

Students Flexing Their Persistence Muscle:  
Race Critical Incidents in Higher Education

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My parents are the ultimate source of my success in education. They instilled in me a love of learning, tenacity, and confidence in my ability as a scholar. As knowledge seekers and curious souls, they charted their own paths and modeled independent thinking. I am forever grateful that of all the parents in the world they were mine. My goal is to promote this wonderful legacy of lifelong learning and critical thinking with my children, Andrew and Sydney. I now pass the torch to you!

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## ABSTRACT

Black undergraduates have the lowest persistence and lowest college graduation rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups at colleges and universities (Fleming, 2012). Using narrative inquiry methodology, the purpose of this study was to explore the influences of race critical incidents on Black undergraduate student college persistence at Predominantly White Institutions. Persistence can be understood as the combination of three motivating factors - **family support** (encouragement) plus **Black Identity Development** (awareness, knowledge, appreciation of racial histories and identity) plus **Race Critical Incidents** (resistance to racism and call to action). In essence, the very construct (racism and race critical incidents) explored in this study is also one of the major findings as an influence in persistence.

The effect of Racial Battle Fatigue among students who persist cannot be ignored and the construct that elicits it – racism and race critical incidents - must be addressed and eradicated. Green (2016) asks whether it is appropriate for colleges to ask historically marginalized students to exercise more grit and persistence efforts or whether efforts should focus instead on institutional changes that promote greater racial justice so that Black students do not have to compromise their well-being by being resilient. Higher education institutions must step up.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“It is hard enough to be a student. It’s harder to be a student at a predominantly White institution where I don’t feel safe” says Asha\*<sup>1</sup>, a Black woman talking about minority students and struggles in higher education during an open forum to discuss race relations at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) of higher education. During the forum held on March 17, 2015, a packed auditorium of over 500 students, faculty and staff members spoke to the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs about academic, residential life, student conduct and other policies and practices that marginalize minority populations. Against a backdrop of current state and national attention about race relations as exemplified in the Ferguson, Missouri murder of Michael Brown, a Black man, by a White police officer, Asha (and others) discussed experiences on the campus that make her feel unsafe and disenfranchised. Recent racist tweets by students gone viral and the subsequent lack of accountability, transparency and action on the part of campus administrators in addressing racial concerns were part of their narrative.

During the forum other students and faculty members called for more diverse faculty and administrators, more education and training about race relations, required diversity courses and swift and harsher consequences for students who engage in racist behavior. Asha indicated factors such as these impact her ability to focus in college and achieve academic, social and emotional success. Despite what many would consider a harsh environment, Asha continues to pursue her education at the PWI.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Many Black students, however, do not complete higher education. Black undergraduates have the lowest persistence and lowest college graduation rates compared

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<sup>1</sup> Asha is a pseudonym.

compared to other racial and ethnic groups at colleges and universities (Fleming, 2012). Persistence has traditionally been described as 1) enrollment in higher education institutions after high school graduation, 2) continuous enrollment without interruption, 3) full-time pursuit of a degree with the expectation of graduating in two or four years, depending on the type of college and finally, and 4) progress toward educational goals not characterized by the one-institution, continuous progress and timely graduation restraints of the conventional definitions of persistence (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Multiple factors influence Black student persistence and retention such as college cost, academic preparation, social support, and racism experiences (Fleming, 2012; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999). Greater persistence and graduation rates among students in general have been found to maximize human potential, expand an educated workforce, and reduce the financial loss from public investment in college attendance for those who do not complete (Anyon, 2009; Fleming, 2012; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999). More importantly, greater persistence and graduation rates for students of color have been found to increase “life chances” such as better paying jobs, higher income and higher life satisfaction (Wimer & Bloom, 2014). Although the benefits of a college degree are known, Black student persistence is often compromised due to many factors, including racism experiences on campus (Leonardo, 2013; Wimer & Bloom, 2014).

In particular, this study examines race critical incidents, those highly visible or extreme racism occurrences, at a university and their impact on Black student persistence (Angelides, 2001). Race critical incidents draws from concepts in the book

entitled *Race Critical Theories* by Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (2001). This book describes race critical theories but also foregrounds the importance of race and racism agendas that impact minoritized and oppressed people (Essed & Goldberg, 2001; Harper, 2006). By invoking this term, my research highlights racist and racialized situations and climates as they exist on college and university campuses and the saliency for Black students.

Higher education efforts to increase persistence are varied and those that emphasize academic, emotional, social, and financial success can positively influence student persistence (Howard, 2007; Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Tinto, 2012). Some institutions have tried to narrow the retention gap to remedy the problems faced by students of color by strengthening 1) linkages with elementary and secondary schools, 2) affordability of college, 3) academics and classroom learning, 4) non-academic assistance, 5) minority student support and racial identity, and 6) institutional leadership, coordination and affirmative action (Fischer & Massey, 2007; Howard, 2007; Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Seifert, Drummon & Pascarella, 2006). However, these efforts have resulted in only minor increases in Black student persistence and often fail to address race issues on campuses and how they contribute to persistence (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). In fact, research points to racism as a factor in creating harsh environments that negatively impact persistence for Black students (Habley et al., 2012; Harper, 2012).

Though many institutions invest in retention efforts to improve student persistence, retention rates have not only *not* improved over time, they have been largely unsuccessful in closing the persistence gap between Black and White students (Braxton,

Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones & McLendon, 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Seidman, 2005). This fact coincides with the reality that institutional administrators often do not offer *effective* programming and supports for Black students and/or do not know how to address race critical incidents and racism that exist on campus (Habley et al., 2012). Moreover, these incidents occur within an ecology of Whiteness that often creates a root of racial disharmony on campuses that negatively impact the well-being and performance of students of color (Feagin, 2013; Gusa, 2010; Gusa, 2009). Entrenched and taken-for-granted White cultural practices often rationalize a system of race oppression (Feagin, 2013). This ecology only heightens negative experiences for students of color that are compounded by critical incidents of racism (Gusa, 2010). If Black students feel unsafe and experience racism, they are more likely to drop out of college (Grier-Reed, Madvun & Buckley, 2008; Ortiz and Santos, 2009).

Racism and race critical incidents pose immense challenges for Black students and can negatively impact persistence (Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2005). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that 222 colleges and universities reported hate crimes in 1998 of which 57 percent were racially spurred (Wessler & Moss, 2001). Considering the difficulty of collecting race hate crime data systemically and the hesitancy of institutions to report such incidents, the FBI report is likely an underestimation of actual events (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005).

Race hate crimes, criminal offenses with the added component of racial bias, continue to happen in higher education institutions as exemplified by the 2010 arrest of two White students who scattered cotton balls outside of the University of Missouri Black Culture Center, referencing imageries of slavery and indicative of racial strain on

campus (Mytelka, 2010). A year later in 2011, a White student at this institution was arrested for spray-painting racial slurs on a campus sculpture (Associated Press, 2015). These kinds of occurrences are the most evident and aggressive forms of racism while the subtle, less aggressive daily experiences such as micro-aggressions that exist on college campuses are largely ignored (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). Critical incidents can be more accurately identified as racist and problematic than behavior that is subtle or quietly but embedded within the institutional structure (Spencer-Oatey, 2013).

