With developing a racial identity, that will create a space for the African American to build confidence in who they are in the face of adversity, in this case, the environment at a PWI. By understanding oneself as a racial individual, will prepare the African American individual for challenges that may arise being a minority at a PWI. Another important factor is the individual will understand the complexities of developing a race identity and the multiple influences that may assist or hinder that process. The above-mentioned studies also noted that their racial identity may

also fluctuate over time depending on their environment. With the study, those changes that may occur over time with African American students developing a racial identity will be investigated along with the impact of microaggressions and how that influences student satisfaction, student engagement, and persistence.

### **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions cause conflict in interpersonal relationships and the environment, and create adverse effects on African American students campus life and their sense of belonging to the university (Harwood et al., 2012). Microaggressions, as mentioned earlier, could negatively impact African American students, which could decrease their performance and impact their self-image (Martin et al., 2010). From experience, social media, and history alone, discrimination still occurs within the context of our society and remains a threat to African American students at PWIs. Being comfortable and knowing who they are as a minority at a majority institution could be a protective factor against discrimination. The racial climate at many PWIs also is a direct factor for African American students transferring to an HBCU.

Negative stereotypes alone will affect the individual, decreasing performance and self-image (Martin et al., 2010). Harwood et al. (2012) noted that microaggression causes conflict in interpersonal relationships and the environment; they also found that microaggressions adversely affects their campus life and sense of belonging to the university (Harwood et al., 2012). Microaggressions, as mentioned earlier, could harm African American students, which could decrease their performance and their self-image which could decrease engagement with their campus environment (Martin et al., 2010).

Being comfortable and knowing who they are as a minority at a majority institution may be a protective factor against discrimination from prior research (Chavous et al., 2018; Lige et al., 2016). The racial climate at many PWIs is a direct factor for African American students transferring to an HBCU. Many African American students at PWIs encounter barriers that impact their overall well-being at the PWI, especially student-athletes. This population at PWIs has unique barriers to education and student satisfaction within the institutional context. African American students at PWIs are within the minority population and often feel the racial climate is tense from their White counterparts. They also feel pressure from their peers as not being “black enough” or “too black.” As mentioned earlier, there is an underrepresentation of their racial group that could cause African American students to struggle with maintaining that collectivist mentality of the African American culture.

Ritchey (2014) also noted that Black identity development is crucial as a positive racial identity relates to academic and personal success. Without a strong identity, the African American student may not develop a sense of resiliency in the face of adversity and fall victim to racial discrimination. Harris et al. (2019) noted that students of color, including African American students, experience microaggressions and prejudice while attempting to follow college cultural norms of mainstream culture. Although the current study will include both males and females, the development of the African American’s racial identity could defend against negative experiences, including racism and microaggressions encountered at a PWI. Developing a positive racial identity will, at the

least, create a positive sense of self where the negativity they face will do less damage if they are secure in who they are.

The goal of developing a racial identity is to find a healthy balance by engaging with others who are like-minded and the African American students knowing who they are racially and personally. Von Robertson and Chaney reported that participating in extra-curricular activities on PWI campuses may be a safe place for African American students (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017). With this safe space, African American students will be able to thrive as they have a place where they can be themselves. The students becoming engaged with their university will create a network and provide resources for them to succeed. Pittaway also mentioned that the student environment would be different as not all teachers teach the same, nor will they have the exact expectations for their students and themselves; however, they will be aware of the importance of creating a safe, respectful, supportive learning environment (Pittaway, 2012). Many African American students feel they need to be more welcome and supported by the faculty and staff; therefore, their satisfaction with the university is low. The idea is that if African American students are confident in who they are and their role at the university, they will overcome this hostile environment to excel within that environment.

Microaggressions play a large role in developing a racial identity as noted above as many PWIs have been noted to have an unwelcoming environment for African American students. Microaggressions can occur at any time in any situation and negatively impact African American students at PWIs noted in prior studies. Developing

a racial identity could play a role in safeguarding against microaggressions as there is no way to stop them from occurring but may be less impactful if a racial identity is developed or is in the process of developing. Previous students have not addressed the impact of microaggressions on racial identity development. From Cross's theory, microaggressions occurring especially in the earlier stages, may cause the African American student to believe these negative comments/statements. From there, the African American student could internalize those negative comments/statements and distance themselves from African American culture. Or they could challenge those negative comments/statements and seek out information and experiences that prove those negative comments/statements false. The study shed some light on how microaggressions could hinder or assist with African American students developing a racial identity while at a PWI. Also, another factor that impacts racial identity developing could be the students experiencing overall satisfaction with their university can be helpful to motivate students to be engaged with not only their schoolwork, but social events also sponsored by the university. The student's motivation to participate in school events may be impacted by the university environment to include as mentioned above, microaggressions. Those microaggression may create a negative environment resulting in creating negative stereotypes.

### **Student Satisfaction**

Negative stereotypes alone may affect the individual's performance and self-image (Martin et al., 2010). Martin et al. (2010) conducted a study to examine African American male student-athletes' academic experiences and confidence in their academic

achievement. They noted how stereotype threats (engaging in behaviors to combat the negative stereotype) and stereotype reactance (resisting negative characterizations) affect how African American students perceive others, and their peers perception of African American athletes (Martin et al., 2010). In their study, they chose 27 African American student-athletes from Pac-Ten universities, where African American students are a part of the minority population. They noted that negative stereotypes and stereotype reactance could affect the performance of African American students. Negative stereotypes are a form of microaggressions that may pose a threat to African American students. They hypothesized that stereotype threats will impact African American students negatively, where they will have negative experiences and lack confidence in their academic achievement.

Martin et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study. They had interviews to obtain first-hand experiences from the participants concerning their confidence in their academic achievement while encountering negative stereotypes. Their participants were African American male undergraduate students who played football, basketball, track and field, and soccer at four PWIs in the Western Region of the United States, and at those universities, 3.7% to 8.8% of African American students are enrolled. Martin et al. (2010) asked their participants about their academic experiences, academic and athletic balance challenges, motivation for success, and how they felt they were perceived as African American male student-athletes.

The data from each interview was transcribed, and themes emerged: proving they are worthy, they feel they are a threat to society, time management, pride, and hard work.

As it relates to the study, themes of the African American student-athletes are feeling they are a threat to society, pride, and hard work, and how that relates back to microaggressions and racial identity. Microaggressions come in various forms, where the African American student-athlete may experience microaggressions in the form of negative stereotypes.

Martin et al. (2010) noted that many African American students reported that they believed they were academically incapable of achieving due to being African American and believed they were at a disadvantage. The African American students also felt they had to prove themselves as African American student-athletes to break the stereotype of being a threat to society as they are aware they are African American at a PWI and a disadvantage and are more motivated to succeed. The participants also mentioned in the study that combating negative stereotypes motivates them to be better students and go above and beyond to excel. Their study shed light on the impact of stereotypes concerning African American student-athletes and their influence on academic achievement. Stereotype threat can hinder African American student-athletes or prove to be a motivator. Understanding African American students, whether athletes or not, experiences at PWIs as a minority, will serve to inform ways to prevent the occurrence of negative stereotypes or microaggressions, although neither will ever be nonexistent. Educating the student population about the importance and significance of diversity may make the PWI environment more open to minorities.

Martin et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative study aimed to explore African American student-athlete's academic experience, and their findings contradicted prior

studies related to student involvement. Martin et al. (2010) stated that although student involvement is crucial, allowing African American male student-athletes to have a “voice” was more important. Their study found that giving the students a say in what they found is helpful rather than assuming what other faculty and staff found helpful was crucial for their academic development. It may lessen the negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with African American male student-athletes.

Although helpful, Martin et al.’s (2010) results pertained to African American male student-athletes, which needs to be more generalizable to the public. All African American students attending a PWI are not always male athletes. As noted in their study, the African American student-athlete population has stigmas and issues. Also, with being an African American student-athlete, there may be a higher chance of those students being around each other more than the student population, with not much interaction with other White students, which could impact their overall results from the study. These students may develop a higher level of racial identification without the impact of being around the rest of the student population. Others of a different race or culture may not influence them. As noted in their study, African American student-athletes have an interest and comfort level with other African American staff aside from the rest of the faculty and staff. Overall, further research mentioned in their research article is needed to explore this unique population and expand further on how African American female student-athletes at Division I universities explore those differences and compare how other racial groups of male student-athletes thrive at other Division I universities.

As students, African American should also be motivated to engage with their university outside of academic related activities; however, when feeling excluded, African American students may not feel satisfied by what the university has to offer its minority students. African American students feeling “heard” and supported as African Americans may assist racial identity development. If the African American student feels included in activities other than academics, the African American student may have a more enjoyable experience.

From the above-mentioned studies, African American students did not feel they were capable of achieving at the PWI and feel that they are a “threat to society,” a lack of pride, and are unmotivated. Their lack of engagement could also impact developing a racial identity which the current study sought to investigate. It is assumed that African American students with a lack of support, being perceived as unmotivated and problematic, will not be satisfied with their university resulting in a lack of progress toward developing a racial identity as they may perceive being African American as negative.

### **Student Engagement**

A sense of belonging and inclusion for students increases their overall student satisfaction and willingness to stay at the university, according to the research mentioned above (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015a; Harwood et al., 2012; & Pittaway, 2012). Student engagement includes five key elements: personal, academic, intellectual, social, and professional (Pittaway, 2012). For the study, social and personal engagement will be discussed. Social and personal engagement is related to racial identity as both concepts

center around the individual's development of a sense of self. Student engagement is about how the student engages with their education and interacts with their peers and the facility. Brooms (2018) noted that African American students attending a PWI are haunted by low expectations, biases, and prejudice concerning academics by faculty members (Brooms, 2018). It is important to note that engagement in this context is related to particular behaviors and student outcomes.

Brooms (2018) conducted a qualitative study to explore African American student engagement and experiences in a Black Make Initiative (BMI) program that is a supportive group for African American students on campus who attend PWIs (Brooms, 2018). Brooms' study on a social-cultural theory, not Cross's theory of nigrescence, still applies to the significance of racial identity. Although not Cross's theory, this theory does incorporate the social aspect and cultural aspects of one's knowledge of one's own culture, skills, and abilities, which includes aspects of Cross's theory of nigrescence as there is a social and cultural aspect included in developing a racial identity. With that in mind, Brooms (2018) interviewed 40 African American male college students aged 19-26 from two PWIs ranging from undergraduate to graduate students. From the interview questions, the narratives captured involved their racialized and gendered identities and how they felt supported as African American males at a PWI, along with efforts from the BMI.

Four significant themes came from those interviews (Brooms, 2018): belonging, access, academic motivation, and an increased sense of self. Brooms reported that the participants in the study felt having a safe space to call their own was crucial in their

development and assisted with their ability to cope with the challenges of being an African American student on a PWI campus. The BMI created a safe space for African American students to vent, be themselves, and feel supported, motivating them to succeed despite challenges.

From the study, Brooms noted that students felt a stronger connection with other African American students and gained more cultural knowledge about themselves and the world around them. The results also mentioned how the African American students felt welcomed and valued, thus increasing their sense of belonging and self from a sociocultural perspective. The current study furthermore highlights the importance of recognizing the challenges associated with African American males' experiences while attending a PWI and the resources they need in order to be successful.

Although the current study also added to the wealth of knowledge; the results do not apply to the general population. The BMI program is unavailable or established at other PWIs in the United States and only available at a select few. Also, the locality of southern states may not be as welcoming as northern states where the PWI is. This program is at a select few PWIs, so the results may not apply everywhere as the BMI program is not available. Another area for improvement is how the BMI is only available for African American male college students at PWI versus being open to African American female students. African American female students may have the same struggles, if not more, than their counterparts, and yet the program is closed to them. Creating a program similar to the BMI that is open to those of color or just another group for women of color may to assist African American female students. There may be the

expectation or assumption that African American female students can better adapt; however, the current study did not mention that. There also may be groups for female students, but not specifically African American female students, which comes with its unique challenges as they are a double minority on a PWI campus with possibly little to no support.

African American students at PWIs may refrain from engaging with their peers and staff as an underrepresented population at these institutions. Stewart (2014) discussed in their study that African American students faced internal and external criticism regarding their engagement with the student population. Stewart also mentioned internal struggles with responding to criticisms from other African American students and how they may associate with so many White students on campus “by acting white” (2014). The notion is that the more the student is engaged, the less likely they will be to voluntarily leave the university prematurely (Tight, 2019). On the other side, African American students from their White peers experienced comments such as “You don’t act Black,” which makes it difficult for African American students to socialize with others due to criticism from the minority and majority student population. The complex sense of belonging includes struggling to find a place in the student community at the university.

