

THE ROLE OF SUPPORT IN STUDENT OF COLOR WELL BEING AFTER 2020

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THE ROLE OF SUPPORT IN STUDENT OF COLOR WELL BEING AFTER 2020

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a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
METHOD.....	8
FINDINGS.....	12
DISCUSSION.....	26
REFERENCES .....	32

## ABSTRACT

The socially and politically tumultuous year of 2020 has provided a unique mix of additional stressors on folks living in the United States, particularly for students of color. The current study employed qualitative methods to examine how this historic time affected undergraduate students of color at a large Predominantly White University and the extent to which they felt supported by faculty and administration on their campus. The study's findings revealed the mental toll that race-related experiences on campus take on students as well as the power of having professors who students perceive to be genuinely supportive. Ultimately, findings highlight the need for a stronger emphasis on multicultural competence in academia, and better training for faculty and administrators, so that the burden does not fall onto students of color to navigate and overcome further harm done within their educational institution.

## Introduction

The year 2020 and into 2021 has been a historic time for a multitude of reasons, with tensions in the social-political climate particularly high. The COVID-19 pandemic has created monumental changes and challenges across all walks of life. The killing of George Floyd and many other Black people across the nation by police, the election, and subsequent aftermath, including the Capitol violence, has amplified many of the issues in America that already existed. To say that this has been a difficult year would be an understatement. However, to say that it was equally difficult for everyone would be a gross misrepresentation of the events that have taken place from the summer of 2020 through the winter of 2021 and beyond. Despite the increased efforts to be anti-racist, not only has this been a response to extreme violence and hatred towards Black Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), but it also creates a climate where BIPOC are more than ever needing to be made aware of their racial identity. When these national events happen, it is extremely difficult for people to carry on throughout their days normally, especially for those who are more directly affected, like BIPOC and those with other marginalized identities.

This is particularly difficult for college students who have also had to adjust to online learning and increased isolation in a time when peers are a huge part of their lives. As academic responsibilities persist, the outside world seemingly falls apart, and one cannot simply isolate their identity as a student from their other social identities that have been consistently put under attack. With all of these pressures, faculty support and involvement comes into question. During this time, faculty and administrators have had to make critical decisions regarding how they

would address these events as they come, or if they wanted to address them at all. Mass emails have been sent, and some may have taken extra efforts to check on their students. Others may choose to ignore it entirely. Given the wide range of choices faculty and administration have, it would be important to understand how students perceive these efforts or lack thereof in some cases. This would allow educators to be able to better meet the needs of their students.

### **Mental Health Impacts from Racism and Racialized Incidents**

Racism has been well documented as a source of stress and negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric symptoms (Pieterse et al., 2012). During the summer of 2020 and beyond, racism has manifested in a multitude of different ways, serving as an almost constant onslaught of attacks on mental health for people of color. Despite the recency of events such as the 2020 election and the racial uprisings in the summer of 2020 as a response to the murder of George Floyd, racism and police violence are by no means new. Therefore, scholarship related to previous events may also glean valuable findings that can be applied to the current climate.

Previous literature has indicated the deleterious mental health impacts of police violence, not only for those who experience it firsthand, but even from hearing about it from a friend, family member, or the news media (Pryce et al., 2021). In fact, police violence in the news plays an integral role in the transmission of vicarious trauma, and can account for anger, mistrust, resentment, etc. that Black people have of police or race relations in general. This supports claims of trauma for Black people during the highly publicized murders of George Floyd in May 2020, in addition to Breonna Taylor,

Rayshard Brooks, Tony McDade, and many more. Racial discrimination alone is also considered racial trauma, especially when there is an accumulation of experiences with racism (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019). Therefore, with the build-up of many racist events in the news during 2020 and 2021, racial trauma could be at increasingly heightened levels.

The protests in response to the police violence against Black people may also serve as a source of stress. Ni and colleagues (2020) found evidence of increased depressive symptoms following major protests regardless of one's involvement, especially for those with lower socioeconomic status (SES), women, those who have been exposed to violence, and more frequent social media use. This is important information given the violence that broke out at a number of protests in the summer of 2020 and the widespread coverage on social media. With the violence at these protests often coming from the police and towards protesters of color, this has likely contributed to the mental toll that 2020 has taken on many BIPOC communities.

Impacts on mental health have also been documented as a result of the 2016 election. For college students in general, a daily diary study revealed an uptick in anxiety, stress, and poor sleep quality starting the day after the election, with many reporting feelings of fear and anger (Roche & Jacobson, 2019). Notably, feelings of marginalization and experiences of discrimination also increased in these days. Albright & Hurd (2020) also found a spike in anxiety following the election for college students with marginalized identities compared to those without. This rate of anxiety also increased as one's number of targeted marginalized identities increased, such that someone who has multiple marginalized identities had a greater spike in anxiety compared to someone with only one targeted marginalized identity.