Further, the situation in Ferguson, Missouri also highlights another timely race critical incident in 2014. Although, the Michael Brown murder occurred within the Ferguson community, the race critical effects were still “experienced” on campuses in close proximity. This is congruent with articles by Brondolo (2009) and Pyke (2010) that discuss the collective Black experience that feels the effects of race critical incidents even when those incidents are not directly happening to the individual or even in close proximity (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). These commonly felt events might be experienced or compounded by White institutional frames, even when race critical incidents are not occurring on campus, and can influence persistence at PWIs.

More recent findings from Van Dyke & Tester (2014) indicates that racially motivated verbal and physical assaults continue to grow, particularly on PWI campuses and those that have large numbers of White students, faculty and Greek student life populations. This increase was reflected at the PWI for this study as exemplified by racially motivated activities on campus that escalated in 2015 in a movement primarily led by a student group named Concerned Student 1950 (Vandelinder, 2015). A sequence of protests related to race and leadership resulted in

the resignation of the president and chancellor at this PWI (Vandelinder, 2015). The changes came after a series of events that included a hunger strike by a student and a boycott by the football team, followed by the removal of a faculty member involved in a clash between the media and protesters (Vandelinder, 2015). These high profile, race critical incidents shine light on pervasive and embedded racial problems on this PWI and other college campus and institutions.

As a result of racism and other factors, Black undergraduate students persist in college at a rate of 41% compared to White students who persist at 59%, thus creating a racial persistence gap (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). In Missouri, the undergraduate persistence gap is just as concerning: Blacks persist at 21% compared to 37% for Hispanic and 38% for White students (Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education, 2007).

In a report that looks at the graduation rates of Black students at flagship state universities across the nation, the rates range from 86% at the University of Virginia to 15% at the University of Alaska. This PWI has a 56% graduation rate (Black Student College Graduation Rates, 2016). While the ranking of this PWI is above the national average of 42%, a caveat is that some institutions, such as this one, go to considerable efforts to attract high-achieving Black students from other states (Black Student College Graduation Rates, 2016). This entry of talented Black students at selective flagship universities from out of state tends to inflate the total Black student graduation rate at these institutions (Black Student College Graduation Rates, 2016). Many Black students do not persist in college, a trend that warrants attention and action in higher education (Harper, 2012).

Research and testimonials from students such as Asha indicate that racism within higher education institutions negatively impact Black student persistence in academic, emotional, social, and financial ways (Sledge, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). However, there is room in the literature for testimonials or narratives from Black students who *do* persist in the face of these stressors compounded by “extreme cases” or in this case, critical incidents of racism, particularly given the racially motivated incidences that occurred at this PWI in 2015.

### **Research Question**

Bamberg (2010) states that narratives provide a portal into two realms: (1) *the realm of experience*, how individuals experience certain events and ascribe meaning to these experiences; and (2) the *realm of narrative* or the context in which these experiences make sense for the individual. This research aims to examine the experiences of Black students and how a context and climate of racism and race critical incidents influence these experiences and the meaning students ascribe to them.

Bamberg’s realms of narrative also allow me to consider the narrative histories of each participant collectively but also individually (American Baptist Seminary of the West, 2015) and aligns with the theoretical/conceptual model I am using in my research: Resilience theory and Resistance theory. Both theories allow me to consider the racial experiences and environments of participants (as they describe them) through the lens of resistance efforts and/or protective factors—those things that detract from or enhance healthy adaptation - and *multiple* persistence outcomes. These theoretical models will be explored further in the literature review section of this study.

The research question for this qualitative, narrative study is:

- How does racism and race critical incidents influence Black student undergraduate college persistence at Predominantly White Institutions?

In this study, Black is characterized as individuals born in the United States and those who identify as Black.

Other aims of the study include gathering student descriptions of racism and race critical incidents and their ideas regarding persistence. Narratives provide participants an opportunity to share their experiences and higher education stakeholders an opportunity to better understand the experiences of Black students and ultimately persistence.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of race critical incidents on Black student persistence at a PWI. Race critical incidents was defined earlier in the introduction however it is important to highlight the ways in which this study conceptualizes race and racism. These key terms and other concepts such as White racial frame, White privilege and White supremacy are defined in the next section. However, it is important to note a part of my research aims to also have students describe how they ascribe meaning to these terms and identify what they consider as racism, racist, and race critical. This allows me to honor the narrative realms and how certain experiences such as oppression, racism, and identity are interpreted in Black experiences as a collectivity but also individually (American Baptist Seminary of the West, 2015).

The inclusion of personal and campus institutional factors is important because my experience working with Black undergraduate students indicate that racism is realized for Black students in many different ways within higher education. Students

navigate and make sense of racial experiences and ultimately how they persevere and persist. A part of my thesis argument posits that there is a resiliency to and resistance of race critical incidents that determine how racial experiences occur, are experienced and understood. I will discuss this further in the section on theoretical frameworks. Given a current context of racial challenges exemplified by Michael Brown in Ferguson, the Black Lives Matter movement and racist incidents on college campuses, the transformative role of higher education institutions in society and how they address racist problems is crucial.

On PWI campuses in particular, Black students encounter the common challenges of adjusting to college life in addition to the tension of racism and discrimination (Sledge, 2012). When race critical incidents or challenges arise for Black students, reaching out for guidance and support to trusted individuals may be a typical first response (Habley et al., 2012; Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Many Black students are first-generation and come from low-income families (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). When families have challenges understanding higher education for their child they are less likely to have the skills and knowledge to support their child's efforts in this area including life decisions, educational choices and college persistence (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). The discussion of issues such as race, White privilege (societal privileges that benefit White people beyond what is usually experienced by non-White people), discrimination and being a minority in American culture is essential for Black students to understand in order to cope with these challenges in the university setting (Leonardo, 2013; McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). Consequently, while many Black students attend a PWI, their perceptions of the

educational climate may be different than that of their White peers (Strayhorn, 2010). The student's perception of racism, discrimination, and prejudice at the university, as well as how the university deals with diversity issues, is important to know in order to effectively address these problems.

Tierney (2002) says that a strong awareness of cultural identity is necessary to obtain a successful college career. However, going to a PWI with few Black students often requires assimilation within the dominant culture in order to persist (Herndon & Hirt, 2004), a problematic endeavor given a White racial frame that foregrounds Whiteness (privilege) and backgrounds other races (Feagin, 2013). The level of student self-esteem and cultural identity impacts the process of engagement on predominantly White college campuses (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Other research shows that bicultural socialization, the ability to function in two environments (their own culture and that of the dominant culture) is important when Black students have to assimilate on campus while also staying connected and authentic in the Black community (Barnett, 2004; Peters & Massey, 1983).

Thus, Black student persistence is impacted by many factors including racism and a White racial frame (Sharpe- Grier, 2015). However, despite challenging situations, Asha persists, as is the case with other Black students. Perhaps students like Asha find resources and support systems to help them succeed regardless of race critical incidents on campus, a concept this research will address.

### **Background of the Study**

The experience of Black students concerning a White racial frame and racism has been documented on college campuses across the nation (Feagin, 2013; Harper,

2012a; Sharpe-Grier, 2015). The impetus for understanding this phenomenon comes from observing students like Asha and others enrolled in PWIs who experience racism that challenges their focus on academics and achievement in college.