Overall results from studies conducted by Brooms, Stewart, and Tight show that a sense of belonging, academic motivation, a heightened sense of self, and access to resources were crucial to their college experience (Brooms, 2018; Stewart; 2014; Tight, 2019). That sense of belonging relates to student engagement as the student feels welcomed and accepted, where they may be more invested in their college experience

despite the negative encounters they might experience. Brooms found that the BMI program was a “safe space” for African American students for support and to foster coping strategies to increase their sense of belonging on campus and increase their self-confidence (Brooms, 2018). An education environment that supports its students is aware of their multiple identities and how society impacts them, and it can assist with developing the students’ positive identities (White et al., 2021).

As student engagement relates to racial identity, it is important to consider how African American students engage with other students, faculty, and staff at the PWI. Those encounters may have an impact on the African American student developing a racial identity as those they encounter may not have similar experiences. African American students engage with other students of a different race may assist or halt the development of a racial identity. For example, the African American student having only White friends, they will not share many of the same experiences or have similar encounters while at the PWI that would create a positive racial identity and could do the opposite, create a negative sense of self. The African American student may encounter negative stereotypes as mentioned above which could create a sense of confusion or dismay about who they are and how they fit in.

### **Persistence**

As mentioned previously, Thomas et al. (2014) examined how African American college students’ involvement with the university predicted academic persistence. The researchers discussed how variables such as campus involvement, faculty mentorship, self-efficacy and utility value, along with a sense of belonging, contributed to African

American college students' academic persistence. For their students, they recruited freshmen (6%), sophomores (28%), juniors (36%), and seniors (33%). They utilized a multiple regression to examine the relationship between their variables with 139 participants and a logistic regression to predict actual persistence using the same set of predictor variables with 136 participants (Thomas et al., 2014).

The participants were administered the Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale (P/VDD), the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), the College Student Mentoring Scale, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, University Environment Scale (UES), and the Peer Group Interactions subset of the P/VDD. Thomas et al. (2014) hypothesized that African American college students who reported involvement in out-of-class organizations and mentorship, perceived a college degree as meaningful and applicable, demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy, and expressed a substantial sense of belonging to the university would be more likely to persist.

The researchers defined the utility value as how that degree would fit into their plans. The concept of utility value was mentioned in their study, which showed limited research concerning African American college students and persistence. To analyze their data, they utilized a multiple linear regression for self-reported student persistence and a logistic regression to examine if there is an actual relationship between the variables mentioned above. The multiple linear regression and logistic regression had varying results. From the multiple linear regression analysis, they found that campus involvement, faculty mentorship, self-efficacy, utility value, and a sense of belonging

made up 14% of the variance in the persistence ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). They found that utility value significantly predicted self-reported student persistence from the multiple linear regression ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). From the study, African American college students who valued their education more were more likely to persist with their academic careers. They noted that although utility value was also a significant self-report predictor, although was not an ideal predictor of persistence (Thomas et al., 2014).

From the logistic regression, the only significant factor was self-efficacy in predicting whether students were enrolled the following semester, which they noted as the individual's confidence level toward positively reaching their goals (Thomas et al., 2014). The logistic regression found that self-efficacy is an actual predictor of persistence. African American students who are more confident in their abilities are successful in college and are likely to re-enroll. Although their results were significant, they found that previous studies noted self-efficacy to be related to university persistence and retention; however, results showed a negative relationship between those two variables (Thomas et al., 2014). The negative relationship could impact their beliefs and confidence in performing college tasks, but not having the resources or capability to execute effectively is also a factor.

Aside from the significant findings, the researchers also noted that self-efficacy, utility value, and sense of belonging all correlated positively, showing that each had some impact on African American student persistence. Oddly enough, campus involvement did not correlate with any of the other self-reported variables, which alludes to the fact that

campus involvement among African American students is not an essential factor in retaining African American students, as others may have believed.

Although Thomas and his colleagues' study added knowledge to the body of research that is continuing to emerge on this topic, the researcher's population was mainly female. The findings need to be more generalizable to the population to apply to a more diverse population. A more diverse sample would have yielded more data and could have added to the body of research concerning female and male college students' academic success.

The length of the study also posed a concern as they only obtained data from one semester. Extending the length of the study would allow researchers to see if African American student's beliefs change over time as they become acclimated to their environment. Another limitation after reviewing the researchers' study is that they should have included how ethnicity or race plays a role in persistence. The researchers should have included the complexity of how race and ethnicity may play a role—self-efficacy, defined in their study as confidence and belief in oneself and one's abilities. Race and ethnicity influence persistence, impacting campus involvement, faculty mentorship, self-efficacy, utility value, and a sense of belonging. Individuals who are confident in themselves and have a strong racial identity could also have an impact on persistence. As this relates to the current study, there may be a correlation between racial identity and persistence as a variable; however, there is limited research that this prior study examined.

A supposed goal of attending a university is to remain at the university until graduation. For an African American student, that goal may be difficult to achieve especially at a PWI. This could be due to the many factors that have been previously discussed and again the theme of developing a racial identity has not been established.. Not developing a racial identity could also impact persistence as the African American student would not have that sense of self-motivation and pride to persist in the face of adversity. By developing a racial identity, the African American student would be able to navigate the environment at a PWI and remain at the university despite the challenges they may face. The current study will shed light on if in fact developing a racial identity may serve to increase student engagement and student satisfaction while protecting against microaggressions where the student will want to remain at the PWI.

Many African American students enter college already shaped by early trials associated with navigating their racial identity in U.S. society. Beginning in high school, they often encounter experiences that devalue “Blackness” while validating Whiteness, creating pressure to conform to mainstream cultural norms. Holland (2020), in interviews with African American high school students, found that participants described this phenomenon as one that affirms Whiteness while simultaneously diminishing the value of “Blackness” (Holland, 2020).

As a result, some students push aside or reject aspects of their racial identity and internalize self-hatred that may persist as they transition to college. This internalized struggle can influence their decision to attend a predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where the cultural norms often reflect and reinforce dominant standards. For many, the

message learned early on is that aspects of “Blackness” are negative, and these perceptions can carry forward into higher education settings, shaping how African American students engage with their new environment.

Given these formative experiences, African American students frequently encounter additional challenges within the racial climate of PWIs, where feelings of marginalization and exclusion can intensify and reinforce the identity conflicts that began prior to college.

The racial climate at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can be off-putting for African American students, as these campuses often carry a history of exclusion that continues to shape feelings of marginalization and discomfort (McClain & Perry, 2017). Mwangi et al. (2018) found that African American students at PWIs frequently associated their racial identity with fear and encompass experiences of overt racism. Their study sought to examine how students navigate campus racial climates in the context of broader national issues and racial tensions. They argued that higher education institutions must remain connected and responsive to societal events that directly affect their students.

For example, the murder of George Floyd that occurred in 2020, along with the deaths of Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, and Donovan Lynch, were not campus-based incidents, yet they intensified racial tensions and trauma within African American communities nationwide. These tragedies highlight the ways in which off-campus racial injustices reverberate within college environments, influencing how African American students experience belonging, safety, and racial identity at PWIs.

Already a minority at PWI campuses, many African American students report feeling singled out, which contributes to a diminished sense of belonging noted throughout the above mentioned studies. Mwangi et al. (2018) further noted that the campus racial climate can negatively affect African American students' college experiences and overall well-being. Their study highlighted how the broader racial climate in the United States often intersects with campus environments, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and discomfort. For African American students, this overlap intensifies the challenges of navigating campus life, as national events of racial injustice amplify existing campus tensions. These experiences ultimately may affect African American students' satisfaction with their institution, leading them to perceive PWIs as an unwelcoming space where they are underrepresented, excluded, and insufficiently supported.

Negative racial climates have been linked to a variety of adverse outcomes for African American students. Research indicates that perceptions of discrimination and marginalization reduce students' academic engagement, weaken motivation, and increase the likelihood of attrition (Bimper et al., 2013; McClain & Perry, 2017). Students who feel excluded or stereotyped are less likely to participate in campus organizations, develop mentoring relationships with faculty, or form cross-racial friendships—all of which are key predictors of persistence and degree completion (Tight, 2019). Smith et al. (2016) further noted that hostile racial climates contribute to “*racial battle fatigue*,” which manifests in stress, frustration, academic disidentification, undermining academic performance and well-being.

Conversely, studies show that supportive climates—where diversity is valued and African American students feel affirmed—are associated with greater engagement, higher satisfaction, and stronger persistence (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017). A positive racial climate fosters not only individual success but also resilience in the face of microaggressions and systemic inequities. Thus, understanding the role of the campus racial climate is critical in examining how African American students develop a racial identity, manage microaggressions, and sustain their academic journey at PWIs.

Matias and Newlove (2017) also examined how educational spaces attempt to foster racial equality and greater acceptance of students of color, though such efforts are often fraught with challenges (Matias & Newlove, 2017). They argued that negative attachments and stereotypes associated with students of color are deeply embedded within the majority culture and must be intentionally unlearned. Their findings suggested that racial equality must be explicitly taught in educational settings, requiring systemic changes in achievement outcomes and institutional policies to reveal and address broader societal injustices. Importantly, they posited that cultivating awareness of majority-culture emotional responses toward race could “lessen the projections of White emotions” onto people of color, including students (Matias & Newlove, 2017). This perspective aligns with Cross’s theory of nigrescence, which emphasizes the unlearning of negative racial stereotypes as a critical step toward reshaping identity. Such a mindset shift creates space for students of color to develop more positive self-concepts and create and maintain educational environments where they feel welcomed and affirmed.

Building on this, Cox (2020) also investigated how racial identification is shaped socially for African American students in higher education (Cox, 2020). Through a qualitative study of African American undergraduates at two PWIs and one HBCU, Cox explored how students construct a sense of “*Black authenticity*,” defined as what it means to embody real “Blackness” as part of racial identity development. He argued that the college environment plays a crucial role in shaping this process, particularly at PWIs, where African American students must navigate competing pressures from both their peers and the majority White population. Cox’s study focused on students’ school choice, the quality of their relationships with Black peers on and off campus, and their perceptions of HBCUs versus PWIs. His findings highlighted the complex negotiations African American students undertake in defining authentic “Blackness” within environments where cultural representation and support vary significantly.

Results indicated an unstable foundation for developing authentic “Blackness” as there is a conflict between being themselves and not “selling out,” as mentioned by participants in the study. The study revealed that many African American students at the PWIs found themselves under significant pressure to fit stereotypical images of being black (i.e., having only black friends, engaging and supporting all black events, and joining black organizations) yet were conflicted as there was a risk of being ostracized if not meeting those expectations. The climate at PWIs influences how African American students construct black authenticity, which is difficult for many as positive images and sentiments about the African American population are limited within that context. The

student must often navigate the fine line between “being too black” or “not black enough,” which can be a constant battle.

The research study further supported the notion that is not well researched of how other African Americans struggle with seeing themselves versus how others see them. In other words, African American students have the underlying need to know how they are viewed by “nonblacks” and also by other African American students. This concern relates to the “double consciousness” of African American students which may influence racial identity development. There may be times where the African American student cannot see themselves beyond the image of what others have created of them in turn possibly limiting their racial identity development.

To further expand on Cox’s research, it would be beneficial to further investigate how African American students feel that justifying or excusing racist behaviors helps decrease the occurrence of negative experiences or increase while attending a PWI. Continuously excusing the negative behavior would not decrease those behaviors and may reinforce them. By not holding individuals or groups of people accountable for their behaviors, ultimately allows those behaviors persist within that environment.

For further study, it would be imperative to explore the perception of African American students by the faculty at PWIs. In the above mentioned study, the racist behaviors and encounters were from faculty, not just the White students. The racist behaviors and encounters came from those in a higher power, and those individuals often are the ones who inform policies and set the tone for the university. Exploring and identifying the faculty’s beliefs and perceptions could create positive change at a higher

level that may trickle down the power hierarchy to promote positive social change at the lower levels.

Together, these studies underscore the importance of context in shaping African American students' racial identity development. Matias and Newlove (2017) emphasized the need for intentional unlearning of racial stereotypes within educational spaces, while Cox (2020) highlighted the complex negotiations of "authentic Blackness" that students undertake within different institutional environments (Cox, 2020; Matias & Newlove, 2017). At PWIs in particular, the absence of consistent and positive cultural affirmation may leave students vulnerable to internalizing negative societal messages about race or feeling pressure to conform to limited stereotypes of "Blackness." These findings align with Cross's theory of nigrescence by illustrating how African American students at PWIs are often prompted to reassess, reject, or reconstruct aspects of their racial identity in response to both direct campus experiences and broader societal forces. Ultimately, the institutional climate at PWIs plays a pivotal role in determining whether students experience racial identity development as affirming and supportive or as conflicted and undermining.

As mentioned above, many African American students report feelings of not belonging, which often stem from their interactions with White peers and faculty as well as from observing the dynamics between White students and faculty members. Harris et al. (2019) found that students of color and White students have markedly different college experiences, shaped by disparities in educational, social, and relational spaces that frequently exclude students of color. Consistent with these findings, Chen and

Hamilton (2015) reported that many African American students feel unaccepted by their peers and are perceived as inferior. Banks and Dohy (2019) further observed that such experiences of racism can foster beliefs of non-belonging, creating psychological and social distance from the university. This distancing may contribute to underperformance and higher dropout rates among African American students at PWIs. Similarly, Lewis et al. (2019) noted that students with lower senses of belonging and weaker connections to campus life are less likely to succeed academically, underscoring how perceptions of exclusion directly affect persistence.