More specifically, at the time of the 2016 election, there had been an increase in debate surrounding immigrants and concerns over the border with Mexico, leading to exacerbated victimization of Latinos. Consistent with this aspect of the social-political climate, around this time, Spanish speaking individuals had a marked change in internet search behavior related to mental health, reflecting greater mental distress compared with non-Spanish speaking individuals (Krupenkin et al., 2019). Even more notable, additional research findings confirm that Latin adolescents experienced greater peer discrimination, which they attributed to anti-Latino and -immigrant political rhetoric (Booth & Huerta, 2020). These youth reported feeling more anger, sadness, and powerlessness as a result. Similarly, Muslim college students experienced a rise in clinically significant mental health symptoms in the 14 months after the election (Abelson et al., 2020). In the context of the last year, although the election itself had a different direct outcome, the surrounding discussions before and after continue to perpetuate oppressive views that attack the humanity of marginalized folks and highlight the existing inequities in our country. This was prominent not only in the platforms being discussed by politicians that trickle down and embolden everyday citizens, but also in the aftermath of the accusations of election fraud and the violence at the capitol at the beginning of 2021. Therefore, it may be helpful to use these previous findings from the time of the 2016 election to inform hypotheses about psychological impacts from the current climate.

Numerous studies suggest the ongoing events occurring on the national level can create microcosms within college campuses, creating a hostile and distressing environment for students of color (Ali 2019; Mwangi et al., 2018; Schuster, 2020; Yao et al., 2020). Black students reported feeling that their campus climate mirrored the racial

climate occurring throughout the nation as it relates to tensions with police, concerns about their safety, and experiencing bolder expressions of racism, which they attributed to Donald Trump's blatantly racist rhetoric (Mwangi et al., 2018). This left them feeling hyper-aware of their racial identity on campus. Similarly, students who identify as Muslim noted that they felt that they were often stereotyped and treated with suspicion by faculty and peers alike (Ali, 2019). This treatment sends continuous messages of "othering" within a single community. Students also often commented on how their institution as a whole responded to nationwide racial hostility. Many questioned why their university was not taking a stronger stance against racism, and noted that this contributed to feelings of hostility or marginalization, which communicates messages about their value and even safety on campus (Schuster, 2020; Yao et al., 2020). The sentiments of these students are consistent with research findings that point to experiences of campus racial discrimination as detrimental to campus belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

### **Buffers Against Racism for Students**

Systemic change is ultimately necessary to increase success and well-being for students of color, but in the meantime, there are other protective factors that can act as a buffer for some of these negative impacts of racism and related occurrences. For example, social support can be an important factor in mobilizing coping resources for marginalized students. Support from family, friends, and significant others has been shown to promote resilience (Brown, 2008; Juang et al., 2016). On college campuses in particular, support from faculty and administration can play a significant role in a student's well-being, success, and overall belonging on campus. For example, Hurtado

and colleagues (2015) found that validating experiences with faculty and staff mitigated impacts of discrimination and bias on their sense of belonging on campus. This is important because sense of belonging has also been well established as an integral part of success and well-being in college. For example, at the classroom level, sense of belonging has been associated with students' academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and task value (Freeman et al., 2007). It is also central for a student's decision to persist at school (Hausmann et al., 2009). This is especially vital for students who are highly minoritized, such as women of color in STEM (Johnson, 2009).

Additional exploration into this construct has demonstrated that instructor's expression of warmth, openness, and their encouragement of student participation is also strongly linked with student belonging (Freeman, 2007). When faculty are perceived as more accessible, approachable, and authentic, students of color are more likely to persist in the face of other stressors or challenges (Booker, 2016). In addition to individual faculty, universities as a unit have a responsibility to tend to students needs to promote their success. Hussain and Jones (2021) found that a positive perception of institutional commitment to diversity can also increase students' experiences of belonging. Notably, in one study, more positive perceptions of overall campus climate was linked with psychological well-being for students of color but not for White students, indicating the importance for faculty and administration to create an environment of inclusivity and take a strong stance against racism (Koo, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 1995) provides an integrative framework for contextualizing the self within larger

systems and outlining risk and resilience factors related to race, class, etc. This framework is particularly useful for examining the self within the sociocultural context throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this lens, race/ethnicity would be considered a risk factor as it. In addition, in the context of the current study constructs, faculty support may be seen as a resilience factor. Thus, a student's ethnic and/or racial minority status can put them at greater risk for negative mental health impacts and sense of belonging in conjunction with the negative impacts in the macrosystem related to racist rhetoric and occurrences. However, components in a student's microsystem can possibly correct for this, including the level of support they receive from faculty. Therefore, if they do receive more support, this could potentially offset the deleterious mental health impacts of the other existing risk factors on their sense of belonging. In addition, efforts on the part of the administration at one's educational institution can also make a positive impact if they demonstrate a commitment to diversity and anti-racism.

Thus, the current study addresses these risk and protective factors by inquiring more specifically about the faculty level supports. By examining the different student-faculty interactions and the perceived impacts from students of color, the current study will aim to understand more about what types of faculty support and interactions act as protective factors and any faculty interactions that may be actively unsupportive and serve as risk factors.