How do students navigate racial dynamics supported by a White racial frame of the higher education system? How do some students like Asha persist and succeed in college given the challenges of normative college demands (i.e., coursework, finances, and time management), *and* racialized experiences? How do Black students who experience race critical incidents navigate these happenings and systems in college? How do students understand these systems and how do they impact persistence? In my work with Black students over the past 14 years I've seen some students who persist despite significant challenges and those who don't. Exploring college experiences through Race Critical Incident and White racial frame lenses will add to the body of research on Black college student persistence.

### **Positionality**

Because this is a qualitative study it is important that I convey positionality, that is, information about myself which influences the content, style and emphasis of this research. My worldview and thus, research perspective, is shaped by the combination of my race, gender, education level, age, career, social status and life experiences. Epistemologically I enter this research from the standpoint of a person who cares about the students I serve and a desire to understand their experiences. However, we all walk a fine line between the ideal of ourselves and the sociocultural entrapments that accompany our identities. I come with baggage, particularly in the form of Whiteness (Flagg, 2005) and White privilege (Leonardo, 2013), concepts explained later in this paper.

I am a White woman married to a White man for 24 years and we have two children. My family and family of origin is upper middle class, most people in my family have advanced college degrees and none have experienced poverty or financial need. We often serve in civic, leadership and volunteer positions so my experiences and worldview have been shaped largely by affluence, privilege and power, concepts referred to as Whiteness (Flagg, 2005). Whiteness is a racial term that explains the dominance of White identity, culture, practices and behavior as norms from which other races are compared (Flagg, 2005). It is often invisible to White people but evident to people of color (Flagg, 2005).

In the book *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, Irving (2014) discusses her journey of understanding her Whiteness and becoming awakened to its benefits for her and consequences to others. I identified with this book because it met me at a time along the continuum of my awakening. I am constantly finding new nooks of my ignorance of Whiteness and how I benefit from societal policies and practices reproduced over generations that insure White people (and not others) maintain privilege and dominance. I am awake to the fact that I am still only fractionally awake to the nuances of Whiteness as a construct and how it operates or the ways I draw upon it in my daily living. The following quote from McIntosh (1989) in her salient article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”, helps me see myself and how others may view me,

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks

(p. 10).

I carry the invisible knapsack but I am awake to my compounding privileges of being White, upper middle class and educated. I have a “designer” knapsack that I don’t think about but that others readily see. I know my designer knapsack sends signals of power and likely creates a distancing between me and people who are not like me.

I am also a youth development specialist and associate director of a statewide youth development program within higher education. I’ve served in this role for over 20 years. There is, consequently, a focus in this research on the developmental aspects of college students and how they integrate new knowledge and experiences in their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. In addition, I write from the paradigm of a youth development professional – utilizing a strengths-based approach in understanding human development and focusing on support systems to help individuals thrive (Benson, Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Finally, one of the highlights of my personal life and career is the development of a college readiness and access program for first generation college students. Initiated in 2002 this program is now implemented at land grant universities across the United States. This has created close professional and personal relationship with many of the youth participants and their families from Missouri and we maintain connections outside of the program (i.e., college graduations, weddings, social events, coffees, dinners). Several of the older participants, now age 30 or over, have become my friends. These long-term relationships expand my worldview through close association with others and their worldview.

It is because of these relationships that I have chosen to study the effect of race

critical incidents on Black student college persistence. After reading Irving's (2014) book, I found myself questioning for the first time my motivation in developing this program. One of the tenets identified by Irving (2014) is that those with White privilege often shower it upon 'the less fortunate' to 'help them be better.' I am often conflicted as I unpack my love and desire to work with marginalized audiences and whether it's simply another form of exercising White privilege. However, it has caused me to reflect and revise how I make decisions about programming, whose voices I listen to, and to focus on the outcome for others rather than my intent.

### **Key Concepts and Definition of Terms**

- Race – the definition of race has morphed from signifying biological differences among groups of people to that of an invented or socially constructed concept (Leonardo, 2013). This study views race as a group of people who have traits determined by society to be socially significant, sometimes resulting in people regarding other people in discriminatory, oppressive and racist ways because of them (Fisher & Massey, 2007).
- Discrimination – this term refers to the unjust treatment of different categories of people, specifically on the grounds of race for the purposes of this study.
- Prejudice – a negative belief or feeling developed about people of color without facts, reason or reflection.
- Bias - a belief that some groups of people are superior to others, often resulting in unfair treatment.
- Oppression - a situation or system imposing harsh or undue burdens or restrictions on individuals.

- Racism - the belief that all members of a race have qualities or abilities specific to that race and distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races (Leonardo, 2013). For the purposes of this study racism is defined as the ideology and performance of domination and power of White people over Black people.
- Racial Battle Fatigue – a concept that explains the exhaustion a person of color experiences as a result of continual interpretations and negotiations of racism experienced through interactions with students, faculty, administrators, staff and other members of a campus community (Smith, Yosso, & Soloranzo, 2006).
- Whiteness – a racial term that explains the dominance of White identity, culture, practices and behavior as norms from which other races is compared. It is often invisible to White people but evident to people of color (Flagg, 2005).
- White privilege - a term for ideologies, policies, customs and practices that benefit White compared to people of color in the same social, political, or economic situations (Leonardo, 2013).
- White racial frame – a framework that includes the concepts of Whiteness, White privilege and systemic racism, as ways that promote the power of White people over people of color both consciously and unconsciously (Feagin, 2013).
- White supremacy – a concept that addresses political or socioeconomic systems that enable White people to experience systemic advantages over other racial and ethnic groups, both at the individual and collective level (Leonardo, 2013).

- Colorblindness – a concept suggesting that rather than acknowledging racial differences, focus should center on the individual (Leonardo, 2013).  
Although the concept emerged as a way of battling racial inequality by suggesting that race should not be used to define a person, it fails to be genuine because of the persistence of racial hierarchies and inequality.
- Race critical incidents – extreme cases, situations or behaviors that foreground racism (Angelides, 2001). In this study, the significance and meaning given to incidents by participants is what makes them critical, rather than drama or sensationalism that might accompany the incident (Angelides, 2001).
- Persistence – from an institutional perspective, persistence can be defined as continued enrollment at any single institution but from the student perspective, it can refer to the continuation of enrollment at any institution of higher education, local, national, or international (Burrus, Elliott, Markle, Carney, Moore, Betancourt et al., 2013; Habley et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study persistence is defined as full-time pursuit of a degree with the expectation of graduating in four to six years.
- Retention – although the United States Department of Education (n.d.) defines college retention as the percentage of an institution's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year, this study looks at retention of Black students after their sophomore or junior year of college in order to understand how retention is impacted by further years of study.

- Risk factor – an attribute of an individual, group, or their environment (school violence) that forecasts negative outcomes (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers & Reed, 2009)
- Asset – an attribute of an individual, group, or their environment (culturally competent and inclusive teachers) that predicts positive outcomes (Masten et al., 2009).
- Protective factor – an attribute of an individual, group, or their environment that predicts positive outcomes in the context of risk or adversity (Masten, et al., 2009)
- Resilience – positive adaptation in the context of adversity, relating to successful development during or after experience in potentially challenging situations (Masten et al., 2009).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to better understand Black student racial experiences and persistence it is important to begin with an examination of the context of the higher education system itself and strategies institutions employ that affect students of color (Fleming, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In other words, higher education retention strategies can impact Black student persistence. The remainder of the review of literature includes research pertaining to Black student persistence and contributing factors, race and racial concepts, White racial frame, racism in higher education, and effects of racism on Black student persistence.