Taken together, these studies highlight the intersection of racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, and persistence. Each of these constructs plays a significant role in shaping African American students' experiences at PWIs and can either mitigate or exacerbate challenges related to belonging. To expand on that notion, Strunk et al. (2018) examined these dynamics by comparing the campus experiences of African American and White students, focusing on how African American students make sense of their racialized experiences within PWI environments. Their findings demonstrate that institutional context and campus climate profoundly influence both students' self-perceptions and their broader educational outcomes.

Strunk et al. (2018) hypothesized that African American students would report a higher number of racially motivated incidents compared to their White peers. To test their hypothesis they conducted a mixed-methods study with 1,186 students enrolled at a PWI in the U.S. Deep South. The sample included 203 African American students and a combination of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students. Their framework drew on

critical theory, which examines how class and economic structures shape college choice and individuals' sense of self, and critical pedagogy, which interrogates the influence of power, privilege, and oppression in educational spaces. These perspectives provided the foundation for analyzing how White supremacy and structural inequalities shape African American students' experiences at PWIs.

Quantitative data was collected through surveys capturing demographic information, academic year, group affiliations, and religious background. Students also responded to questions about their experiences with racism, perceptions of their university's commitment to diversity, and their level of comfort on campus. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was employed to compare responses between African American and White students. The results indicated a significant difference in the number of racial incidents reported by the two groups, with African American students experiencing higher rates of racially motivated incidents than their White counterparts.

The second MANOVA from the above mentioned study also revealed significant differences between groups. African American students reported that the campus was less supportive based on race and that they felt less comfortable on campus compared to White students. To account for multiple comparisons, the researchers applied a Bonferroni correction, which confirmed the robustness of these results. The findings further showed that threatening behaviors were more frequently reported by African American students in interactions with faculty, and racist encounters from faculty members occurred at higher rates than those reported by White students. Interestingly, no

significant differences emerged concerning racist behaviors perpetrated by fellow students.

In addition to the quantitative survey, Strunk et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative component that included a campus climate survey and semi-structured focus groups. Students discussed their experiences with faculty and peers and shared their perceptions of areas in which the university could improve. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed three central themes.

The first theme, normalizing racialized experiences, reflected students' anticipation of racism at PWIs and their tendency to rationalize discriminatory encounters (e.g., "I cannot say I ever experienced direct racism). The second theme, reproducing hegemony and White supremacy, described how students adapted to majority-culture norms in order to be accepted, often by acquiring marketable skills and behaviors aligned with White expectations. The third theme, coping with hegemony, emphasized the belief that students should avoid being "childish or petty" when confronted with racism and instead frame such encounters as preparation for future challenges in professional and social contexts.

Taken together, the results provided compelling evidence of racialized disparities in campus experiences. Quantitatively, African American students were more likely to report experiencing racist behaviors from faculty ( $\Lambda = 0.98$ ,  $F(4, 1073) = 4.50$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .017$ ), perceiving the campus as less supportive ( $F(1, 1085) = 16.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .015$ ), and feeling less comfortable overall ( $F(1, 1085) = 4.16$ ,  $p = .042$ ,  $\eta^2 = .004$ ). Qualitatively, the normalization of racism and the expectation of adapting to majority

culture suggested that African American students often accepted and rationalized their discomfort as an inevitable part of life at a PWI. Strunk et al. (2018) concluded that while the presence of racist encounters was undisputed, many students framed these experiences as preparation for navigating systemic inequities beyond the university context.

In addition to other studies, Smith et al. (2016) examined the experiences of African American male students at PWIs, focusing on the challenges they encountered during their college matriculation. Their study highlighted how microaggressions and a hostile campus racial climate negatively affected these students' educational goals, academic performance, and ability to engage with peers and faculty. Specifically, Smith and his researchers investigated the role of Black racist misandric stereotypes—portraying African American men as threatening, hypersexual, or anti-intellectual—and how these stereotypes contributed to what they termed *racial battle fatigue*. Racial battle fatigue refers to a cluster of negative psychological responses, including stress, frustration, defensiveness, academic disidentification, and feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, which arise as students navigate persistent microaggressions and systemic bias at PWIs. Using a grounded theory approach, they analyzed how the campus social environment perpetuated stereotypes and microaggressions, thereby fostering the conditions that lead to racial battle fatigue among African American male students.

Smith et al. (2016) conducted their qualitative study with 36 African American male students, ages 18–25, enrolled at seven “elite” PWIs. Using purposeful sampling, they recruited seven participants from each institution from African American student

organizations and referrals. Semi-structured interviews addressed students' experiences with racial discrimination, their responses to such encounters, and their perceptions of the campus racial climate. The analysis focused on the types of racial discrimination experienced, how students reacted, and the psychological responses that followed.

Two major themes emerged from the data. The first, *Black misandric stereotyping*, reflected portrayals of African American men as criminals or predators, bearers of "ghetto-specific" knowledge and behaviors, as non-student athletes, and as anti-intellectual. The second theme, *marginality, hyper-surveillance, and control*, captured participants' feelings of being out of place, constantly monitored, and restricted in their interactions on campus. These themes underscored long-standing concerns regarding the challenges faced by African American students at PWIs, where such stereotypes and surveillance contribute to unwelcoming environments and reinforce feelings of exclusion.

Psychosocial responses included stress, frustration, defensiveness, and disidentification from academics, highlighting the toll of persistent microaggressions and racial hostility. Importantly, while the study documented the presence and impact of racial encounters, it did not address issues of persistence, such as whether these students remained enrolled or graduated. The study made way for future research to examine the experiences of African American upperclassmen students to better understand the factors that influence persistence despite exposure to hostile campus climates over time.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

From the research discussed, there appears to be a link between racial identification, microaggressions, student engagement, and student satisfaction that influence African American persistence at PWIs. Although there may be a relationship, it is still unclear where that relationship is and how each variable impacts the other. Examining how the variables mentioned above intersect, may shed light on how African American students make sense of their experiences related to their racial identity and how those experiences play a role in shaping their educational journey at PWIs. Identifying their racial identification level and while encountering microaggressions are two potential factors that may influence students' engagement and overall satisfaction with the university, which may affect the student's persistence at that university.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This quantitative study was designed to examine whether three of Cross's stages of racial identification – pre-encounter (assimilation), encounter (self-hatred), and internalization (Afrocentricity) – as defined in the revised theory of nigrescence (Vandiver et al., 2002), are related to African American students' experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Specifically, the study investigated whether racial identity influences students' ability to cope with microaggressions, their level of engagement with the university, and their overall satisfaction with the institution.

The study tested the hypothesis that students at higher stages of racial identity development would be more resilient in the face of microaggressions and, as a result, would demonstrate greater engagement and satisfaction with the university. In this design, racial identity (assimilation, self-hatred, and Afrocentricity) and microaggressions served as the independent and moderating variables, while student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence represented the dependent variables.

The chapter outlines the methodology employed to address these research questions. It begins with a description of the research design, setting, and sample, followed by procedures and instrumentation. Consideration is then given to threats to validity, data collection, and data analysis strategies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the protections in place to safeguard participants and a summary of the methodological approach.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study employed a quantitative, nonexperimental design utilizing multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to test the stated hypotheses. MANCOVA was selected because it allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple dependent variables and their relationships with one or more independent variables. As Creswell (2014) noted, this design is appropriate when there is reason to believe the variables are interrelated and may demonstrate positive or negative associations.

The study did not involve manipulation or control of variables. Instead, it examined naturally occurring differences among participants with respect to racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. The independent variables included racial identity, operationalized through three of Cross's (1991) revised nigrescence stages (assimilation, self-hatred, and Afrocentricity), and reported experiences of microaggressions. The dependent variables were student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence.

The study also considered the role of racial identity and microaggressions as potential moderating variables to determine whether they influenced the relationships among the dependent variables. Specifically, the analysis sought to uncover whether the stage of racial identity development, combined with the presence of microaggressions, predicted differences in engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. The proposed outcome was to determine whether higher stages of racial identity development (e.g., internalization/Afrocentricity) correspond to greater resilience against microaggressions, leading to more positive academic and social outcomes at PWIs.

The use of MANCOVA in this study contributes to the existing body of research by examining whether relationships exist among racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. More specifically, it allows for an exploration of how racial identity may serve as an influential factor in shaping African American students' educational experiences at PWIs. Understanding these relationships is critical for identifying strategies that better support and retain African American students within these institutional contexts.

Previous research has consistently shown that African American students at PWIs often struggle to feel comfortable, connected, and fully invested in their academic and social lives (Brooks et al., 2012; Butler-Barnes et al., 2013; Hall, 2017; Kumar et al., 2019). These studies identified factors such as sense of belonging, racial identity, persistence, institutional climate, and acceptance from faculty and peers as critical to students' overall experiences. However, prior research has not sufficiently examined how racial identity stages, in conjunction with experiences of microaggressions, directly influence student engagement and satisfaction (Chavous et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Douglass et al., 2015; Durkee et al., 2022; Krueger et al., 2021).

The present study addresses this gap by investigating whether racial identity development and microaggressions interact to shape African American students' engagement, satisfaction, and ultimately their persistence at PWIs. Identifying such relationships may demonstrate the need for institutional interventions, such as creating and maintaining "safe spaces," that affirm racial identity and provide supportive environments for African American students as they navigate the challenges of PWIs.

## **Methodology**

This section will be organized into discussing the targeted population for study, sampling procedures, and recruitment procedures. This section will also include a discussion of the instruments used for data collection, discuss how data will be collected, threats to external and internal validity, and lastly ethical procedures.

### **Population**

The intended target population for this study was African American undergraduate students enrolled at Old Dominion University (ODU); a predominantly White institution located in the Tidewater area of Virginia. The study focused on undergraduate students, male and female, who were at least 18 years of age and enrolled from their first year through their fourth year. Eligible participants included students living either on or off campus who were willing to voluntarily complete all study assessments.

The study employed a non-random sampling strategy to recruit participants from this specialized subpopulation. Non-random sampling is particularly appropriate when the research focuses on a defined subgroup, in this case, African American undergraduate students at a PWI (Borden & Abbott, 2011). The anticipated sample size was approximately 50 participants, drawn from the larger African American undergraduate population at ODU. This target size accounted for the likelihood that some individuals might decline participation, while still allowing for meaningful analysis of the research questions.

### **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

Using a non-randomized sampling method, participants were selected from the overall student population at the university. This sampling method is appropriate as the participants are part of a specific racial group to include specific racial qualities that are not a part of the general population. Participants must also be at least 18 years of age, identify as African American undergraduate students, be fluent in English, and be willing to complete all study-associated assessments voluntarily. The sample size was calculated using G\*Power, a statistical software tool commonly used for power analysis (G\*Power Tool, 2023). The analysis utilized the option in G\*Power of ANCOVA with fixed effects, omnibus, and one-way, which is appropriate for evaluating the moderator effect in a MANCOVA. The power analysis was conducted with three groups with one predictor. Based on the input parameters and analysis settings, G\*Power calculated that a minimum size of 100 total participants is needed to achieve the desired power of .80 at the alpha of .05. This analysis was used to determine the required sample size for a MANCOVA. The significant level was set at .05 with a Type I error probability. The desired power was set at .80 for the likelihood of detecting an effect if present. The effect size ( $f^2$ ) for the moderator variable was at .25, representing the variance explained by the moderator.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through email invitations distributed to eligible students. The invitation described the nature and purpose of the study, emphasized its focus on enhancing African American students' experiences at a PWI, and outlined the

approximate time commitment of 30 minutes to complete the survey. Demographic information collected included ethnicity and class year.

To ensure participants had sufficient experience within the university environment, transfer students who had been enrolled at ODU for fewer than two semesters were excluded from the study. These students were not included because limited time on campus reduces opportunities for meaningful engagement with faculty, staff, and peers, making it difficult to assess their experiences of persistence, satisfaction, and engagement in comparison with students who had been enrolled longer.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through an online survey administered via SurveyMonkey. The survey packet included four validated instruments: (a) the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011a), (b) the Student Engagement Scale (SES; Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015b), (c) the Academic Persistence Outcome Expectations Scale (APOES; Kozlowski & Fouad, 2023), and (d) the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS; Worrell et al., 2020), also known as the Cross Social Attitudes Scale. Demographic questions regarding ethnicity and class year were also included.

Prior to participation, all students reviewed and electronically signed an informed consent form, ensuring that only voluntary participants completed the assessment packet. The examiner reviewed each completed packet for accuracy and completeness before scoring the instruments.