This study also used a critical framework as a lens to guide the research. Hallmarks of critical qualitative inquiry are the commitment to social justice and ethical responsibility in research (Canella et al., 2016). More specifically, its goals are to center voices that are most marginalized, expose underlying power relations in research and in

everyday life, and also to critique or challenge inequality and discrimination that is born from these power relations. The general subject matter of this study alone brings attention to systems of oppression at the national level and their impact on daily life, as well as the potential role for academic institutions of power. The research questions also seek to inquire specifically about the experiences of students of color, thus centering voices who are marginalized.

Another principle of critical inquiry is the acknowledgement of history and the past and present contexts (Cannella, 2016). Inherent to this study is the racist past of the United States and the embedded systems of oppression that allowed the events of 2020 to unfold as they did. Though the year 2020 was difficult on everyone, the lines of inquiry in this study recognize that students of color will have been uniquely impacted due to social and historical contexts of racism. Finally, this study ultimately has an aim of social change and social justice. Through giving voice to marginalized students on campus, this study seeks to inform future work that may intervene at the institutional level to make students feel more supported and more at home at Predominantly White Institutions (Canella et al., 2016).

The following research questions helped to guide the study:

1. To what extent have students of color felt supported by their professors?
2. How do students feel faculty contribute to students' sense of belonging in the classroom, department?
3. How have students' experiences on the greater campus community been impacted?

## **Method**

The current study represents a preliminary round of data collection and analysis, and is meant to serve as a pilot for a larger study. This study was guided by narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry was chosen to elicit story telling from participants about their experiences. Given that the focus of the study was around a specific period in time related to specific national events that happened, narrative inquiry was a helpful methodology to allow participants to construct narratives of how they as experienced these events, the immediate aftermath of the events, and the lasting impacts that persist almost two years later. The act of story-telling and giving space to have participant voices heard in this way was intended to be empowering to the participants. Through the lens of intersectionality, the approach in this study was guided by the assumption that one's unique positionality or social identities, and their interaction with systems of oppression will differentially impact one's lived experiences. Therefore, students of color were targeted for recruitment

***Participants and Procedure.*** Three participants were selected to be a part of this phase of the study. The participants were three undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. Participants all identified as Black, two of which were bi-racial. Individual participants identified as queer, biracial and gay. Two participants identified as cisgender women, and one was agender. Participants also needed to have been a college student since 2020, so they needed to be upperclassmen. Additional more specific participant details are left out to maintain confidentiality. Participant names used in the study are all pseudonyms. To recruit participants, an email was sent out to groups on campus that have a large number of students of color or are centered around a minoritized racial identity. Students were given information about the study and asked to contact the

researcher indicating their interest. Once contact was made, they were sent an informed consent form and asked to fill out a brief demographics survey via Microsoft Teams. The interview was then scheduled to take place over Zoom. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and lasted approximately 60 minutes in length. Interviews were recorded via Zoom. In following a narrative tradition, the interview included questions that prompted storytelling of one's experiences, such as "Can you tell me a story from when you were on campus in 2020?" or "Can you tell me about a specific time when you felt supported by a professor?" In addition, in an effort to co-construct meaning from the narratives, participants were asked explicit questions to gauge their internal interpretation of the events. Follow-up questions such as "What messages did that send you?" or "What was that like for you?" aided in this process.

Following the interview, participants were sent a debriefing form which also included mental health and coping resources. Participants were sent \$30.00 for their participation in the interview through the mobile payment medium of their choice. After the interview, the transcript provided by Zoom was edited and cleaned up for errors. Once this process was finalized, the video recording footage was deleted.

***Analysis.*** The current early pilot phase of the project reflected preliminary analyses, with more rigorous analysis planned for the next phase of the study. A narrative thematic analysis was used to interpret the data following the interviews (Reissman, 2008). Instead of traditional thematic analysis, in which the data for each participant is broken up into small pieces, a narrative thematic analysis keeps participant narratives intact. Large narrative blocks are often identified, such that one story a participant tells in its entirety serves as the unit of analysis. Though there is still significant room for

researcher influence, this method of analysis allows for the potential for the participants' stories to be interpreted more closely in line with the way they intended it. Once the smaller participant narratives were identified, their underlying assumptions were extracted and compared across cases to identify patterns and themes. The efforts taken to ask participants what they make of each story during the interview also allows for participants' underlying assumptions within their narratives to be illuminated explicitly by the participant, rather than leaving it up to the researcher to decide.