#### **Higher Education Retention Strategies**

Minority student retention in higher education is determined by a number of organizational aspects such as institutional commitment, social involvement and support and individual aspects such as preparation and academic record (Fleming, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Retention is a complicated issue involving multiple variables that are often interwoven and challenging to resolve. Linkages between higher education and elementary and secondary schools are a place to start in addressing college retention factors.

#### **Linkages with Elementary and Secondary Schools**

In order for students of color to succeed in higher education, many researchers and policy makers suggest that colleges and universities must strengthen their linkages with elementary and secondary schools in inner-city areas where the greatest minority populations live (Howard, 2007; Lang, 1992). Howard (2007) and Anyon

(1997) posit that until major improvements are made in teaching and learning at the Pre K-12 level, students of color will have lower educational achievement, decreased participation in college and lower graduation rates compared to White students. Increasing reading proficiency, creating culturally responsive classrooms and emphasizing science and math are ways to enhance academic success for minority students (Lang, 1992).

In a qualitative study, Freeman (1997) interviewed Black high school students regarding their perspectives about how to increase African American participation and achievement in higher education. The students stated the need to improve the physical condition of schools, cultivate more interested teachers and actively involved counselors, instill possibilities early, and emphasize cultural awareness (Freeman, 1997). One student said she knows early world history, for example, but African Americans were not incorporated in the history, making it harder for her to connect with the content (Freeman, 1997).

Similarly, Anyon (1997) and Howard (2007) suggest that higher education institutions have a responsibility to increase collaboration with Pre-K-12 schools to promote 1) student skill development that infuses ethnically and culturally relevant content in curriculum, 2) teachers who master not only curriculum content but practice a genuine belief in student potential, and 3) teachers who possess knowledge and understanding of minority culture including language, modes of interactions, motivational strategies, demonstrations of respect and disrespect, and the value of family and church. In addition to fostering administrator and teacher effectiveness with students of color, higher education institutions should work with Pre-K-12 schools and

students to make college tangible (Howard, 2007).

### **College Cost**

The high cost of college is a major concern for all students, felt strongly by students of color in particular, thus affecting persistence (Perna & Jones, 2013). Beginning in the 1980s, the federal government transferred the process of financial equal opportunity in higher education from primarily grants to loans (Hu & St. John, 2001). And, state funding for public colleges and universities has decreased across the United States in recent years (Perna & Jones, 2013). As a result of these changes, the burden of paying for college has shifted from the general public to individual students and their families. Educational attainment for students of color is especially challenging due to college finance policies that hurt those with typically fewer family and personal resources and less willing to use educational loans (Kaltenbaugh et al., 1999; Perna & Jones, 2013; Perna & Kuban, 2013).

Further, Gladieux and Perna (2005) found that disproportionately, low-income student, such as students of color, are more likely to be unsuccessful in completing a college degree, “leaving them without a higher education credential and the income advantage it offers but with the substantial loan debt that must be repaid irrespective of their degree status.” (p. 174). Thus, the high cost of college is a significant barrier to students of color. Society loses, too, when minority students can’t realize their educational goals and contribute in leadership and career positions.

### **Academics and Classroom Learning**

Academic integration is an important component in student retention because it signifies the importance of a strong association with the higher education academic

environment, both in and outside the classroom, with faculty, academic staff, and peers (Braxton et al., 2013; Griffin, 1992). Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann (2015) find that faculty and staff can mitigate the effects of discrimination and bias by validating students and helping to create a sense of belonging in the classroom and other academic settings. Direct contact with faculty and staff that is positive and meaningful can reinforce student self-worth and value in the educational setting (Hurtado et al., 2015). These relationships can promote resiliency in students in the face of micro-aggressions and attacks on their racial identity.

The role of faculty and staff of color in promoting minority student academic achievement is important as evidenced by the following statement by Schexnider (1992): “It has long been contended that a key element in recruiting and retaining black students lies in having a significant proportion (8%-10%) of black faculty and staff.” (p. 127). Schexnider (1992) suggests that institutions need to recruit and retain Black faculty, sensitize administrators to the time and energy needed by Black faculty to mentor and support Black students, and reward and recognize faculty who support students.

Coursework and ethnic educational opportunities can be linked to retention, too. Ortiz and Santos (2009) discuss the importance of ethnic identity for Black students and that college is often the time when students have the opportunity to learn about and embrace their ethnicity. In the study, the authors identify the “passion” students spoke about their involvement with activities where they learned more about African American history and African history and culture (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). This conclusion corroborates research that finds that students who have a strong sense of self and a positive self-concept are more likely to persist in college (Fleming, 2012; Trent,

Lee, & Owens-Nichols, 2006;).

Researchers have found that students seek academic counseling more than any other type of services and students of color are three times more likely than White students to use these services (Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). Strong academic counseling centers can assist students in need, particularly those on academic probation who need to regain a sense of control over their educational experiences (Davis, 2002; Habley et al., 2012).

### **Non-Academic Assistance**

Higher education programs and interventions that rely solely on academic factors to identify students at risk of dropping out may overlook those who are in jeopardy due to other non-academic factors such as negative self-concept, limited social support and feelings of isolation (Seifert et al., 2006). A student may have high academic ability but be unable to master course subject matter due to college adjustment problems (VanDyke & Griff, 2014). Feelings of disconnectedness, loss of identity, experiences with racism, and not knowing who to go to for help are some of the factors that can negatively affect student persistence (Braxton et al., 2013; Lotkowski, et al., 2004; Van Dyke & Griff, 2014).

In order to help solve retention problems, a combination of academic and non-academic solutions is important to strengthen student success and ultimately increase persistence (Braxton et al., 2013; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Seifert et al., 2006). Both solutions are more likely to address the wide-ranging academic and social/emotional issues that impact college success such as learning study skills and test-taking tips, finding friends and a caring adult, and accessing health care and daily living advice

when needed.

Some campuses have established a “focal site for students to interact with each other and other students of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Tomlinson, 1992, p. 85). These cultural centers, with an end goal to improve recruitment and retention of Black students, can create an environment where students of color feel connected but not separated from campus life (Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

### **Racial Identity Development and Minority Student Support**

Support groups provide a way for students of color to interact, learn and be supported (Strayhorn, 2010). Researchers find that by connecting with other Black students on campus, individuals have a reference group with whom to identify (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). And, through interactions with other Black students they often learn more about their racial identity and gain a greater appreciate for their culture (Davis, 2002; Strayhorn, 2010).

Greater racial identity development and appreciation can lead to more confidence and a higher self-esteem, variables that contribute to college persistence (Davis, 2002; Ortiz and Santos, 2009). A recent study looks at Black student enrollment in Black Studies courses to determine impact on racial identity development (Fuller, 2016). The findings suggest that those pursuing Black Studies minors describe a heightened sense of self and express a more positive racial identity development contrasted to many of the students who did not enroll in a Black Studies class (Fuller, 2016).