The data were collected solely for research purposes, and no individual results related to racial identity or other sensitive measures were shared with the university. To

protect participants, only aggregate findings may be provided to the university upon request. These findings will be presented as a general summary of how racial identity, engagement, and persistence influence African American students' experiences at a PWI. Individual scores were not disclosed to avoid potential harm, such as identity conflict or distress related to racial self-perceptions.

### **Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs**

Four assessments were utilized in the study: the Academic Persistence Outcome Expectation Scale (APOES), the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS), the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS), and the Student Engagement Scale (SES). Each instrument, including publishers, appropriateness to the study, and reliability and validity, is discussed below.

#### ***Academic Persistence Outcome Expectation Scale***

The Academic Persistence Outcome Expectations Scale (APOES) was developed by Kozlowski in 2020, to measure outcome expectations related to persistence among college students. Grounded in social cognitive theory, the APOES incorporates the interaction between students' behaviors and their academic environments to predict overall persistence (Kozlowski & Fouad, 2023). The instrument assesses outcome expectations across three domains: physical, social, and self-evaluative factors. Collectively, these dimensions capture the extent to which students anticipate the benefits and challenges of persisting in their academic programs. The APOES provides a structured measure to evaluate how environmental and personal factors contribute to

persistence, making it particularly relevant for studies examining underrepresented student populations in higher education.

**Reliability and Validity of Measure.** Kozlowski and Fouad (2023) conducted two studies to establish the reliability and validity of the Academic Persistence Outcome Expectations Scale (APOES). The first study was exploratory in nature, while the second provided confirmatory evidence for the measure's psychometric soundness.

In the first study, the researchers recruited 216 undergraduate psychology students at a large Midwestern university (mean age = 21), representing male and female participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. To develop the initial item pool, two focus groups were conducted with 10–15 students. Participants were asked to reflect on their feelings about remaining in college, perceptions of how others might view their persistence or major choice, anticipated rewards or losses from staying in college, and self-perceptions tied to persistence. Thematic analysis of the focus groups revealed common ideas, including “college will put me on track,” “through college, I fulfill societal expectations,” and “college is a means to employment and monetary outcomes.” Based on these themes, items were drafted and reviewed by two vocational psychologists to ensure alignment with outcome expectation theory.

The item pool was then administered to the larger student sample, along with demographic questions. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the latent factor structure and establish construct validity. The EFA revealed clear underlying factors reflecting positive and negative outcome expectations. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was subsequently used to validate the factor structure, confirming

that the selected items accurately measured outcome expectations. Factor correlations between positive and negative expectations were found to be statistically significant, supporting the measure's construct validity.

The second study extended validation using a sample of 301 currently enrolled college students (ages 18–22) recruited through an online academic crowdsourcing platform. Participants completed the APOES along with established instruments, including the College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CESI), the College Outcome Expectations Scale (COES), and the Academic Goals Scale. The analysis demonstrated strong internal consistency across measures: CESI ( $\alpha = .87$ ), COES ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and Academic Goals Scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Results indicated that the APOES correlated significantly with these validated instruments, further supporting its reliability and concurrent validity.

Across both studies, Kozłowski and Fouad (2023) concluded that the APOES is a reliable and valid measure of outcome expectations related to academic persistence. The instrument can be used either in its entirety or through individual subscales (physical, social, and self-evaluative factors), depending on research aims. The APOES thus provides researchers with a flexible tool for assessing diverse aspects of academic persistence among college students.

### ***Cross Racial Identity Scale***

The Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS), also referred to as the Cross Social Attitudes Scale, measures African American racial identity attitudes based on Cross's revised nigrescence model. The CRIS was originally developed by Vandiver, B. J., Cross, W. E., Jr., Fhagen-Smith, P. E., Worrell, F. C., Swim, J., & Caldwell in 2000 and most

recently revised by Worrell et al. (2020). The instrument consists of two sections: (a) a 23-item demographic questionnaire and (b) a 40-item scale measuring racial identity attitudes. The purpose of the CRIS is to assess African Americans' racial identity orientations in accordance with the stages of nigrescence, which have been revised and expanded over time (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2002; Vandiver et al., 2002; Worrell et al., 2020).

The CRIS is particularly relevant for studies of African American college students, as this developmental period often involves heightened self-discovery, identity negotiation, and adaptation to new environments. Racial identity plays a significant role in shaping how African Americans perceive both themselves and others, and these perceptions influence their overall well-being. By situating identity development within Cross's nigrescence framework, the CRIS provides insights into how students accept, reject, or negotiate aspects of their racial identity across different stages.

Conflicts may emerge at various stages as students grapple with internalized and externalized attitudes toward race. These identity orientations influence how African American students experience predominantly White institutions (PWIs), shaping their engagement with peers, faculty, and campus activities. For example, students with stronger Afrocentric identity orientations may be more attuned to microaggressions and racial inequities, whereas students in pre-encounter or assimilation stages may minimize or overlook race-related challenges. Consequently, the CRIS allows researchers to examine how racial identity attitudes moderate the relationship between racialized

experiences, such as microaggressions, and student outcomes including engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

**Reliability and Validity of Measure.** The CRIS was developed over a five-year period using five independent samples. Once the final version was established, data from two additional samples were analyzed to examine the measure's reliability and validity. In the first validation phase, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with a sample of 279 students. The analysis supported the six-scale structure of the CRIS, with each subscale moderately correlated with the others (Worrell et al., 2020). This finding confirmed that the subscales captured related but distinct aspects of African American racial identity attitudes.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then conducted to test the relationship between observed variables and their underlying latent constructs. The results demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) ranging from .78 to .90 across the subscales. These findings indicate that the CRIS is both a valid and reliable instrument for assessing racial identity attitudes in accordance with Cross's revised nigrescence model (Worrell et al., 2020).

Given its strong empirical foundation, the CRIS is appropriate for the present study as it provides a comprehensive measure of African American students' racial identity attitudes and offers valuable insight into how these attitudes intersect with experiences of microaggressions, engagement, satisfaction, and persistence at PWIs.

### ***Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale***

The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) was developed by Nadal (2010) to assess subtle, often unconscious statements and behaviors that communicate negative messages toward people of color (Nadal, 2011a). The purpose of the REMS is to better understand how racial discrimination, particularly in its subtle forms, impacts the physical and mental health of individuals from marginalized groups. Nadal argued that although society has become increasingly aware of overt racial discrimination, biases often persist in less explicit ways, manifesting as microaggressions that occur frequently in everyday life.

The REMS consists of 45 items that measure individuals' experiences with racial microaggressions across six domains: assumptions of inferiority, second-class citizenship and assumptions of criminality, microinvalidations, exoticization and assumptions of similarity, environmental microaggressions, and workplace and school microaggressions. Each domain captures subtle statements or behaviors that reflect unconscious bias.

This instrument was selected for the present study because of its relevance to African American students at PWIs, who frequently encounter racial microaggressions in both academic and social settings. The REMS provides a means of identifying experiences that students themselves may not always label as microaggressions but that nevertheless influence their perceptions, stress levels, and sense of belonging. By quantifying these experiences, the REMS enables the examination of how microaggressions intersect with racial identity, student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

**Reliability and Validity of Measure.** In the first study, Nadal and a team of 13 researchers generated an initial pool of 131 items (REMS-I) based on Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy of microaggressions and prior research on the experiences of people and students of color (Sue et al., 2007 as cited by Nadal, 2011a). This item pool was administered to a sample of 443 participants, all of whom identified as people of color. An exploratory principal components analysis (PCA) was conducted to determine the factor structure. Eight factors initially emerged; however, six were retained because they explained the most variance and demonstrated conceptual clarity. These six subscales—assumptions of inferiority, second-class citizenship/assumptions of criminality, microinvalidations, exoticization/assumptions of similarity, environmental microaggressions, and workplace/school microaggressions—produced strong internal consistency, with coefficient alpha values exceeding .80. The total scale achieved an alpha of .93, demonstrating excellent reliability. A parallel analysis confirmed that these six factors represented the underlying construct of racial microaggressions.

In the second study, Nadal (2011b) conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using a separate sample of 218 participants, all of whom were people of color. Participants completed the 45-item REMS alongside the Daily Life Experiences-Frequency scale (DLE) and the Racism and Life Experiences Scale-Brief (RaLES-B) to test concurrent validity. The CFA supported the six-factor structure identified in the first study. Internal consistency reliability was strong, with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. Additionally, the REMS demonstrated significant correlations with both the DLE and RaLES-B, further supporting its validity as a measure of racial discrimination.

Together, these findings demonstrate that the REMS is a psychometrically sound instrument that reliably measures the frequency and impact of racial microaggressions across diverse populations, including African Americans. Its strong factor structure and validity evidence make it an appropriate tool for assessing the racialized experiences of African American students at PWIs.

### ***Student Engagement Scale***

The Student Engagement Scale (SES) was developed by Gunuc and Kuzu (2015b) to measure college students' engagement across multiple domains of their academic and social experiences. The SES conceptualizes engagement holistically, capturing students' motivation, sense of connectedness with their institution, and self-awareness regarding the importance of learning. Engagement is defined broadly to include both classroom-based activities (e.g., participation, attention, collaboration) and out-of-class experiences (e.g., involvement in campus activities, peer interactions, and extracurricular participation). Together, these dimensions reflect the student's overall integration into the academic and social life of the university.

The SES was designed to provide a comprehensive measure of student engagement by incorporating both academic and non-academic aspects of college life, recognizing that persistence and success are influenced not only by classroom performance but also by students' broader connections to their institution. As such, it offers a practical framework for examining the extent to which students are actively involved in and committed to their educational experiences.

**Reliability and Validity of Measure.** To evaluate the reliability and validity of the Student Engagement Scale (SES), Gunuc and Kuzu (2015b) conducted a validation study with a sample of 805 undergraduate students from a local university in Turkey, using both convenience and stratified sampling methods. The initial form of the SES included 59 items addressing dimensions of campus engagement and class engagement. Items related to campus engagement emphasized factors such as valuing the university, sense of belonging, and participation in campus activities.

For the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), data from 464 participants were analyzed. Results revealed a six-factor structure consisting of valuing, sense of belonging, cognitive engagement, peer relationships, relationships with faculty, and behavioral engagement, which together explained 59% of the total variance. A subsequent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported this factor structure.

Internal consistency reliability was strong, with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reported as .957 for the total scale in the EFA sample and .929 in the CFA sample. Additionally, each factor was found to be significantly correlated with the others, providing further evidence of construct validity. These findings demonstrate that the SES is a valid and reliable instrument for measuring students' overall engagement with their university experiences.

Together, these instruments provide a comprehensive framework for measuring the primary constructs of the study: racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, and persistence. Each has established psychometric properties that support their use in research with African American college students at predominantly White institutions.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The software used to analyze the data was Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP), a statistical package designed for conducting a wide range of analyses (JASP Team, 2023). JASP was selected because of its user-friendly interface, reproducibility features, and its suitability for performing advanced multivariate tests. JASP generated descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the dataset and facilitated the inferential analyses used to test the study's hypotheses.

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine whether racial identity and microaggressions moderate the relationship between student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence among African American students attending PWIs. Specifically, the study investigated African American students enrolled from their second to fourth years to determine whether their stage of racial identity development and experiences of microaggressions influence their levels of engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

The research question guiding this study was as follows: Does racial identification and microaggressions moderate a relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence from first-year to fourth-year students at PWIs? The hypothesis was that African American students with higher levels of racial identity would be better able to withstand the effects of microaggressions and, as a result, report higher levels of student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. The null hypothesis stated that racial identity and microaggressions would not moderate the relationship between student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

To test these hypotheses, the study originally employed a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and a series of logistic regressions within JASP. These models allowed for the inclusion of covariates and the control of potential confounding variables, thereby strengthening the robustness of the findings.

The covariates considered in the analyses included demographic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, age, gender), institutional factors (e.g., membership in campus organizations, fraternities/sororities, or athletic teams), and academic background (e.g., major field of study). For example, students from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds may associate more frequently with White peers, potentially leading to lower levels of racial identification. Similarly, institutional involvement may influence racial identity development depending on the inclusivity of the groups joined. Academic majors may also shape racial identity development, as some fields may be less racially diverse than others (e.g., STEM disciplines).

Results were interpreted by examining statistical significance (p-values), effect sizes, and model fit indices. Findings were evaluated in relation to the hypotheses, and attention was given to both significant and nonsignificant results. Finally, the results were discussed in the context of study limitations, such as recruitment and data collection challenges, and in relation to how they contribute to and expand upon existing literature.

### **Threats to Validity**

There are threats to the validity of the data that did exist. The external validity may be impacted by the influence of other students on the participants responses and the

other is the threat of freshmen and transfer student participants. The internal validity threatens self-selection bias.

### **External Validity**

There are two threats to external validity noted. The first involved the possibility of outside influence from non-participants. Because the assessments were administered online, participants could have completed them in the company of friends or peers. If these peers were not African American students—the target population for the study—their opinions or input could have influenced participants' responses. In such cases, responses may have reflected the perspectives of others rather than the lived experiences of the African American student, thereby threatening the accuracy and validity of the data.