***Trustworthiness.*** Trustworthiness involves addressing standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, and is a part of demonstrating the rigor of the qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address these elements of trustworthiness, in the next phase of research collection and analysis, investigator triangulation will be used and additional research collaborators will be included in data analysis efforts. To affirm the study findings, each participant transcript will be reviewed by two people, the primary researcher and one secondary researcher, who will both independently analyze each case of data for themes. The researchers will discuss similarities and differences to come to a consensus. Final data interpretations will be reviewed by a third researcher. Peer and expert consultation have been and will continue to be used across the research process. In addition, member-checking will be used to allow participants to review and comment on the accuracy of the interpretation of the data. Lastly, the researcher has been and will continue to engage in reflexivity around her positionality and how her worldview may impact the research process.

***Positionality.*** As a researcher, I have been engaging in work related to racism, sexism, and oppression more broadly, as well as experiences of individuals with

marginalized identities, for about five years. I am a White heterosexual cisgender woman who is able-bodied and neurotypical. In preparing to collect data as well as throughout the data collection process and the analysis of the data, I engaged in reflexive thinking and journaling to reflect on how my own positionality may be impacting my own beliefs about this work as well as the research process. I recognize that as a White person, I do not fully understand what it is like for my participants to be Black on campus or in the United States. My White privilege makes it so that I may miss things or make incorrect assumptions about their experiences. I can empathize in some ways with experiences of sexism and internalized misogyny, but even so, there are still limitations to this because the way I experience sexism and the way a Black woman experiences sexism are qualitatively different. One aspect that can help to address or minimize this bias is my experience working and studying in this area of race and racism, which has informed my own stance of striving towards being anti-racist and anti-colorblind, and helps me to view the world through a lens of power and oppression. The aforementioned member-checking, consultation, and collaboration will also help minimize negative effects of my positionality.

### **Findings**

Throughout the research process, the participants' narratives seemed to take on a life of their own, addressing the research questions with their own experiences, but also providing insight into what was most important to them related to the topic. In an effort to center the participants and their narratives, these findings are representative of the narratives that emerged and that demand to be heard. To center the unique voices of the

participants and the way they tell their stories, direct excerpts from interviews are provided as much as possible, rather than a retelling in the words of the researcher.

The communication and organization of the findings is meant to reflect different elements of a story. These narrative themes encapsulate different phases and layers of the participant's lived experiences and ongoing meaning making process. The first narrative theme is the institutional climate of the university that serves as the contextual backdrop or in some ways inciting incidents of the subsequent narratives. This can be thought of as the setting of the story. The next narrative theme is students' ongoing efforts at determining genuineness, including using the cumulative interactions with faculty and administration as their own data. This theme is like the main plot of the story and seemed to occur over time. The last narrative theme is the resulting affective and cognitive response of the students, including conclusions drawn from the summation of interactions. This acts as the story's resolution. It does not always have a happy ending or act as a true "end," as these are ongoing narratives; however, it represents the participants' interpretations and main takeaways from the events.

### **Setting: Institutional Climate**

*Administration's Attempt at Silencing Students.* Many students spoke about how administration at their university engaged in efforts to limit and silence forms of protests or even mere discussions around social injustices occurring on a national level and within the university. Skylar described how administration retaliated against students who protested for the removal of a statue on the campus and punished them for attending.

Ashton elaborated on these forms of punishing students:

“Students wanted to protest and do different things on campus and you have individuals who work for the university like [xxx] going to these protests wearing body cameras to be able to later identify students and like get them in trouble. So it just felt a lot like there were a lot of things going on, that we couldn't necessarily do anything about without putting ourselves at risk. And I know that, like a lot of my peers were still going out and doing things and like they ended up losing jobs and different opportunities and have kind of been in a sense, like blacklisted for the like their efforts to continually try to hold this university accountable.”

They also noted how as the social media organizer for a department on campus that serves many Black students, they “basically had a gag order placed on” them, which kept them from posting anything in support of Black students in the midst of these events.

*Administration's Attempt at Silencing Faculty.* Students were not the only ones who were limited by administration. All of the participants noted how faculty were also kept from talking about any of the injustices and support students explicitly in response to these incidents. Ashton noted how they learned about attacks on faculty through leaked audio tapes and articles on the subject. In particular though, they noted a moment of understanding with a professor who expressed worry on this subject:

“We were doing a lesson and it was a zoom class. And she had said something about like the current climate of the university and, like all these things, but she basically told us like ‘Because we're talking about this, I can't record our zoom lecture and put that on campus.’ Like she was unable to even like share the class period because we were talking about things that were like supposed to be things

that faculty and staff are not talking about, and so I think like directly in terms of like the lower level positions, people have been very supportive and like they're able to do what they can. But there's still that certain line of like you can't go too far, or you risk losing your job in terms of the administrative side.”

This demonstrated a clear way in which administrative policies and threats have negative impacts at the ground level in classrooms.

***Racism in the Student Body.*** The campus climate also involves the student body in addition to faculty and administration. The participants noted clear differences in how their experience as a racial minority on campus shifted after 2020. Erica described how everything became much more racially polarized after 2020. Similarly, Ashton explained how typical experiences of day-to-day racism were heightened during this time:

“In a normal semester, you have all these things happening, and like there's the micro-aggressions the macro-aggressions the blatant racism like. It never really goes away, but especially like during 2020 that first semester back on campus in the fall, it was like a really intense transition.”