Support groups can also enhance racial identity development (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). Grier-Reed, et al., (2008) created a student support group entitled the African American Student Network (AFAM), a program designed by Black faculty to facilitate

retention of Black students on a predominantly White campus. By connecting with other Black students to share their experiences, the study shows that students feel supported and empowered. The authors identify that while academic factors affect retention, emotional factors also play a large role, citing a study of a retention program with a 90% success rate of persistence that focused on emotional well-being (Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

Further, on many predominantly White campuses limited activities are available to meet the needs of students of color in the areas of outreach, support, performances, exhibits, or community service (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). Again, cultural centers can provide a culturally relevant space for students to connect and experience support (Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

### **Institutional Leadership and Affirmative Action**

Some researchers have found that institutions with higher percentages of students of color often have a climate of support that includes more participation by all stakeholders in diversity initiatives and administrators that have the “time, mandate, and power to be effective” (Davis, 2002, p. 137). Successful institutions often utilize a wide range of practices that are proactive, involve people of color, and address core causes of racial problems (Fischer & Massey, 2007).

Although consideration of race in admissions and financial aid awards have increased access for some minority students, some states and institutions have banned affirmative action citing reverse discrimination for non-minorities, and unfairness to minorities due to potential lack of college readiness and stigmatization of acceptance without merit (Fischer & Massey, 2007; Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn and Arrona,

2006). While higher education decision-makers can promote racial diversity with affirmative action policies, these procedures are contentious and face frequent legal dispute (Fischer & Massey, 2007). Fowler (2009) identifies power as a major variable in promoting change in educational systems. Thus, while affirmative action strategies have enhanced retention efforts, institutions must be willing to exercise them in the face of potential lawsuits.

Davis (2002) suggests that an important strategy for retention success may be the recruitment of administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are truly committed to racial diversity citing further that the college president and other high-level administrators should be closely involved in racial diversity efforts.

### **Systematic Institutional Connections**

Some researchers such as Lang (1992), Hamlen (1992) and Fleming (2012) attribute lower retention rates of students of color to lack of commitment of equal opportunity, access, and retention efforts by higher education institutions. Hamlen (1992) calls for systematic connections between effective retention programs and services rather than silo or isolated efforts that students must learn to navigate. Similarly, Cooper, Williams, and Burnett (1992) find that without coordinated efforts to support students and encourage them to access services, institutional resources can be underutilized and ineffective. Integrated efforts by campus administrators, faculty and staff that result in the sharing of information and coordination of services create more seamless outreach and assistance to students.

Further complicating retention issues is that since the 1980s there has been a

decline in national opinion supporting equal opportunity and a commitment to the concerns of marginalized individuals, including students of color (Habley, 2012; Lang, 1992). Lang (1992) explores this trend in the following narrative, If the boards of trustees and chief academic officers at these institutions were to commit themselves to equal opportunity and direct their underlings to carry out their directives, minority access and retention would improve virtually overnight (p. 519). When higher education institutions lack commitment to increase the retention of students of color, the outcome is tokenism or little response to the needs of minority students. Perhaps little will change regarding the retention of Black students until the collective attitudes and behaviors of the systems that control higher education change.

### **Black Student Persistence**

Statistics show racial and ethnic gaps in college enrollment, persistence and completion. The college enrollment rate among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old high school graduates is 45% for White students, 34% for Black students, and 28% for Hispanic students (Ryu, 2010). The percentage of twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-old college graduates in 2003 was 34% for White students, 17% for Black students, and 10% for Hispanic students (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). A later study found that Asian students have the highest five-year college persistence rate at 62%, followed by 58% for White students, 42% for Hispanic students, and 36% for Black students (Ryu, 2010). Black students have the lowest persistence rate compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

Further, the persistence experience of Black males is well-documented and particularly troubling given their lower college enrollment rates coupled with high dropout rates (DeAngelo et al., 2011) compared to females and other racial/ethnic

groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a). In 2002, Black men comprised 4.3% of students enrolled in higher education institutions, the same percentage as in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Harper (2012a) finds that the six-year graduation rate for Black male students attending public colleges and universities was 33.3%, compared to 48.1% for students overall.

Persistence rates vary not only by gender but by kinds of higher education institutions. With the exception of elite institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities and four- year publics reveal not only low persistence rates among Black students but also *increases* in the persistence and graduation gap (Harper, 2012a).

**Persistence at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).** HBCUs enroll 11% of Black students and they represent less than 3% of colleges and universities in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). These institutions are public and private, religious and non-sectarian, two-year and four-year, selective and open, and urban and rural. Although HBCUs have a low student persistence rate at 30% (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), it is important to consider the context of these institutions and that many HBCU students are low-income and first-generation (Mercer & Stedman, 2008). Students with these characteristics are less likely to graduate regardless of where they attend college.

Research reveals mixed findings about Black student persistence and graduation rates at HBCU institutions. While persistence rates of Black students at many HBCUs has increased as exemplified by Jackson State University' growth of 11% and Delaware State University growth of 8% from 1998 to 2011, student persistence at other HBCU institutions has decreased over time ("HBCUs Showing," 2013). The

Black student graduation rate at seven HBCUs (i.e., Rust College, Fayetteville State University, and Florida A&M University) dropped by 10 percent or more in the 1998-to-2011 period (“HBUCs Showing,” 2013).

**Persistence at Elite Institutions.** Black students at some selective and elite PWI colleges and universities persist and have graduation rates that mirror those of their White peers. In fact, at some top-ranked schools, the Black graduation rate is higher than that of White students (Black Student Graduation, 2013). For example, 18 high-ranking colleges and universities have Black student graduation rates that have averaged over 90 percent, the highest rate at Harvard University, where 97 percent of entering Black students earn their degree within six years at that institution (Black Student Graduation, 2013). These institutions, however, enroll a “tiny” number of Black students and can’t accurately compare to other institutions (Black Student Graduation, 2013).

At Amherst College, the Black student graduate rate is 95% (“Black Student Graduation,” 2013). Blacks at Yale University and Swarthmore College graduate at a rate of 94 percent and Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania have Black student graduation rates of 93 percent (“Black Student Graduation,” 2013). Among the high-ranking universities, Harvard and Rice have Black graduation rates that are one percentage point below the rate for Whites (“Black Student Graduation,” 2013).

**Persistence at Four-Year Public Institutions.** While Black students are more likely than any other racial and ethnic group to attend college without earning a degree, they are also substantially less likely to graduate from 4-year public institutions than

White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b). At 40%, six-year college graduation rates for Blacks are over 20% lower than White students (DeAngelo et al., 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In Missouri, the 2010 graduation rate at public, four year institutions within a four and six-year time period for *all* students is 29.6% and 54.5%, respectively. For other racial and ethnic populations, the four and six-year rate is as follows: White students, 32.2% and 57.5%; Hispanic students, 25.7% and 49.5%; and Black students 10.8% and 31.2% (DeAngelo et al., 2011). Black students lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in college persistence and graduation at four year public institutions.

### **Factors Contributing to Black Student Persistence**

Many reasons exist for low persistence and graduation rates including racial climate (Anyon, 2009), academic preparation (Habley et al., 2012), family utility and knowledge of college processes (Kuh et al., 2008), and finances (Perna & Jones, 2013).

**Racial Climate.** A racial climate of discrimination and racism at institutions can cause Black students to feel unsafe and unwelcome and they may be more likely to drop out (Sledge, 2012). These dynamics can be the result of overt and covert racism, poor race relations among students, a dearth of cultural and social activities directed toward Black students, and/or a surrounding community that lacks cultural amenities or displays hostility to Black students (Griffin, Cunningham, & George Mwangi, 2016; Habley et al., 2012). In these contexts, Black students may leave school altogether or decide to complete higher education elsewhere.