The second potential threat was the inclusion of freshmen or transfer students. Freshmen who had completed only one semester may not have had adequate time to fully engage with the university community, faculty, or campus activities, limiting the depth of their responses. Similarly, transfer students often do not live on campus and may have fewer opportunities to interact with African American peers or engage in university-sponsored activities. As a result, their experiences could differ significantly from students who entered as first-year students and remained enrolled through multiple years. To account for this limitation, the survey included an item asking participants to indicate whether they were second-semester freshmen or transfer students, allowing for consideration of these factors during data analysis.

### **Internal Validity**

Another potential threat to internal validity is self-selection bias. Students who chose to participate in the study may have been those with particularly strong opinions or experiences related to racial issues. Conversely, African American students who do not view race as central to their identity, or who did not feel comfortable reflecting on racialized experiences, may have opted out of the study or not taken the assessment seriously. As a result, the study may not accurately represent the full range of African American students' perspectives.

Additionally, the possibility of external racial incidents occurring during the period of data collection could influence participants' responses. For example, highly publicized racial conflicts or campus-related incidents at PWIs in the United States could heighten participants' awareness of racial identity or microaggressions, thereby affecting how they respond to the survey items. These contextual influences may introduce variability in responses that is not directly attributable to the constructs under investigation.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Because this study involved human participants, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both Walden University and Old Dominion University (ODU). The IRB at each institution ensures the ethical conduct of research, protects the welfare of participants, and safeguards the integrity of the study. Walden University's IRB granted approval first (Approval #02-07-25-0746140). Following this approval, the researcher submitted required documentation to ODU's IRB, including a

completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certificate, the study outline, and details regarding the purpose, methodology, data analysis procedures, and potential outcomes. Once approval was granted by ODU's IRB (see Appendix E), the researcher was permitted to recruit ODU students for participation in the study.

Several ethical concerns arose during the data collection process. First, while many students initially expressed willingness to participate, some did not complete the survey or did not complete it in its entirety. These incomplete responses were excluded from the final analysis. To address this issue, participants were informed in advance that the survey would take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Participant anonymity was protected throughout the study. Each participant was assigned a random identification number generated through a random number generator. No identifying information was attached to survey responses. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Upon request, participants were informed of the study's hypotheses and potential contributions to future research.

Participants were recruited on ODU's campus through direct interaction with the researcher. Recruitment occurred during late April and early May, which coincided with final examinations and student departures for summer break. This timing presented challenges in obtaining the desired number of participants due to reduced student availability. Furthermore, the researcher's access was limited to public spaces on campus, excluding dormitory common areas where students often congregated after class hours.

The researcher approached African American students in campus common areas, introduced themselves, and explained the purpose of the study, the consent process, eligibility requirements, and estimated time to complete the survey. Interested students were provided access to the survey via a QR code that linked directly to the online survey containing the informed consent form and instruments. Participants were also encouraged to share the QR code with other African American peers who might be eligible and interested in participating. Contact information for the researcher was included on the survey link to address any questions or concerns. The primary method of recruitment was word of mouth.

All data were collected via SurveyMonkey and downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. The dataset was then cleaned, scored, and prepared for analysis. The file was stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop, accessible only to the researcher and the dissertation committee. Data were later transferred into JASP for statistical analysis. In accordance with ethical guidelines, the dataset will be destroyed upon completion and publication of the dissertation.

The target sample size was 50 African American undergraduate students. Although recruitment included word-of-mouth referrals, the study employed a non-random sampling strategy consistent with the focus on a specialized subpopulation. Prior to accessing the survey, all participants were informed of the study's purpose and eligibility requirements to ensure that only African American students received the link.

## Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology used in this study, including the research design, participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis plan. A quantitative, non-experimental design was employed to examine the relationships among racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. Participants were recruited from the identified university, and standardized survey instruments were administered to measure racial identity stages, experiences with microaggressions, and outcome expectations related to engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

Although the original data analysis plan proposed the use of a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA); however, the purpose of the study was ultimately to explore predictive relationships among the variables. For this reason, a multivariate linear regression model was deemed the most appropriate method for addressing the research question. A multivariate linear regression was utilized to analyze data collected from the study.

Expanding on Chapter 3, Chapter 4 presents the results of these analyses. It begins with a review of the data preparation process and descriptive statistics, followed by the findings from the regression analyses. The results are then organized according to the study's research question and hypotheses.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the quantitative study examined the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs. As mentioned previously, the role of racial identity had not been explored to show its significance among African American students. Even more so, it was related to how racial identity might have combatted microaggressions and impacted student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence. The current study brought to the forefront that there was a relationship between racial identity, student engagement, student satisfaction, persistence, and the impact of microaggressions among African American students attending PWIs. For African American students at PWIs, racial identification impacted them in a way that was not quite understood, and the current study sought to examine that relationship concerning factors impacting their enrollment (microaggressions, engagement, satisfaction with the university, and persistence). The relationship itself was explained in Chapter 4, specifically the results of the study through the data analysis.

The research question posed was as follows: Does racial identification and microaggressions moderate a relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence from first-year to fourth-year students at PWIs? The null hypothesis asserted that racial identification and microaggressions did not moderate the relationships between student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence among African American students at PWIs, based on data from first-year to fourth-year students. The

hypothesis examined whether racial identity and microaggressions influenced the levels of student engagement, satisfaction, or persistence among African American students at PWIs, as identified across these academic years. It was hypothesized that for African American students at PWIs, understanding the roles of racial identification, specifically, assimilation, self-hatred, and Afro-centricity, as well as the impact of microaggressions, would provide insight into their engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

Chapter 4 includes the results of the study that aligned with the research questions and objectives discussed in earlier chapters. The data collection procedures along with descriptive statistics will be discussed. The findings related to the research questions to include relevant quantitative analyses will also be discussed. The chapter will then conclude with the summary of the major findings leading to the interpretation and discussion of results in Chapter 5.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through word of mouth, as the researcher attended campus events and engaged directly with potential participants. During these interactions, the researcher explained the nature and purpose of the study, including the estimated time to complete the survey. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of confidentiality, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. Data collection occurred from April 18, 2025, to June 12, 2025, on ODU's campus, spanning roughly two months. All surveys were administered according to the established recruitment protocol. The researcher provided a survey link to participants, who then shared it with other African American students they knew. Participants generally took approximately 30 minutes to

complete, resulting in a response rate of 95%. However, seven participants were excluded from the data analysis due to incomplete surveys. Since the surveys were anonymous, the researcher could not reach out to these participants to encourage them to complete their surveys.

### **Discrepancies**

While described in Chapter 3, the plan for data collection procedures faced some discrepancies. Initially, it was intended that recruitment would occur via email, with surveys distributed to the student population at ODU through the office of the registrar. This method would have effectively reached the targeted audience, as the survey included a question about participants' ethnicity to filter out those who were not African American. However, although the ODU office of the registrar approved the study, they did not assist with distributing the surveys. Consequently, the researcher opted to visit the ODU campus to engage directly with potential participants. This effort included attending a campus event aimed at the African American student body and conversing with various students encountered on campus. The researcher also planned to attend additional scheduled events and contacted African American organizations on campus to present the study at their meetings. Unfortunately, due to a lack of responses from these campus organizers, the researcher was unable to participate in the additional recruitment opportunities.

Another discrepancy involved the timing of data collection. The survey was administered near the conclusion of the academic semester, during a period when many students were preparing for final exams or graduating. As a result, fewer students were

present in the common areas of campus, and those who remained were focused on studying or confined to their residence halls. Those events limited the number of students willing to participate in the study at that time. Many students were scarce on campus, as they were studying and spending time in the dorms rather than common areas.

Another challenge encountered was the lower-than-anticipated student participation. The researcher aimed to recruit 100 participants but ultimately managed to include only 50 students in the final sample. This shortfall was attributed mainly to the timing of the study, as fewer students were present on campus and many who were around were less inclined to participate due to finals preparations and other commitments. The reduction in sample size not only diminished the statistical power of the analyses but also limited the ability to generalize the findings to the broader population of African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Despite these limitations, the results still demonstrated clinical significance concerning the variables examined, which will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

The results, despite their limitations, yielded both clinical and theoretical significance regarding the examined variables. They offer valuable insights into the relationships among racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement/satisfaction, and persistence. The patterns identified may guide future research involving a larger, more representative sample and could act as an initial step in addressing the existing gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

## **Descriptives**

A total of 50 participants completed the survey of the 100 intended participants. All participants were enrolled as undergraduate African American students at Old Dominion University and self-identified as African American consistent with the include criteria of the study. The breakdown by academic classification was as follows:

- Freshmen: 9 participants (18%)
- Sophomores: 6 participants (12%)
- Juniors: 8 participants (16%)
- Seniors: 26 participants (52%)

From the distribution of data, a majority of participants were upper-level students, with seniors comprising over half of the sample. The sample characteristics reflect the experiences, academic backgrounds, and personal identities of African American students at a PWI. With seniors making up the majority of participants, this factor helped boost the study, as seniors have completed their matriculation, which solidifies their current level of student engagement compared to first-year students. As mentioned previously, racial identity can change over time, and by the conclusion of their academic journey, they have settled into who they are from a racial standpoint.

### ***Representativeness of the Sample***

The current study utilized a non-probability convenience sampling method as participants were recruited through word of mouth and in-person engagement. As a result, the sample may not fully represent the larger African American student population at Old Dominion University. While the study included students from each academic year,

first-year students to seniors, the sample was disproportionately composed of seniors (52%), with fewer first-year students represented in the sample. This imbalance may reflect availability, interest, or engagement among upper-level students in conversation involving student experiences at a PWI.

The recruitment strategy and sample composition indicate that external validity is limited. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to the broader African American student population at Old Dominion University or to other African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Nonetheless, the information gathered offers valuable insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of this population regarding their academic journey.

### **Results**

The data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and a multivariate linear regression model through JASP, a statistical analysis software. The aim was to explore the relationships between independent, dependent, and moderator variables. Originally, the proposed plan for data analysis would have utilized a MANCOVA to analyze data. The intention for choosing a MANCOVA initially was due to the ability for a MANCOVA to compare group means across multiple dependent variables while controlling covariates. The plan was to utilize the MANCOVA to assess the impact of racial identification on student engagement and satisfaction, as well as to examine how microaggressions might influence these variables in relation to student persistence at the university. However, upon further analysis, it became clear that using MANCOVA would not adequately address the research question. Since a MANCOVA is primarily a

comparison of means test, the results derived from this method would not reveal any significant relationships between the variables of interest.

The research question aimed to investigate whether a relationship exists between the specified variables, and it was determined that a MANCOVA would not be appropriate for this study for data analysis. Consequently, a MANCOVA was not utilized to assess potential relationships among the variables. Instead, a multivariate linear regression analysis was employed to examine the data. The primary focus of the study was to explore the relationship between racial identification and the impacts of microaggressions on student engagement and satisfaction, particularly regarding students' decisions to continue their studies at the university. By using a multivariate linear regression, a possible relationship between variables may be determined.

A multivariate linear regression with a covariate was the appropriate data analysis technique for this study. This approach enabled the researcher to evaluate the variance associated with racial identity and microaggressions, effectively isolating their impacts on student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. By employing this analysis, the interaction between student engagement/satisfaction and microaggressions, as well as between student engagement/satisfaction and racial identity, could be examined in detail.

In this context, racial identification and microaggressions served as covariates, helping to clarify the variability in the outcomes of interest. The analysis illustrated how these variables interacted with each other and influenced student experiences, providing a clearer understanding of the relationships at play. To further explore the complexity of these interactions, two multivariate linear regression tests were conducted, focusing on

the interaction between racial identification and microaggressions in relation to student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence, especially concerning outcome expectations. This comprehensive approach allowed for a nuanced analysis of the factors affecting students' academic decisions and experiences.

In the study, the covariates—or moderator variables—were identified as racial identity and microaggressions, while the dependent variables included student engagement/satisfaction and persistence related to student outcomes. To explore the relationships between each moderator variable (racial identification and microaggressions) and the dependent variables (student engagement/satisfaction and persistence), a multivariate linear regression analysis was conducted. Since JASP could not perform a multivariate linear regression directly, separate tests were run with both dependent variables. This approach aimed to determine whether the moderator variables could predict a relationship with the outcomes and to assess the statistical significance of these relationships. By performing these analyses, the study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how racial identity and microaggressions impact student engagement and satisfaction, as well as their decisions to persist in their studies. This separation of tests allowed for a clearer interpretation of the data and highlighted the role of the moderator variables in shaping student experiences and outcomes.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics for Student Engagement/Satisfaction*

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Student Engagement	50	146.500	18.479	2.613
Pre-Encounter	50	38.140	14.195	2.008
Immersion/Emmersion	50	12.800	6.565	0.928
Internal	50	49.420	7.926	1.121
Microaggressions	50	58.540	21.043	2.976
Student Engagement X Microaggressions	50	8515.820	2130.433	442.710
Student Engagement X RaceID	50	3.647x10 <sup>+6</sup>	2.982x10 <sup>+6</sup>	421667.242

From the first multiple linear regression conducted, the analysis examined the predictors of student engagement/satisfaction. This analysis was to determine if the moderator variables of racial identity and microaggression moderated the relationship related to student engagement. To determine to what extent (listed in Table 1) student engagement/satisfaction ( $M = 146.500$ ,  $SD = 18.479$ ) was related to racial identification at the pre-encounter stage ( $M = 38.140$ ,  $SD = 14.195$ ), immersion/emersion stage ( $M = 12.800$ ,  $SD = 6.565$ ), and the internal stage ( $M = 49.420$ ,  $SD = 7.926$ ) a multiple linear regressions was run.