Skylar noted emerging White nationalist and Neo-Nazi groups on campus and how they are aligning themselves with existing student government groups on campus.

Ashton also seemed to confirm this sentiment:

“I know even from some experiences like white peers, especially white men have become a lot more like angry and like vitriolic towards black students on campus and it's one of those things where it's like if 2020 and the political state of the world never happened like would be having these experiences right now?”

This theme of the institutional climate helps provide context for what students of color were facing coming back to campus in 2020 and the level of fear that was instilled in them for so much as talking about the traumatic events that deeply affected them in addition to the many instances of harm and grounds for mistrust of White individuals on campus at the student, faculty, and administrative levels.

**Plot: Determining Genuineness of Supports**

The theme that was overwhelmingly prominent throughout and across cases was in sources of information students would use to gauge genuineness of support towards students of color. Through the participants' interpretations of genuineness, a larger meaning-making process was illuminated, whereby students would be examining the totality of interactions with a given person to obtain clues of where they were coming from. This can be thought of as the "plot" of the story.

*Performativity as Disingenuous.* One way in which participants noted a lack of genuineness, was when they perceived support to be more performative to give the appearance of caring without really doing anything. Administration in particular was mentioned often regarding being performative in their efforts to show support for students of color. Ashton expressed how they perceived the administration's efforts to appear supportive and to understand students of color as hollow when they did not follow through:

"In terms of the administrative side, I think that they've kind of been the most performative out of everyone. They're the ones who are like scheduling meetings with students to talk about things that are happening in the world and on campus and like they want to like hear you and support you, but they're not actually

listening to you. So that that was like the most frustrating was like the people in these director roles and the people in these higher up positions basically like saying to your face like ‘Oh I recognize that this is like a hard time I really want to be there for you, I want to help you,’ but then you'd meet with them, and you talk about ideas for progress and ways to move forward and they basically ignore it.”

For Ashton, scheduling meetings created the illusion that administration cared, but when it came time to take action and respond to the needs students expressed, they failed. Ashton also brought up the element of unpaid emotional labor here that they were asking of students of color, and how this was especially harmful when it was seemingly for nothing. They expressed how it became clear through these actions that “as a Black person on this campus, you're not really safe or supported or even cared about.” Erica similarly mentioned how people in her department were “all talk” when it came to issues of social justice and diversity. She pointed to a time when she was discussing the importance of not being neutral in her work, and recognized how the strongly negative response from one faculty member signaled to her that statements of wanting to diversify the field of study were not truly embodied:

“We talk all the time about like diversifying our sources and diversifying [at the workplace] and like, to me, that's just an example of how a lot of that is just like all talk, because if you're going to like shut down someone who's like, you know, one of these like diverse individuals that you want in your [workplace], and you're going to like shut them down immediately the minute they say something, like, ‘Hey like actually my identity like you know letting people know my identity is

helpful to me, or like taking a less objective stance is actually more productive for society' ... And to just be immediately like shut down and be like whoa 'whoa whoa like stop being like a bra burning feminist' was like, it was just very yeah very invalidating."

When institutions make empty promises of diversity, and when there is not true meaning and intentionality behind the words, students start to catch on and take note. These instances are just some of many that make up the full picture conveyed to students that serves as a basis to make determinations about who they can trust or feel safe with.

*Minimizing Issues.* Another way that signaled to students that they were not as genuine about their care was when subtle language or even larger decisions served to minimize the weight and importance of student concerns. Skylar discussed statements faculty would make in class, vaguely acknowledging what was going on outside in the world, but not in a way that was actually meaningful or helpful to students, and in the same breath using language to dismiss the stress of these moments:

"Most of them if there is like something very weird going on in the news. they'll just go 'Alright, I know we're in crazy times, right now, but I need you to get this done' or something like that so yeah... It's one of those kinds of things when they say those things where I get why you're saying this, but also it doesn't help me because, when they say stuff like that: "I know we're in crazy times, BUT..." it's like "I know this may be a detriment to your mental health um but that doesn't matter"

This subtle language cue sent the message that the need for student productivity negated or outweighed any "crazy times" or emotional distress. Ashton also discussed

how the university's handling of centers and organizations important for social justice demonstrates a lack of care or true understanding of their importance and the significance of the harm onto students of color that necessitates these centers:

“Like the University has done in the past, they have a way of kind of putting a Band-Aid over something and like pretending that the issue is gone so like we have our social justice centers and different things like that and it's like. You guys develop these for the problems that these identity groups are having on campus. But then you also shove them in the basement of the student Center, you're not giving them funding, and you're overworking the coordinators and ultimately we are where we are now they're fired individual coordinators and they've moved to having one person overseeing multiple centers.”