In contrast, Samuel Museus (2013) contends that undergraduates who experience a more culturally inclusive campus climate are more likely to feel a greater

sense of belonging, exhibit greater academic confidence and higher levels of academic performance, and ultimately be more apt to persist to graduation. Museus (2013) offers a Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model that identify indicators that lead toward a more culturally inclusive climate. These indicators encourage campuses to engage students' racially diverse cultural backgrounds and identities, reflect their different needs as they navigate college campuses, and enable their success in college (Museus, 2013). In essence, the model encourages a shift on college campuses from a climate of racial disparity to one of inclusion.

**Academic Preparation.** Many Black students who enroll in college are not prepared for college-level academics. Inadequate preparation in K-12 education can leave Black students without the necessary academic foundation to succeed in college (Anyon, 2009; Fleming, 2012; Howard, 2007). Howard (2007) and Anyon (1997) posit that until major improvements are made in teaching and learning at the Pre K-12 level, students of color will have lower educational achievement, decreased participation in college and lower graduation rates compared to Whites groups. Increasing reading proficiency, creating culturally responsive classrooms and emphasizing science and math are ways to enhance academic success for minority students (Lang, 1992). Poor grades can lead to frustration which increases the likelihood of dropping out or dismissal.

Guinier (2015), however, questions the fundamental strategies that institutions use in determining which students get to enter and leave higher education. She finds that current metrics in college entrance decisions (grade point average, college entrance exam scores, extracurricular activities) are problematic as they privilege individual elites and

perpetuate a hierarchical, elitist society. While Universities claim to provide educational opportunity, the merit system that dictates the admissions practices of these institutions operate to choose elite individuals rather than create learning environments that progress critical thinking and egalitarian societies (Guinier, 2015). Thus, Guinier (2015) posits that institutions are lacking in their mission to provide educational opportunity and to prepare students for contributing to and advancing a democratic society. In essence, Guinier (2015) argues that colleges and universities must focus on accepting and educating students who will be critical thinkers, civically minded and publicly engaged leaders. She contrasts the current merit-based approach by posing “democratic merit,” a system that measures the success of higher education not by the personal qualities of the students who enter but by the work and service performed by the graduates who leave (Guinier, 2015).

**Family Knowledge of College Processes.** A challenge confronting some youth of color is that they are often first-generation college students whose parents or caregivers lack first-hand knowledge of the college experience (Habley et al., 2012), a corollary, perhaps, of the meritocratic system discussed by Guinier (2015). These youths are twice as likely as those with a college educated parent to leave before their second year of college (Choy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2008). Black students often come from families that have little to no tradition of higher education (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). Because of this lack of direct experience, a lack of needed support and understanding for helping Black student succeed in higher education can occur.

Due to a lack of experience and/or other obligations some parents may be unable to help their children directly with college, resulting in students who lack a family

guidance to assist when challenges arise (Dennis, et al., 2005). Tinto found that while 15 percent of students drop out of college because of academic failure; most leave because of personal, financial, or social problems, critical factors to success in college and eventual graduation that support systems can impact (Tinto, 2007).

A more strengths-based method of exploring the role of family in college persistence among students of color is Funds of Knowledge, a concept defined by researchers Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). The Funds of Knowledge concept began in educational studies that identify the resources of working-class, Latino families in order to contradict the deficit-based perceptions common in representations of these and other low income families (Moll et al., 1992). It is the prior knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom due to their unique family, cultural and life backgrounds (Moll et al., 1992).

Kiyama (2010) extends the Funds of Knowledge concept to issues of college access and aspirations of Mexican American families. Kiyama (2010) illustrates ways in which families are involved in their children’s education through the construction of both supportive and limiting educational ideologies leading to beliefs about college-going processes; college information gathered from social systems and academic assets found in the family environment; and the development of college-going attitudes and behaviors. Funds of Knowledge offers a counter-narrative to deficit-based notions of family ability to support students of color in the college process.

**Finances.** Financial strain also explains lower persistence rates of Black

students. The price of higher education (i.e., tuition, fees, living expenses, and textbooks) is prohibitive for some Black students and research has shown that two-thirds of Black students who drop out of college do so for financial reasons (Kaltenbaugh, et al., 1999; Perna, 2008; Perna & Jones, 2013). Many Black students have debt aversion and decide against an accumulation of loans to finance higher education (Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999; Perna, 2008).

Increases in tuition, fees, and textbooks costs can drive the price of education too high to afford (Gladieux & Perna, 2005). Further, once in college the loss or reduction of scholarship and grant awards after a student's first year in school may result in their inability to sustain college expenses once paid through this aid (Perna & Jones, 2012). Some students attempt to maintain employment while going to college but find it too difficult to undertake both commitments concurrently, and often resulting in the decision to drop out of college (Perna, 2008). And, some students drop out of college to enter the work force to help support their families (Gilford & Reynolds, 2013; Heiss, 1996).

Even though students of color may have debt aversion, Gladieux and Perna (2005) find that student borrowers are disproportionately from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Black students. They also are more likely to be unsuccessful in completing a college degree, "leaving them without a higher education credential and the income advantage it offers, but with the substantial loan debt that must be repaid irrespective of their degree status." (p. 1741).

### **Race and Its Constructs**

In addition to the typical responsibilities and demands of college (academic

performance, student life, employment, etc.), Black students often encounter racism and anti-Black attitudes in academia, likely resulting in race-related strain and hardship that can impact achievement and persistence (Martin, 2015). The literature demonstrates how racially charged sentiments and encounters on college campuses can be harmful to Black students (Sharp-Grier, 2015; Yee, Roderick, & Gamble, 2015). It is important to identify and unpack racial concepts that frame the college environment in order to better understand Black student experiences and persistence in higher education. First is an exploration of the term race.

**Race.** Race is a term used to categorize individuals into distinct social groups (Ortiz & Santos, 2009),

People of color are treated as though they belong to a biologically defined racial group on the basis of characteristics that society deems to be racial (i.e., skin color, hair texture, body size, and facial features) and regardless of one's cultural socialization, disadvantageous treatment most often occurs on the basis of phenotypic characteristics. (Helms & Taleyrant, 1997, p. 1247)

Supporting this view is research linking phenotypic differences within individuals of color with discrimination and oppression in economic, educational, health, housing and other opportunities. (Anyon, 2009; Helms & Talleyrand, 1997; Leonardo, 2013; Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

An early definition of race included a group of people who share similar and distinct biological and physical characteristics (Anderson, 2002). Since the mid-1950s, though, the association of the term *race* with ideologies and theories from social and biological science led to the word *race* itself becoming problematic

(Leonardo, 2013). Ultimately, certain body variations are constructed by society as having meaning based purely on physical appearance. Now the term *race* refers to groups of people who have traits determined by society to be socially significant, sometimes resulting in people regarding other people in discriminatory and oppressive ways because of them (Fisher & Massey, 2007). For example, differences in hand size have not been treated as socially significant but differences in skin color have. The idea and practices of the term *race* justified and continues to rationalize social inequalities as normal.

Thus, although race is “made up” the social construction of it and internalized meaning makes it extremely powerful and potent because society takes it for granted in an unquestioning way and reproduces these “made up” notions of groups of people over generations (Leonardo, 2013). Racism, then, is prejudice based on manufactured socially significant physical features. Leonardo (2013) believes that the social construction of race fosters marginalization, exclusionary practices and stereotypes about people of color and the subsequent development of racism as a belief system in order to perpetuate the place and role of the dominant White society.