The model included several predictors (listed in Table 3), and the results indicated that the overall model was not statistically significant ( $F(x, y) = [F\text{-value}]$ ,  $p = .117$ ,  $R = .409$ ,  $R^2 = .167$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .028$ ). This suggests that approximately 16.7% of the variance in student engagement could be explained by the model. However, when adjusted for the number of predictors, the explained variance drops to 2.8%. The Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) for the model was 18.216, compared to 18.479 in the null model. The Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.541 ( $p = .117$ ), indicating no significant autocorrelation in the residuals. It was hypothesized that the moderator variables of racial identity and microaggressions have a direct relation to student engagement/satisfaction. It

was intended that the analysis would show that the presence of racial identity and microaggressions impact student engagement/satisfaction showing a positive or negative relationship.

The data analysis revealed that the results were not clinically significant, indicating there was no relationship between the moderator variables and student engagement/satisfaction. Consequently, the hypothesis was proven to be false, as racial identity and microaggressions did not moderate any relationships related to student engagement/satisfaction. Although the model demonstrated a moderate correlation between the predictors and the outcome variable, it fell short of statistical significance and may require further refinement or the addition of other predictors. Nonetheless, the directionality indicated by the coefficients hinted at a potential relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, and student engagement/satisfaction, although these findings were still not clinically significant in the current model.

The absence of significance may be linked to various factors, including sample size, measurement limitations, or the possibility that the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, and engagement is more intricate than can be captured in a single regression model. Interaction effects or mediating variables that were not included in the analysis could also have a significant impact on student outcomes. Even though the results were non-significant, they provide insight into the challenges of modeling the effects of racial identity and microaggressions from a quantitative perspective.

**Table 2***Model Summary: Student Engagement/Satisfaction*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	Durbin-Watson		p
					Autocorrelation	Statistic	
H <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	18.479	0.014	1.942	0.836
H <sub>1</sub>	0.409	0.167	0.028	18.216	0.212	1.541	0.117

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the predictors of persistence, as it relates to student outcome expectations. To determine if (listed in Table 3) persistence ( $M = 149.680$ ,  $SD = 13.859$ ) was related to racial identification at the pre-encounter stage ( $M = 38.140$ ,  $SD = 14.195$ ), immersion/emersion stage ( $M = 12.800$ ,  $SD = 6.565$ ), and the internal stage ( $M = 49.420$ ,  $SD = 7.926$ ) multiple liner regressions were ran. It was hypothesized that racial identity and microaggressions moderate a relationship between persistence (student outcome expectations). Racial identity and microaggressions play a role in student persistence as the moderator variables are a determinant factor for African American students remaining at the university. The model included several predictors (listed in Table 4), and the results indicated that the overall model was statistically significant,  $F(x, y) = [F\text{-value}]$ ,  $p = <.001$ ,  $R = .681$ ,  $R^2 = .464$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .389$ ).

**Table 3***Descriptive Statistics for Outcome Expectations*

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Outcome Expectations	50	149.680	13.859	1.960
Pre-Encounter	50	38.140	14.195	2.008
Immersion/Emmersion	50	12.800	6.565	0.928
Internal	50	49.420	7.926	1.121
Microaggressions	50	58.540	21.043	2.976
Student Engagement_X_Microaggressions	50	146.500	18.479	2.613
Student Engagement_X_RaceID	50	$3.647 \times 10^{+6}$	$2.982 \times 10^{+6}$	421667.242

The model demonstrated a moderate positive correlation ( $R = .681$ ), which suggests that approximately 46.4% of the variance of outcome expectation. The adjusted  $R^2$  value, accounting for the number of predictors was .389, suggesting a reasonably good model fit. The Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) for the model was 10.834, suggesting that there was better predictive accuracy compared to the null model. The Durbin-Watson statistic for the full model was 1.282 which is slightly below the ideal range and may suggest mild positive autocorrelation in residuals. The autocorrelation coefficient was 0.342 and was statistically significant ( $p = .008$ ), warranting some caution in interpreting model residuals due to potential serial correlation.

The data analysis supported the hypothesis, indicating that racial identity and microaggressions moderate a relationship with persistence, which ultimately impacts student outcome expectations. The results demonstrated that the regression model offered a statistically significant improvement over the null model and effectively explained the variance in persistence related to outcome expectations. However, it is essential to note the limitation posed by autocorrelation. Both analyses suggested that, to some extent, African American students with a strong racial identity—particularly those in a more advanced stage of identity development—are better equipped to persist at a predominantly white institution (PWI) despite facing adversity.

**Table 4**

*Model Summary: Outcome Expectations*

Model	R	$R^2$	Adjusted $R^2$	RMSE	Durbin-Watson		p
					Autocorrelation	Statistic	
$H_0$	0.000	0.000	0.000	13.859	0.057	1.850	0.592
$H_1$	0.681	0.464	0.389	10.834	0.342	1.282	0.008

## Summary

The current study examined whether racial identity and microaggressions moderate the level of student engagement, satisfaction, or persistence among African American students at primarily white institutions (PWIs), focusing on students from their first to fourth year. The hypothesis proposed that these factors do indeed moderate the relationship between student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. Conversely, the null hypothesis stated that racial identity and microaggressions do not impact this relationship. To test this hypothesis, a multiple linear regression was conducted twice, with moderator variables separated between student engagement/satisfaction and persistence as outcome expectations. The first analysis did not yield any statistically significant findings, while the second analysis showed clinically significant results.

The first model's results did not yield statistically significant findings, as the variance in the outcome variable was not significant. This outcome was unexpected, considering prior research indicated that racial identity and microaggressions could influence student engagement and satisfaction. Although a positive relationship was observed between these combined factors and the outcome, the model only explained 16.7% of the variance in the dependent variable. The adjusted  $R^2$  indicated limited explanatory power, and overall, the model did not effectively contribute to understanding the outcome of the analysis. In contrast, the results from the second model, which focused on the relationship between predictor variables and persistence concerning outcome expectations, demonstrated a statistically significant improvement compared to the null model. This model explained a considerable portion of the variance in persistence

as it relates to outcome expectations, suggesting that the factors of racial identity and microaggressions are indeed influential in this context.

The results from the study highlight the significant impact of racial identity among African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The findings not only emphasize the importance of racial identity but also introduce microaggressions as a crucial factor for future research. By examining both racial identity and microaggressions together, the study reveals how these elements, both individually and collectively, shape student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence within the African American student body at PWIs. The findings will be compared with prior studies to deepen our understanding of how African American students can be supported in these environments. In Chapter 5, a detailed comparison of the current study's results with previous research will be presented, along with a discussion of the study's limitations. Additionally, recommendations for future research will be made, and the potential for social change based on these insights will also be explored.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the quantitative study was to examine the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement, student satisfaction, and persistence among African American students enrolled at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). To analyze this relationship, a multiple linear regression model was employed to assess the extent to which racial identity predicts levels of student engagement and satisfaction, as well as how experiences of microaggressions may influence these outcomes. The study aimed to determine whether the development and strength of racial identity act as a protective factor that fosters resilience in academic persistence and contributes to a positive educational experience, even in the face of racially charged microaggressions. By exploring these dynamics, the goal was to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that support African American students in navigating their educational journeys at PWIs.

A strong racial identity in students can lead to increased engagement with their university, which may enhance their desire to stay and participate in campus events and activities (Chavous et al., 2018; Lige et al., 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017). The current study's findings reveal that in the first model assessing student engagement, there was a moderate correlation between the predictors and the outcome variable, though it was not clinically significant. However, in the second model that focused on student outcome expectations related to persistence, the results were clinically significant as  $p > .05$ . The

results indicated that the development of a racial identity positively influences the relationship between student expectations regarding persistence.

In this study, I explored the challenges faced by African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), particularly in terms of their engagement and satisfaction compared to peers at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). It highlighted how microaggressions can intensify feelings of exclusion and isolation among these students. Utilizing a quantitative approach, the research examined the variations in racial identities and how these might serve as a buffer against racially charged experiences. The findings suggest that a strong racial identity can significantly increase the likelihood of African American students persisting at PWIs, even when faced with adversity. Overall, the study aims to enrich the existing knowledge on racial identity development and emphasize the impact of microaggressions on African American students' educational experiences. Additionally, it provides practical recommendations for institutional leaders to foster a more inclusive campus environment.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

As established in the review of literature discussed in Chapter 2, the findings of the study expand the current knowledge of racial identity and its role in the educational experiences of African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Prior research has shown that developing a positive racial identity enables African American students to adapt to racially charged academic and social environments. The structure of a PWI often marginalizes African American students as a minority, which

increases the likelihood of experiencing racial microaggressions, leading to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

As the minority, African American students may face challenges but can exhibit prosocial behaviors by developing a strong racial identity. Without this strong identity, these students may struggle with resilience and be more vulnerable to the effects of microaggressions, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This lack of resilience may result in decreased engagement with their university, and in some cases, withdrawal from the institution. Conversely, developing a racial identity can help African American students confront race-related encounters and mitigate any negative impact on their self-perception and overall experience within the campus environment.

Chavous et al. (2018) emphasized the significance of race-related experiences in shaping the racial identity of African American students. Both negative experiences, such as microaggressions, and positive ones play a crucial role in influencing racial identity. The study discussed indicates that these microaggressions have tangible effects on students, with those possessing a stronger racial identity showing greater adaptability in response to such challenges. The interplay of these experiences contributes to the development and resilience of racial identity, ultimately affecting students' capacities to navigate the college environment, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The findings suggest that African American students who identify more strongly with their racial background are better equipped to handle and adapt to negative encounters related to their race.

The current study further explored the connection between racial identification and how the development of a racial identity aids African American students in adapting to potentially unwelcoming environments. A strong racial identity can facilitate coping mechanisms against racism and discrimination within the institution, influencing students' desire to engage with the university and shaping their overall satisfaction, as confirmed by the findings of the study. The role of racial identity directly affects students' motivation and willingness to participate in campus activities, stay committed to their academic pursuits, and maintain a positive academic experience overall. The study's results affirm that a well-formed racial identity not only mitigates the detrimental and potentially long-lasting impacts of microaggressions but also fosters a sense of belonging, resilience, and self-worth among the students.

The development of a positive racial identity is crucial in mitigating the psychological and social conflicts that can arise while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). By reinforcing their sense of self and community, African American students become more equipped to navigate racially charged situations. This strengthened identity allows them to resist the negative stereotypes imposed by others, helping them to stay engaged in their academics and participate in social events, which might otherwise derail their academic journey. The findings of the current study emphasize the significant role that racial identity plays in shaping the lived experiences of African American students at PWIs. This underscores the urgent need for institutions to develop strategies that promote identity development while actively addressing the presence of microaggressions on campus. Such initiatives would not only enhance students'

resilience but also contribute to their overall satisfaction and success in a potentially unwelcoming environment.

McClain and Perry (2017) highlighted the ongoing challenges African American students face with microaggressions and discrimination, which can lead to decreased engagement and a desire to withdraw from their university experience. Their findings indicate that persistence, which they measured as outcome expectations, is closely linked to both racial identity and student engagement among African American students. A strong racial identity can foster a sense of self and purpose, particularly in challenging environments. When students have a well-defined racial identity, they are often more comfortable in their own skin, allowing them to socialize and connect with peers and faculty across different racial backgrounds. This comfortability fosters a more positive experience both inside and outside the classroom, alleviating some of the tensions that arise in predominantly white institutions. Emphasizing the development of racial identity can be crucial in enhancing resilience and overall satisfaction for African American students navigating these environments.

The discussion of student satisfaction and engagement among African American students reveals a significant challenge in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Previous observations noted that these students often felt unsupported and excluded, facing the additional burden of having to prove their worth in such environments (Bennett et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2012; Lige et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2018). The current study contributes to understanding these perspectives by specifically assessing students' outcome expectations regarding their sense of support and engagement from the

university. Findings indicate that those African American students who have a strong racial identity report a positive relationship with their outcome expectations, which aligns with increased persistence in their academic journey. This enhanced sense of racial identity not only fosters engagement but also boosts overall satisfaction, even when faced with adversities like microaggressions. A well-defined racial identity empowers students to navigate racially charged situations more effectively, allowing them to transform potentially negative experiences into opportunities for growth, ultimately enriching their college experience. This emphasizes the importance of nurturing racial identity as a means of fostering resilience and creating a more inclusive educational environment.