*Depth of Social and Cultural Understanding.* Participants discussed times when they were appraising the level of depth in understanding that faculty had when discussing issues of diversity. They noted the cues in what was said that made it clear someone really has put in the work to understand and when they seemed to only have a basic level of understanding. These appraisals made it easier for students to determine who they could trust or turn to for help. Ashton noted their experience of gauging a professor's level of understanding of racial issues.

“I can tell when someone has taken the time to learn about these things and they're like culturally aware and they know what they're talking about. And I can tell when someone is being very surface level and, like they're using it as a talking point but they don't really know anything about it. And so I've had a lot of experiences in different classes, where people will be like talking about a certain

thing that relates to the Black community or like even in books or different things like that, like the way that phrasing is brought up and like the lack of intentionality behind that and like awareness of things, I think that it happens, more often than I would like it to.”

Ashton also mentioned that another clue that a professor doesn't really have the tools or a deep understanding of racial issues is when they fail to recognize or challenge when other students say problematic things. In contrast, Erica discussed when she could tell that when professors really were able to handle discussions around race:

“I find the teachers in the [xxx] department and faculty in that department are just way more equipped to have more like nuanced discussions of those things and to recognize everyone's different experiences and bring in different perspectives and present us with like with material that is like you know, interesting and relevant.”

Erica described an instance where a professor was able to bring in concepts of intersectionality, racism, and sexism into conversations on speaking out about sexual assault in Black communities. Similarly, Skylar mentioned being able to have nuanced conversations about social identities, and specifically how racial identity plays a role in family upbringing and attachment styles in class. They noted how being able to have conversations like that made them feel comfortable turning to the professor or even students in the class for support because they knew they would be able to “handle actual answers to the questions of ‘How are you doing? What's going on?’ and stuff like that, because she facilitated in a way that made it feel safe.” In this way, the depth and complexity of conversations the professor was able to facilitate in class sent messages about how trusted they could be as a potential support.

*Inconsistencies.* The participants discussed how the totality of a professor's actions were taken into account when making judgements or appraisals about faculty and who they could trust. Simply having conversations about politics or acknowledging racial identity was not enough to help build relationships, particularly if there were contradictory clues outside of the interaction. Though Erica initially perceived her professor as understanding of systems of power and oppression, she started to question whether this was the case after she received the "disparaging" comment from her professor about objectivity and protesting.

"I had trouble reading her at first because sometimes it seemed like she was very progressive like in response to all those things that have happened in 2020 and had sort of like realized that like you know objectivity and these other like principles we hold up might be problematic and might be like upholding White supremacy and things like that, like it seemed like she was a little bit progressive at first. And then, like all of a sudden, like that comment was made towards me so like I don't know."

Erica spoke about how these inconsistencies made it so that she was "always doing some guessing" around whether her professors are racist, acknowledging that it was a problem when she and her peers "couldn't quite tell." Similarly, Ashton pointed out how their professor who made space to talk about issues occurring on campus was upholding White supremacy in other ways:

"At the same time it's like that professor specifically was also like grammar checking people in a really rude way on like discussion boards and things like that, and so it's kind of like just a reminder that, like people can be socially aware,

but they're still doing things that uphold white supremacy in a lot of ways, and so it's like. Like I can see that you have some level of understanding that you're like attempting, at least to like have these conversations, but then you revert immediately back into like these systems of like white supremacy.”

From these examples, it is evident that the students are very observant of what their professors say with regard to diversity, racism, and attention to positionality, even with small and subtle nuances. In hearing these participants' narratives around support, a bigger context of support became a part of the conversation. For these students, faculty support can look like being flexible with assignment deadlines and encouraging students to come to office hours. But support for these students largely involves making time and space to make sense of the bigger campus events and systems as well as how one's marginalized identities play a role in their experiences. To even get to this place of having these conversations, building trust was integral for the participants to feel comfortable or safe receiving support from faculty. Given their experiences of being coaxed into situations with a false sense of security around where individuals stand only to be dismissed or outright harmed in the process, there is almost a screening process that seems to occur before students can feel truly comfortable seeking support from others. This process of observing and making note of instances where faculty or administration have been helpful or harmful is as big a part of their journey in getting support as the resolution.

### **Resolution: Cognitive and Affective Responses**

*Academic and Career Engagement.* All participants noted how their experiences on campus with faculty played a role in how they engaged in class discussions or thought

about their career, either positively or negatively. Ashton expressed how their negative experiences in classes with faculty made them more passive in their education in these spaces:

“I think a lot, I think like being a [xxx] major I’m normally the only black person in all of my classes and I think it's one of those things where like I’m less likely to actually like participate in class or speak up or like do anything because I’m just like I'm just here to like get my knowledge and then I’m going to walk out the room. So I think that, like in a lot of ways I've been able to shine outside of the classroom but I haven't necessarily felt comfortable enough to actually like be in the classroom and like participate and like I don't necessarily feel like there's like a space for me.”