**Race in Higher Education.** A brief historical overview of race in higher education is necessary in order to understand current racial contexts. *Ebony and Ivy*, a book written by Craig Steven Wilder (2013), explores the interface between race, slavery and higher education. Wilder (2013) contends that early colleges’ and universities’ (i.e., Harvard, Yale) role in in Christianizing Native Americans also set the stage for further White supremacy and dominance over Black individuals, too. The burgeoning slave economy from the 1600 to 1800s and the creation of American

higher education were intertwined and mutually beneficial (Wilder, 2013). Wilder (2013) describes how slavery financed colleges and built campus buildings and structures. Slaves served faculty and students and college leaders engaged the support of slave owners and slave traders in the development and expansion of institutions (Wilder, 2013). In essence, Wilder demonstrates that higher education institutions, dependent on the slavery system, enveloped the racist premise they were founded upon and continue to reproduce it in the form of oppression and structural and institutional racism today.

Before the Civil War, higher education for Black students was virtually nonexistent and even after the abolishment of slavery, few colleges and universities were open or inviting to Black students. Later, federal government legislation in the second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890, required that states using federal land-grant funds must either make their institutions open to Black and White students or earmark money for segregated Black colleges to function as an alternative to White ones (Purnell, n.d.). Sixteen Black-only college received 1890 land-grant funds and most of these public institutions were founded by state legislatures between 1870 and 1910 (Purnell, n.d.) Prior to this it was primarily the initiative of Black individuals with support from the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Bureau that established private colleges and universities for the education of Black students (Purnell, n.d.).

In the mid-1960s as people of color demanded social justice and the federal government initiated more involvement in promoting equality for all people through the 1965 Civil Rights Act and related affirmative action policies, higher education institutions began to accept students of color (Anderson, 2002). By the end of the

1990s almost all universities and colleges had begun to develop policies and programs to include more students of color in their institutions. Predominantly White institutions of higher education shifted from exclusionary procedures to targeted educational opportunities structured to attract limited numbers of students of color, primarily highly talented ones (Anderson, 2002; Lang, 1992).

The new policies and practices created to increase enrollment slowly included grants and scholarships to pay for higher education and academic support services designed to help students of color adapt to campus life and thus increase persistence and completion (Anderson, 2002). A new philosophy of cultural diversity developed around these initiatives (Siefert, et al., 2006). Higher education leaders espoused the importance of students representing diverse cultural, racial, ethnic and social backgrounds; this perspective identified diversity as important to national and global interests (Anderson, 2002). A growing focus on diversity and a growing global economy and political world likely elicited a narrative of diversity; higher education needed to keep up with national and international changes by enrolling and supporting more diverse students, including students of color (Seifert et al., 2006).

Diversity of thought, knowledge, skills and approaches to life were deemed honorable and useful reasons to grow the representation of students of color in higher education institutions (Anderson, 2002). Further, education for students of color would equip them to share their skills and services with other people of color and serve as community and societal leaders and role models to others (Anderson, 2002).

Although these ideologies and practices present a positive picture of higher education opportunities for students of color and perhaps that their experiences in these

institutions followed suit, the reality is not so (Harper, 2012a). While the number of students of color enrolled in higher education increased as a result of these new policies and practices, economic disparity, inadequate academic preparation in high school, and discriminating and racist college cultures have negatively influenced their success in higher education (Habley et al., 2012). In reality, a culture of racial turmoil has embroiled students of color in higher education and affects their persistence (Fleming, 2012). Race emerges in many ways in higher education, from prejudiced incidents on campus, to policy decisions (i.e., affirmative action, enrollment, housing), to debates on the integration of diversity into curriculum (Chang et al., 2005).

In a sense, history has shown an about face regarding students of color and higher education. Institutions have gone from strongly resisting the inclusion of students of color in the pre-Civil Rights era to marginally supporting it in the Civil Rights era and then full circle to resistance against established policies and practices (affirmative action and admissions policies) that encourage students of color to experience increased representation in higher education institutions (Anderson, 2002). Some individuals now believe that students of color receive an unfair advantage in college admissions and financial aid awards (Anderson, 2002).

Exploring the concept of race and lived experiences, Critical Race theory (CRT) finds that race and racism are embedded or linked with every aspect of education and explains how higher education policies and procedures regarding the progress of students of color are tied to preserving White interests (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Bell, 2005; Bell, 2009). Although college campuses espouse the value of diversity and inclusion, Shaun Harper (2012) finds that CRT concepts like interest

convergence, which explains the advent of policies that appear to support students of color but only when White interest is preserved and minority progress doesn't compromise it, may aptly describe policy and strategies in higher education that impact students of color (Bell, 2005). Similarly, Harrison, Barone and Patton (2015) employ the concept of CRT in describing how diversity, social justice and inclusion are often utilized to promote agendas that maintain the status quo and preserve White privilege in educational settings, rather than serve racially diverse individuals.

Interest convergence explains how outwardly favorable policies and practices that support students of color may actually be self-serving for Whites as exemplified earlier in this paper about increasing students of color and fostering more diversity in higher education institutions because it was/is deemed important for national and global interests.

Delgado (2011) takes the idea of interest convergence further when he discusses how seemingly neutral laws and policies (financial aid, affirmative action) have enabled Whites to acquire wealth, employment and power at the sake of non-Whites. The power of White society is more than acts of favoring one's kind, but "an interconnected system of rules, customs, and privileges that consistently enable the majority group to remain ahead" (Delgado, 2011, p. 9). Critical Race theory researchers emphasize that while oppression of students of color occurs, the gains they experience (Civil Rights Act, financial aid) may also be problematic because they come at a price of reproducing the dominant standing of White society at the expense of people of color (Bell, 2005; Bell, 2009; Delgado, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). While individual students do succeed, perhaps the generalized higher education system for students of color according to CRT,

could be called a zero sum game at best and manipulation and oppression at worst.

Further, CRT concepts like intersectionality explain how the combination of race, sex, nationality, class, and sexual orientation plays out in educational environments (Delgado, 2011). Given human complexity, we are not reduced to just racial beings but live in multiple identities (Bell, 2009). Are the experiences of Black males different from Black females, for example? Storytelling and counter-storytelling, often referred to as ‘voice of color’ are CRT ways to surface racial expressions and identify narratives about lived experiences of people of color (Delgado, 2011). Because of their different histories and experiences, Black individuals are better able to communicate racial oppression matters to White individuals, who are unlikely themselves to know these experiences (Bell, 2009). Minority status, therefore, brings an assumed capability to speak about race and racism (Delgado, 2011).

Another tenet of CRT is double consciousness, a concept that will be addressed later in the review of literature (Delgado, 2011). While scholars have utilized CRT as a framework to explore issues related to racism, oppression and the experiences of minoritized individuals, it has not been widely employed in higher education (Harper, 2012). Despite its’ utility elsewhere, Patton, Harper, and Harris (2015) observe that “CRT was used in only 5 articles published over a ten-year period in seven major higher education journals (p. 193)” suggesting that CRT has not been integrated in higher education scholarship.