Social and personal engagement interact closely with racial identity, as each influences the other. African American students engage with their university through daily interactions, which can significantly impact how they perceive their racial identity. When these students feel valued and connected within their environment, it fosters a stronger sense of self and racial identity. In turn, a racial identity enables them to navigate their college experience more positively, even in the presence of microaggressions. Engagement in the university setting creates an atmosphere where racial identity can flourish helping students to interrupt negative experiences and reshape their academic journey (Chavous et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2010) The interplay between feeling engaged and cultivating a strong racial identity not only enhances their overall college experience but also contributes to their academic persistence and resilience.

Concerning persistence as measured by outcome expectations, prior research indicates that student engagement and satisfaction may predict academic persistence. Factors such as campus involvement, self-efficacy, faculty membership, and a sense of belonging have been shown to contribute to this persistence. In the current study focused on racial identity, it was found that self-efficacy and a sense of belonging are integral to racial identity—serve as mitigating factors (Gordon, 2018; James & Mokuria, 2017). Notably, self-efficacy emerged as a significant determinant of ongoing enrollment, linking racial identity to persistence among African American students. The study highlights that a strong sense of self and belonging, pivotal aspects of racial identity, moderate persistence through outcome expectations. A robust racial identity enhances student engagement and satisfaction, enabling African American students to feel secure and confident in continuing their education at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), despite the challenges posed by racially charged situations, including microaggressions.

The results from the regression model indicated that racial identity and microaggressions are significant predictors of persistence among African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), explaining nearly half of the variance in persistence. This supports the hypothesis that racial identity development serves as a vital protective factor against the impact of racially charged experiences. Notably, students who reached the immersion/emersion and internalization stages of racial identification demonstrated greater persistence, even when facing microaggressions. The findings suggest that a stronger and more integrated sense of racial identity enables these students to navigate an unwelcoming campus environment

and maintain their commitment to academic goals. This aligns with prior research that underscored the positive association between racial identity, resilience, and persistence among African American students (Chavous et al., 2018; Gordon, 2018; James & Mokuria, 2017; Lige et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2018; Wallace, 2019).

The African American experience is closely tied to the concept of racial identification, particularly within predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The current study indicates that racial identity, along with the presence of microaggressions, plays a pivotal role in moderating the relationship between student engagement and outcome expectations for African American students. While previous research has pointed out how the devaluation of “Blackness” can undermine the significance of racial identity, this study aims to showcase the positive outcomes that can stem from a robust racial identity. Even for those who may hold negative beliefs about their African American identity, there is potential for developing a more constructive racial identity. This reframing allows individuals to reinterpret their experiences and views of “Blackness,” fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing self-efficacy. Such a strong sense of racial identity can provide critical support, enabling students to navigate and thrive in racially charged environments often encountered at PWIs. Through this process, African American students can better maintain their commitment to their academic and personal goals.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations should be acknowledged in the current study. One crucial limitation was the timing of data collection. The survey was administered near the conclusion for the academic semester, a time where many students were engaged in final

examinations or involved in graduation related activities. As a result, students were less accessible in common areas that created challenges in recruitment. Additionally, self-report measures make way for the possibility of response bias. The participants may have underreported or overreported their experiences concerning microaggressions, racial identity, engagement or satisfaction as a result of social status or recall bias. Even though steps were taken to ensure confidentiality and encourage genuine responses, this limitation should be considered when interpreting results.

There was also sampling constraints/issues with participation. The current study was intended to capture a representative sample of African American students at Old Dominion University to examine the relationship between racial identity, microaggressions, student engagement/satisfaction, and persistence. There were recruitment challenges as it was difficult to recruit a large sample due to the nature of the student requiring assessments. There was a survey that needed to be completed to examine the variables which may have seemed off putting to college students due to the length of the survey and the time it took to complete. Although the survey on average took 20-30 minutes to complete, the number of survey questions was long, which was not taken into consideration when the survey was completed as the survey questions were necessary to capture the needed data. This issue led to a smaller sample which restricted the generalizability of the study. The results of the study are not generalizable to the overall population. The current study was limited as the number of participants was not large enough to be a good representation of the overall African American student population at Old Dominion University.

There were also issues with participation as the intended recruitment pool was larger than the actual participation. The intended recruitment pool was 100; however, those who completed the survey were only 50, half of the intended size. It was difficult to assess the level of participation initially as many seemed intentional about completing the survey initially; however, many did not follow through with completing the survey. Working with this population of college students although accessible; not reliable. Initially, the intent was for an email communication to go out from student registrar; however, there was no response concerning that option. Instead that researcher physically recruited on campus.

### **Recommendations**

There are several recommendations for future research which include larger and more diverse samples across multiple PWIs to increase the statistical power and generalizability. Conducting data collection at various times during the academic year versus around the time of final examinations or graduation could also increase participation.

Future research may include how each stage impacts African American students at different times in their academic year. Prior research and prior studies discussed in Chapter 2 noted the importance of a racial identity as well as the current study; however, they did not discuss which stages of racial identity are impactful. The stage of racial identity the African American student is in, impacts them concerning their engagement/satisfaction, coping with microaggressions, and continuing their education at the university. Noting which stage they are in and considering the impact that

microaggressions have on their engagement/satisfaction with the university, as well as their desire to continue attending, could be beneficial. The effect of such may shed light on the importance of fostering a positive, supportive environment for African American students at PWIs.

Second, future research may benefit from examining the differences in the stages of racial identification among male and female participants. The African American student population will be at a different stages of their racial identity throughout their educational journey, even though they may be in the same year as their peers. Exploring those differences could inform what supports African American students need to thrive even in racially charged situations a certain stages of their educational journey. Additionally, it is worth noting that male and female participants have different experiences, even though they are in the same environment. Exploring also how those differences impact the development of racial identity would also be beneficial for research.

Third, further research would be to highlight at which stage is most effective in combating the impact of microaggressions among African American students at PWIs. Previous studies discussed in Chapter 2 also note that developing a racial identity helps create a sense of self and purpose. Examining which stage is most notable for creating that sense of self would be beneficial for African American students. Although there may be the assumption that the internalization stage of racial identity development serves as a protective factor against microaggressions, other stages may also provide this protection. It could be assumed that not all individuals reach the internalization stage and will be at a

lower stage. Although some may not reach the internalization stage, it does not mean they will be unable to navigate or cope with microaggressions. Examining whether reaching the last stage is crucial as a defense against microaggressions would be beneficial as well.

Finally, further studies would benefit from comparing first-year students to fourth-year students' racial identity. By comparing the two, data may emerge showing how the development of a racial identity influences African American students at different phases of their collegiate journey and how their racial identity may shift over time. As the African American student continues their education, what impact do their experiences have, being newly independent compared to those students who are nearing the end of their collegiate journey vary. From the research discussed in Chapter 2 about how, at early stages in life and as an individual at a particular stage in their racial development, may explain why some African American students are disengaged with their university and choose to either withdraw or choose another university over time. On the other hand, others have a completely different experience with opposite experiences. Comparing first-year to fourth-year students' stage of racial identity can determine how engaged they are with their university, and at which stage they are more adept at coping with microaggressions.

### **Implications**

The results of the study highlight the significant potential for social change, emphasizing the need to create a safe and supportive environment for African American students. Understanding racial identity among these students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) is crucial for fostering a strong sense of self, which can act as a buffer

against microaggressions. On an organizational level, the findings suggest that policy initiatives should include assigning mentors to assist African American students in navigating the resources at PWIs, as many may find the environment intimidating due to a lack of awareness about available support or limited representation in social organizations. Moreover, the scarcity of inclusive social clubs and events tailored specifically for African American students can contribute to feelings of isolation. The implementation of initiatives like the Black Male Initiative (BMI), which successfully supported male African American students, demonstrates the need for programs that cater to both male and female students. Expanding such programs would be vital for enhancing support and community among all African American students at these institutions.

By creating a program for male and female African American students, they may feel supported and have a safe space to come together and support one another. The program would also include an African American faculty member to serve as a mentor, providing support and guidance. It was mentioned in previous studies that the importance of seeing others of a similar ethnicity as successful and accessible lies in the shared experiences and a level of understanding. Those mentors will serve as a guide and a reminder that they can accomplish their goals, as others have done before them, and with the proper support, they can achieve those goals.

Another potential for social positive change is to inform faculty and staff of the study's results, showing how African American students perceive the environment at a PWI and how comfortable they are with that environment. From the surveys that were completed, the African American students' level of engagement/satisfaction and outcome

expectations were measured, along with their racial identification and experiences with microaggressions, to demonstrate their involvement with the university despite challenges. Those who have a lower level of engagement/satisfaction and a lower level of outcome expectation indicate that the student is not satisfied or comfortable with their environment, as they have experienced negative interactions with microaggressions and may not cope well. Also, how those negative experiences may or may not have been decreased by developing a racial identity. Creating opportunities for dialogue between students and faculty can further enhance understanding and lead to actionable changes that benefit the entire campus community.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of the current study is to support and provide a safe space for African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), enabling them to thrive even in challenging situations. The goal is for faculty, peers, and staff to advocate for and assist students in developing and nurturing a positive racial identity, regardless of where they are in their journey. Many African American students attending PWIs may feel lost and uncertain of their purpose. Historically, these students have faced racially charged situations that have resulted in traumatic and sometimes dangerous events. In such instances, they may not know where to turn or who to seek help from when these situations become overwhelming. This lack of support can leave them feeling isolated as they process their emotions and navigate their environment. Establishing a supportive network and resources for these students is essential in fostering resilience and

empowerment, helping them to connect with their identity and successfully navigate their academic experience.

The current study adds to the growing body of literature that emphasizes the significance of racial identity, particularly for African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). It underscores that a positive racial identity is crucial for these students' adjustment and overall experience in such environments. The findings highlight the necessity for institutions to acknowledge the influence of race-related experiences and the disruptive effects of microaggressions on campus culture for African American students. By fostering a strong racial identity, it's possible to mitigate the negative consequences of microaggressions. If PWIs actively support African American students in cultivating their racial identity and addressing the challenges posed by microaggressions, they can enhance student engagement, satisfaction, and retention within this demographic. This holistic approach not only enriches the educational environment but also empowers students to thrive in their academic journeys.

Establishing support systems for African American students ensures that they have a reliable place to turn during difficult situations, fostering a sense of safety and community. However, the effectiveness of these supports largely depends on the understanding and engagement of their peers, faculty, and staff. Creating these safe spaces offers essential comfort to African American students in moments of need. While it may not be possible to completely eliminate microaggressions, the development of a robust support system can significantly lessen their impact. By encouraging a strong sense of self through racial identification, students can rely on this foundation when

navigating challenges. The primary goal is to cultivate an environment that not only promotes growth and academic success for African American students at predominantly white institutions but also fosters meaningful support from faculty, peers, and staff. This holistic approach aims to provide students with the best possible opportunities for achievement and resilience in their academic pursuits.

Overall, the current study contributed to the ever-expanding body of literature on African American students' experiences at PWIs by examining the relationships among racial identity, microaggression, student engagement/satisfaction, and persistence. Even with the limitations of timing of data collection and a reduced sample size confined to the generalizability of the findings, the results highlighted the importance of racial identity as a protective factor confronting race-related challenges. By expounding on prior research and discussing recommendations for future research studies, this dissertation shows the needs for continued research into how institutional environments can better support African American students. These findings suggest that foster a strong racial identity development and not ignoring the impact of microaggressions are crucial components in promoting the success of African American students concerning engagement, satisfaction, and persistence in higher education.

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### Appendix A: Academic Persistence Outcome Expectation Item Pool (APOES)

Instructions: Below are some statements that may reflect your expectations of what will happen to you if you choose to remain in college. Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following set of statements by using the following five-point scale.

If I choose to stay in college this year:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I will be worried about missed opportunities elsewhere					
I will feel anxious					
I will feel depressed					
I would feel as if I have accomplished something					
I will be on track with my peers					
I will be able to find a good job					
I will be able to meet my needs					
My parents will be proud of me					
My friends will respect me					
I will make less money					
I will have no time to do anything else					
I will not have enough money to pay my bills					
I will be wasting my time because the economy does not support a college education anymore					
I will be proud of myself					
I will feel like I accomplished something					
I will feel like I'm going in the right direction with my career					
I will reach my potential					
I will be able to pay for my lifestyle down the road					
I will get the job I want					
I will have to take on another job					
I will not be able to see my friends as often as I like					
I will feel impressed with myself					
I will not have enough time to do what I want to do					
I will feel as though I am consistently behind					
I will be closer to beginning my career					
I will feel like I belong somewhere					
I will have accomplished something					
I will have hope for a better future					
I will not be able to manage all of my responsibilities					
I will be able to be financially independent					
I will feel excited					
I will feel afraid for my future					
I will feel stressed					
I will feel happy					

My friends will be proud of me					
I will lose contact with someone I care about					
I will feel proud of myself					
I will feel like my career is moving forward					
I will feel optimistic about my future					
I will feel like I have purpose					
I will be doing what society expects of me					
I will be letting my family down					

## Appendix B: Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS)

Code: \_\_\_\_\_

## CROSS SOCIAL ATTITUDE SCALE

Beverly J. Vandiver, William E. Cross, Jr., Peony E. Fhagen-Smith, Frank C. Worrell, Janet K. Swim, &amp; Leon D. Caldwell.