Building on this feeling, Erica even noted how her experiences in her field of study made her seriously question her future career:

“It's made me not feel like I’m wanted in the profession and it's like discouraged me from going into [certain places] that have more traditional policies about like objectivity in what you're allowed to do and say... because I feel like if I can't say like simple things like hey like perhaps it's easier for us to send a black [person] into this Black community you know, that's like going to be a problem for me in the future,”

On the other hand, Skylar discussed how their positive experience with a professor was a clarifying and inspiring moment in their career exploration and interest in pursuing a given career:

“It gave me a sense of that's where I want to be that's where I want to be. Because, although like I wanted to go into [career choice] before that class, I had never done any sort of [career choice] so I'd never like seen that field in action before. But being in a class with her helped solidify like my vision of what it is that I wanted to do.”

As educators, faculty's role is to teach but also to support students to succeed academically and to help students find a path to their future outside of school. From these participants' stories, it becomes evident that faculty's ability to be culturally responsive can directly enhance or hinder student's academic engagement and career exploration.

***“The Personal is Political.”*** The participants all shared a sentiment of how integral these political or politicized topics were to their humanity, and how personally it impacted them. Erica even noted that “human rights stuff isn't necessarily politics but also like the personal is political.” One participant also noted how “human rights issues” were being “politicized” and said:

“I feel like when you're a Black student specifically especially like a Black woman, also a Black woman who's queer, it's like you have to constantly be aware of everything all the time because there's not really a situation where it doesn't directly affect you or like your lived experience in some way.”

Skylar even compared the feeling of faculty's failure to acknowledge or make space to talk about current events to grieving a loved one.

“It's like when you're grieving and everyone else around is just going about their business... It feels like your whole world has stopped, but then you look around and see that it just continues on for everyone else, and you don't really have like

time to actually like grieve that person or actually like sit and acknowledge that that person has gone, because you have to keep going, because no one else has stopped so why can you?”

For Skylar, these events weren't just political events, but deeply personal experiences akin to losing a loved one and not being able to focus on anything else.

*Emotional Effects.* Both positive and negative experiences with faculty and administration yielded deep emotional responses for students. Skylar expressed how moving it was for them to be able to explore concepts of racial identity in their class and learn about how people who share their identities may be affected by course concepts:

“It was honestly refreshing to the point that it almost brought me to tears. Which is interesting because I'm not the type of person to cry almost ever um like but there were moments and stuff where I didn't cry but I felt so exposed that I was just like shaking and I didn't feel like weak or anything I just kind of felt like damn I haven't really explored this much have I?”

Erica similarly expressed how [xxx] faculty made her feel “welcomed and like heard and recognized” when they were able to have discussions about identity in a healthy and safe way. On the other hand, Ashton described coming back on campus in 2020 “feeling overwhelmed and stressed and like anxious just all the time.” They expressed how they eventually became numb and “couldn't take it anymore.” They felt emotionally drained and more withdrawn from engaging with administration after having to put in emotional labor around issues of racism on campus for it to not be heard or addressed:

“It kind of got to the point where most of us stopped even attempting to meet with people like trying to have these conversations, because it just felt so discouraging to like spend all this time and effort have these like really emotional conversations and then to still be met with people who are kind of like ‘Okay, like thanks, I guess, but like we're not going to do any of this’”

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate and understand the experiences of students of color at a Predominantly White Institution, regarding the level of support they are receiving as it relates to the sociopolitical events of 2020 and the subsequent impacts. Though the study intentions were primarily around faculty support, with administrative support and overall climate as secondary lines of inquiry, the themes that emerged from the participant narratives demonstrated how salient the administration and higher institutional systems within the university impact their personal and overall campus experiences. The epistemological and methodological guides of the study demand that participant voices be centered and their true narratives be honored. Though I as the researcher came in with specific aims, I felt a need to share power with the participants and allow their stories to exert influence on the research process, even if it extends beyond the bounds of what I expected to study coming in.

The findings from this study provide valuable contributions to understanding the experiences of students of color on a Predominantly White Institution in 2020 and beyond. First, these students’ narratives gleaned information about how experiences of racism and hostility were heightened on campus after the summer of 2020. This is similar to students’ reported experiences after the 2016 presidential election, where the racism

and racial dynamics playing out on the national level was also mirrored within college campuses. (Mwangi, 2018; Schuster, 2020; Yao et al., 2020). In addition, findings from this study revealed how administration was actively harmful towards students of color throughout their response to racial injustices. This instilled fear of repercussions around speaking out and put a tremendous burden on students to advocate for themselves to be met with resistance and dismissals. Students seem to be aware that their well-being is being sacrificed in favor of maintaining and bolstering the university's funding sources.

The other major finding is what support means to students and the process of how they go about seeking it. For students of color, support needs to extend beyond having office hours and become something that is not only affirming to student's marginalized identities, but challenging of the external oppressive forces within and beyond campus. Having conversations about diversity is one thing, but participants described many instances where their actual experiences of support fell short of what faculty or administration initially communicated or advertised. In addition, the genuineness of commitment to diversity and social justice was necessary, because students can tell when it is not genuine, and they experience microaggressions, invalidation, and other kinds of harm because of it. Because of this, it was common for students to experience a kind of vigilance, taking note of and evaluating the actions of faculty to determine whether they would be a safe space to turn to. This captures the importance for faculty to put effort in to build trust with students of color through both words and actions (Yeager et al., 2013).