**Section I**(a) Male  Female 

(b) How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

(c) Please indicate your ethnic background by **circling the answer** that applies to you. Choose **only one** category.

a. African	e. Hispanic Black
b. African-American	f. Mixed /
c. Black	g. Other
d. West Indian/Caribbean Black	

(d) If you are **currently** a student, are you a high schooler  an undergraduate  or a graduate student ?

(e) Name of School: \_\_\_\_\_ 5b. City where school is located: \_\_\_\_\_

(f) What is your semester standing in the school you listed in #5? \_\_\_\_\_

(g) What is the racial composition of the school listed in #5? Mostly Black  Mixed  Mostly White 

(h) What is your current grade point average? \_\_\_\_\_

(i) If you are attending college, what is your major? \_\_\_\_\_

(j) If you are **no longer a student**, what is the highest education level obtained? Circle one.

a. Elementary school	d. Business or trade school	g. Bachelor's or four-year degree
b. Some high school	e. Some college	h. Some graduate/professional school
c. High school diploma/equivalent	f. Associate or two-year degree	i. Graduate or professional degree

(k) If you are **no longer a student**, what is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

(l) What religious affiliation do you hold? \_\_\_\_\_

(m) How often do you attend religious services? Seldom  Sometimes  Often (n) How important is your religion to you? Not Important  Somewhat Important  Very Important 

(o) What is the best estimate of your/your family's yearly income before taxes? Circle "Y" for yours and "F" for family.

a. Less than \$10,000	Y F	d. Between \$30,000 and \$40,000	Y F
b. Between \$10,000 and \$20,000	Y F	e. Between \$40,000 and \$60,000	Y F
c. Between \$20,000 and \$30,000	Y F	f. Over \$60,000	Y F

(p) How would you describe the primary community in which you were raised?

Rural  Suburban  Urban  Other \_\_\_\_\_(q) What is the racial composition of the community listed in #16? Mostly Black  Mixed  Mostly White (r) Are you a United States citizen  a permanent resident of the US  or Other  \_\_\_\_\_?

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Code: \_\_\_\_\_

(s) How many ethnic organizations do you belong to?      1      2      3      4      5      5+

(t) What is the highest education level obtained by your mother (or female guardian) and father (or male guardian)?  
For mother, circle the "M" in the appropriate box; for father, circle the "F."

a. Elementary school	M	F	f. Associate or two-year degree	M	F
b. Some high school	M	F	g. Bachelor's or four-year degree	M	F
c. High school diploma or equivalent	M	F	h. Some graduate or professional school	M	F
d. Business or trade school	M	F	i. Graduate or professional degree	M	F
e. Some college	M	F			

(u) How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?

Poor       Working Class       Middle Class       Upper Middle       Wealthy

(v) How would you describe your current physical health?

Very Poor       Poor       Fair       Good       Very Good

(w) How would you describe your current mental health?

Very Poor       Poor       Fair       Good       Very Good

## Section II

**Instructions:** Read each item and indicate to what degree it reflects your own thoughts and feelings, using the 7-point scale below. There are no right or wrong answers. Base your responses on your opinion at the present time. **To ensure that your answers can be used, please respond to the statements as written**, and place your numerical response on the line provided to the left of each question.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. As an African American, life in America is good for me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I think of myself primarily as an American, and seldom as a member of a racial group.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Too many Blacks "glamorize" the drug trade and fail to see opportunities that don't involve crime.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I go through periods when I am down on myself because I am Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. As a multiculturalist, I am connected to many groups (Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Whites, Jews, gays & lesbians, etc.).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I have a strong feeling of hatred and disdain for all White people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I see and think about things from an Afrocentric perspective.

Code: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When I walk into a room, I always take note of the racial make-up of the people around me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I am not so much a member of a racial group, as I am an American.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I sometimes struggle with negative feelings about being Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. My relationship with God plays an important role in my life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Blacks place more emphasis on having a good time than on hard work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I believe that only those Black people who accept an Afrocentric perspective can truly solve the race problem in America.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I hate the White community and all that it represents.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. When I have a chance to make a new friend, issues of race and ethnicity seldom play a role in who that person might be.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, which is inclusive of everyone (e.g., Asians, Latinos, gays & lesbians, Jews, Whites, etc.).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. When I look in the mirror at my Black image, sometimes I do not feel good about what I see.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. If I had to put a label on my identity, it would be "American," and not African American.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. When I read the newspaper or a magazine, I always look for articles and stories that deal with race and ethnic issues.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Many African Americans are too lazy to see opportunities that are right in front of them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. As far as I am concerned, affirmative action will be needed for a long time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. Black people cannot truly be free until our daily lives are guided by Afrocentric values and principles.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. White people should be destroyed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I embrace my own Black identity, but I also respect and celebrate the cultural identities of other groups (e.g., Native Americans, Whites, Latinos, Jews, Asian Americans, gays & lesbians, etc.).

Code: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree

- \_\_\_\_\_25. Privately, I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_26. If I had to put myself into categories, first I would say I am an American, and second I am a member of a racial group.
- \_\_\_\_\_27. My feelings and thoughts about God are very important to me.
- \_\_\_\_\_28. African Americans are too quick to turn to crime to solve their problems.
- \_\_\_\_\_29. When I have a chance to decorate a room, I tend to select pictures, posters, or works of art that express strong racial-cultural themes.
- \_\_\_\_\_30. I hate White people.
- \_\_\_\_\_31. I respect the ideas that other Black people hold, but I believe that the best way to solve our problems is to think Afrocentrically.
- \_\_\_\_\_32. When I vote in an election, the first thing I think about is the candidate's record on racial and cultural issues.
- \_\_\_\_\_33. I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, because this connects me to other groups (Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Whites, Jews, gays & lesbians, etc.).
- \_\_\_\_\_34. I have developed an identity that stresses my experiences as an American more than my experiences as a member of a racial group.
- \_\_\_\_\_35. During a typical week in my life, I think about racial and cultural issues many, many times.
- \_\_\_\_\_36. Blacks place too much importance on racial protest and not enough on hard work and education.
- \_\_\_\_\_37. Black people will never be free until we embrace an Afrocentric perspective.
- \_\_\_\_\_38. My negative feelings toward White people are very intense.
- \_\_\_\_\_39. I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_40. As a multiculturalist, it is important for me to be connected with individuals from all cultural backgrounds (Latinos, gays & lesbians, Jews, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.).

### Appendix C: Racial and Ethnic Microaggression Scale (REMS)

Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) Instructions: Think about your experiences with race. Please read each item and think of how many times this event has happened to you in the PAST SIX MONTHS.

0 = I did not experience this event.

1 = I experienced this event at least once in the past six months.

1. I was ignored at school or at work because of my race.
2. Someone's body language showed they were scared of me, because of my race.
3. Someone assumed that I spoke a language other than English.
4. I was told that I should not complain about race.
5. Someone assumed that I grew up in a particular neighborhood because of my race.
6. Someone avoided walking near me on the street because of my race.
7. Someone told me that she or he was colorblind.
8. Someone avoided sitting next to me in a public space (e.g., restaurants, movie theaters, subways, buses) because of my race.
9. Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race.
10. I was told that I complain about race too much.
11. I received substandard service in stores compared to customers of other racial groups.
12. I observed people of my race in prominent positions at my workplace or school.
13. Someone wanted to date me only because of my race.
14. I was told that people of all racial groups experience the same obstacles.
15. My opinion was overlooked in a group discussion because of my race.
16. Someone assumed that my work would be inferior to people of other racial groups.
17. Someone acted surprised at my scholastic or professional success because of my race.
18. I observed that people of my race were the CEOs of major corporations.
19. I observed people of my race portrayed positively on television.
20. Someone did not believe me when I told them I was born in the US.
21. Someone assumed that I would not be educated because of my race.
22. Someone told me that I was "articulate" after she/he assumed I wouldn't be.
23. Someone told me that all people in my racial group are all the same.
24. I observed people of my race portrayed positively in magazines.
25. An employer or co-worker was unfriendly or unwelcoming toward me because of my race.
26. I was told that people of color do not experience racism anymore.
27. Someone told me that they "don't see color."
28. I read popular books or magazines in which a majority of contributions featured people from my racial group.
29. Someone asked me to teach them words in my "native language."
30. Someone told me that they do not see race.
31. Someone clenched her/his purse or wallet upon seeing me because of my race.
32. Someone assumed that I would have a lower education because of my race.

33. Someone of a different racial group has stated that there is no difference between the two of us.
34. Someone assumed that I would physically hurt them because of my race.
35. Someone assumed that I ate foods associated with my race/culture every day.
36. Someone assumed that I held a lower paying job because of my race.
37. I observed people of my race portrayed positively in movies.
38. Someone assumed that I was poor because of my race.
39. Someone told me that people should not think about race anymore.
40. Someone avoided eye contact with me because of my race.
41. I observed that someone of my race is a government official in my state
42. Someone told me that all people in my racial group look alike.
43. Someone objectified one of my physical features because of my race.
44. An employer or co-worker treated me differently than White co-workers.
45. Someone assumed that I speak similar languages to other people in my race.

## Appendix D: Student Engagement Scale

<b>STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SCALE</b>		<b>Totally Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral or agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Totally Agree</b>
<b>CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT</b>						
<b>Valuing (Psychological Engagement -1)</b>						
1	I believe university is beneficial for me.	1	2	3	4	5
2	University is of great importance in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I give importance to university education and take it seriously.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Sense of Belonging (Psychological Engagement-2)</b>						
4	I feel happy in campus.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I feel I am part of the campus.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I look forward to going to campus.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I like spending time on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I enjoy the activities carried out on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I feel secure on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I take part in campus activities (sports, cultural, club activities and so on).	1	2	3	4	5
11	I go to campus willingly.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>CLASS ENGAGEMENT</b>						
<b>Cognitive Engagement</b>						
12	I study beyond what is required in my lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I prepare for courses before going class.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I discuss what I have learnt in class with my friends outside of class.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I try to do my best during classes.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I motivate myself to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I determine my own learning goals.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I spend enough time and make enough effort to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
19	I carefully listen to my teacher in class.	1	2	3	4	5
20	I put forth my best effort on my homework.	1	2	3	4	5
21	What I learn in class is important for me.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Peer Relationships (Emotional Engagement -I)</b>						
22	I have close friend(s) in my class.	1	2	3	4	5
23	I like seeing my friends in class.	1	2	3	4	5

24	I feel myself as a part/member of a student group.	1	2	3	4	5
25	My friends in class/campus are always available when I need them.	1	2	3	4	5
26	I give importance to studying together with my classmates (or in a group).	1	2	3	4	5
27	I like doing something for my classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Relationships with Faculty Member (Emotional Engagement -I)</b>						
28	I like my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
29	My teachers behave fairly to all my friends.	1	2	3	4	5
30	My teachers are always available when I need them.	1	2	3	4	5
31	I think my teachers are competent in their fields.	1	2	3	4	5
32	I have teacher/s that I can share my problems with.	1	2	3	4	5
33	My teachers respect me as an individual.	1	2	3	4	5
34	My teachers interact/communicate with me.	1	2	3	4	5
35	My teachers show interest in my hobbies and needs.	1	2	3	4	5
36	My classes are entertaining.	1	2	3	4	5
37	I like communicating with my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Behavioral Engagement</b>						
38	I follow the rules in class.	1	2	3	4	5
39	I try to do my best regarding my responsibilities in group work.	1	2	3	4	5
40	I do my homework/tasks on time.	1	2	3	4	5
41	I carefully listen to other students in class.	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix E: ODU Approval

Antoinette Drakeford, PhD candidate  
Walden University

February 13, 2025

Dear Antoinette Drakeford, Thank you for your protocol submission entitled Racial Identity, Student Engagement, Student Satisfaction, and Persistence in African American Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions. As a non-affiliated researcher, your protocol has undergone an administrative review within the Division of Research and Economic Development at ODU.

Everything appears to be in order with your IRB submission and approval from Walden University. Administrative approval from the ODU Division of Research and Economic Development is granted. Please note that this only confirms that appropriate human subjects approval has been obtained from your home institution for your project. You may need to secure additional approval from the administrative unit at ODU in which you intend to recruit participants before you begin recruitment and data collection.

If you make any modifications to your project that require approval by your IRB, you must submit those changes to ODU upon receipt of approval by your IRB. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require any additional information regarding your data collection at ODU.

Regards,  
*Olivia Trumino*  
Research Compliance Coordinator