Through this research process, it also became clear that for students of color, times where faculty were able to give voice to these issues that students were facing in their real lives was a very validating experience for the participants and subsequently

made them want to be in those spaces, with those faculty, and in those career paths. In other words, students of color experienced a higher sense of belonging in these spaces. This is in line with research indicating that culturally responsive campus environments promote belonging (Museus, 2018). In contrast, when these issues were ignored, it left students wondering where their professors stood on these issues, sometimes having no choice but to assume they were racist, and as a result, had a more guarded presence in the class, mentally disengaging from the discussions, and feeling more alienated.

### **Implications**

This study has vital implications for faculty and administration at PWIs. The findings demand for better multicultural and social justice education for faculty and administration. Living in a time where students with marginalized identities have their personhood attacked by the institutions they live in means that faculty need to rise to a level of understanding of these issues that can make for meaningful, nuanced discussions as well as a culture of care over profit and productivity. Furthermore, faculty need to understand that this is an ongoing process that needs to be consistently embodied. Having one conversation or making a statement about views is not enough. Action and responsiveness in social justice minded ways over time is needed.

Even within classroom curriculum, the reactions from students when they were able to learn about how class concepts can differently affect people who share their identities showed how impactful more culturally relevant curriculum can be. Such a shift in pedagogy easily made students feel much more included and that they were able to connect with people in the class more, but also understand their own self better. White students have the privilege of having most curriculum cater to White individuals;

therefore, they may take for granted how meaningful it is to learn about something that directly impacts them.

There are also implications unique to administration and people who occupy higher leadership roles in universities. It is clear from the participants' narratives how a large shift in values and ideology is needed at academic institutions. Though an overhaul of academic systems is needed for lasting and impactful change, small things like taking student concerns seriously and addressing them in meaningful ways is a good place to start. At the very least, it is important for administration to put in the work to make the changes, rather than forcing students of color to put in the emotional labor to figure it out themselves.

### **Limitations**

One limitation is that due to the small number of participants and the qualitative nature of the study, the findings may not generalize to other settings. Many of the topics brought up were not just related to national socio-political events, but events unique to this college campus. Therefore, though systems of power and oppression exist at all academic institutions, the specific ways in which they occur and affect students will likely look slightly different from place to place. Another limitation may be in the somewhat limited diversity in racial identities across participants, as all of the participants identified as Black. Though many of the events occurring at the national and campus levels (e.g. Black Lives Matter protests, police violence, Jefferson statue) were especially significant to Black communities, additional exploration and insights around how other students of color may be impacted differently by this time period could be beneficial.

One potential limitation could be with regard to time. Because current college students were recruited and the interviews were conducted two years after the start of the pandemic, the students who were eligible to participate were somewhat limited because they had to have been a student since 2020, and therefore needed to be an upperclassmen. In addition, though the distance from 2020 has some advantages, the descriptiveness of campus events in 2020 may have been more thick and detailed if so much time hadn't passed.

Though this is only meant to serve as preliminary data and analyses, and a more rigorous process will be employed with additional researchers looking at the data, the researcher's interpretations may be limited due to not yet having the process of member-checking and triangulation.

### **Future Directions**

This study is meant to be the first phase of data collection and analysis in a larger study. Future steps will include additional interview questions with a larger focus on administration and campus climate. For data analysis, more researchers will be brought on to integrate additional perspective and help with the data triangulation process. Member-checking will also be done to make sure participants can have a chance to view and give input to the data and interpretations.

In terms of follow-up studies based on the findings gleaned from the current study, future studies may seek to delve more deeply into other forms of oppression and identities and use a more intersectional lens. Though content around students' other marginalized identities was asked about and covered during interviews, it was not the

main focus of the study. Particularly given the diversity in gender and sexual orientation in the current sample, more focus on these identities may yield more nuanced findings.

It may also be beneficial to hear from faculty and administration about how they feel they have supported students and handled the events since 2020. An intervention study with faculty or administration may even be beneficial to provide education on systems of power and oppression, microaggressions, and how to implement overall culturally relevant and anti-racist ways of teaching and leading.

### **Conclusion**

The year 2020 was an extremely distressing time, and was made worse for students of color because of the climate on their campus and the administration's attempts to quiet and tamp down on any perceived "noise" coming from students of color. The dearth of genuine care expressed related to their experiences, feelings, and concerns served to further invalidate their experiences and alienate them. However, the stories about the few genuinely supportive individuals and spaces on campus provides evidence for hope amidst the unsupportive environment. The profound impacts that these individuals had on their students shed light on what good can come of the efforts to recognize their students' identities and broader social contexts.

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