**Racism.** Racism is the belief that all members of a race have qualities or abilities specific to that race and distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races (Leonardo, 2013). The term *racism* also denotes a dominance differential as

identified by a continued, interpersonal, environmental, institutional and structural oppression of individuals based on their membership in a group that lacks power by those that have power (Leonardo, 2013). Racism can wear many masks and operate in multiple ways as evidenced by language and symbols that spotlight the ways that it is expressed from overt or blatant ways to more covert or hidden manifestations (DeAngelis, 2009). Given its' more insidious nature, covert racism may require more thought and dialogue to highlight the intent and impact of this more hidden form of racism (Leonardo, 2013).

Racism can be so subtle that neither victim nor offender may entirely understand the impact of the situation — “which may be especially toxic for people of color” (DeAngelis, 2009, p. 24). Uncertainty can be very distressing and the uncertainty of motivations and behaviors of others can have a significant impact on people of color in jobs, school and other arenas in terms of health and prosperity (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). The subtlety of racism can be explored by the term *racial micro-aggressions*, a concept identified by Solorzano (1998) who added the term *racial* to the concept of *micro-aggression* originally proposed by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970, which suggests that seemingly nonracial interactions are racial in nature when dominant and subordinate relationships are involved. In other words, the racial dimensions of daily, even ordinary, interactions become substantial when considering their cumulative effect of discouraging and psychologically harming people of color (Leonardo, 2013; Solorzano, 1998).

Sue (2010) expanded the concept micro-aggressions by developing a classification system to describe and assess the phenomenon. He finds that,

It's a monumental task to get white people to realize that they are delivering micro-aggressions, because it's scary to them. It assails their self-image of being good, moral, decent human beings to realize that maybe at an unconscious level they have biased thoughts, attitudes and feelings that harm people of color. (DeAngilis, 2009, p. 24.)

Many well-meaning Whites who believe in equality may unintentionally act in a racist way in a pattern called *aversive racism*, referencing Whites' aversion to being perceived as prejudiced given an intentional adherence to egalitarian ideologies (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Sue (2010) adds to these findings by identifying and describing the manifestations of aversive racism in a taxonomy that in addition to racial micro-aggressions, includes micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations (Sue, 2010). Each classification has hidden, demeaning and hostile messages and a harmful effect on the recipient:

- **Micro-assault:** These assaults are obvious verbal, nonverbal, or environmental/property attacks that are intended to have discriminatory impact as exemplified by a University of Missouri student who littered the MU Gaines Oldham Black Culture Center with cotton balls in reference to slavery (Heavin, 2010).
- **Micro-insult:** These behaviors or verbal comments are unintentional but convey disrespect or insensitivity. An example is asking a Black student if her hair is “real” or not.
- **Micro-invalidation:** These invalidations are verbal statements or behaviors that discount, deny, or dismiss experiences. An example is a White student rolling his eyes at a Black student who talks about being a victim of micro-invalidations.

Given the ongoing overt and covert ways that racism is performed and experienced, the strength of White denial in the form color-blindness, a belief that racism and race privilege no longer carry the power they once exercised making race-based policies unnecessary, is troubling (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Critical Race theory scholars provide a counter-narrative against the concept of color blindness citing that in fact racism does exist and that racial structures and practices are actually reinforced through individuals and institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2013).

Similarly, another denial of racism is the idea that the United States has entered a post-racial or race ambivalent era, exemplified by the election of a Black president. This theory describes a society devoid of racial favorites, discrimination, and prejudice (Leonardo, 2013). Regardless of these ideologies, society is still plagued with racism in many different and pervasive forms, from the individual to the systemic level (Leonardo, 2013). These forms of racism are identified as internalized, interpersonal, institutional and structural (Anyon, 2009; Better, 2008; Brondolo, et al., 2009; Johnson, 2008; Lawrence & Keheler, 2004; Pyke, 2010; Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

**Internalized racism.** Internalized racism is the internalization of racist viewpoints by individuals towards themselves and people of their own racial group (Pyke, 2010). Johnson (2008) expands the concept by suggesting that it also includes “an individual's conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy in which Whites are consistently ranked above People of Color”, conveying an unequal possession of power between Whites and people of color (p.17). This process connects with W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1989 [1903]) concept of double consciousness, the idea of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others (White society), resulting in the

development of more than one social identity at the sake of fostering a sense of self.

Stuart Hall (1986) refers to internalized racism as one of the most widespread but least researched components of racism. He defines it as “the ‘subjection’ of the targets of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them” (Hall, 1986, p. 26). Internalized racist thoughts and feelings present obstacles towards the attainment of racial equality because those that believe that they are subordinate to other racial groups may not feel that equality is a valid aspiration (Pyke, 2010).

**Interpersonal racism.** Interpersonal racism is individual level racism and has been defined as "directly perceived discriminatory interactions between individuals whether in their institutional roles or as public and private individuals" (Krieger, 1999, p. 301). Interpersonal racism includes harm that the targeted individual credits to conscious or unintentional racial bias on the part of the offender. Interpersonal racism can happen in a wide variety of settings and can be communicated through a range of attitudes and actions such as social rejection, stigmatization, unfair treatment, and/or threats, harassment, and persecution (Brondolo et al., 2009). Examples of interpersonal racism abound in both mundane and highly visible, tragic ways such as the massacre of nine Black people by a self-identified racist man at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015.

**Institutional racism.** Institutional racism refers to the policies and practices that operate within social institutions that, intentionally or not, punish, disadvantage and exploit people of color (Better, 2008). It serves to reinforce White privilege in all areas

of society, including leadership roles, economic conditions, and social networking (Better, 2008). It is often the direct connection and therefore the fundamental cause for the lack of cultural competency and diversity in education and the workplace (Ward & Rivera, 2014). An example of institutional racism can be found in the utilization of college entrance examinations as a method to admit students to higher education institutions given that these tests have consistently been identified as racially biased toward Whites (Anyon, 2009). Another example includes the dearth of nonwhite faculty members and leaders on most college campuses that if more represented, could help diversify institutions and serve as role models for students of color.

**Structural racism.** Structural racism refers to a system in which policies, practices, symbols, and other norms work in numerous and frequently supporting ways to preserve racial inequality (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). It includes dimensions of history and culture that have permitted White privilege and inequity for people of color to persist and adapt over time (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Structural racism is difficult to find in a particular institution because it includes the reinforcing effects of “multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually producing new, and re-producing old forms of racism” (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004, p. 2). Examples include segregation, education inequities, income disparity, and media discourse and narratives. Lawrence and Keleher (2004) find that structural racism is not necessarily a dynamic that people or institutions choose to practice rather it is systemic: a feature of social, economic and political systems and the whole fabric of society and therefore the most profound and all-encompassing form of racism because all other forms (e.g. institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal)

emerge from it.

Racism takes shape in ideologies and manifestations in all parts of society, particularly education, because the intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural and institutional reproduction of it is a silent and embedded dynamic that is often difficult to detect and alter (Leonardo, 2013).

**Anti-Blackness.** Anti-Blackness is hostility and oppression toward Black people, a concept that undergirds the backlash that created the Black Lives Matter campaign brought about by the killings of Black people like Travon Martin and Michael Brown by police and vigilantes (Garza, 2016; Harris & Edwards, 2016). Black Lives Matter is an ideological frame and political protest movement that reacts against systematic and intentional oppression, typically centered around police violence against Black people. Black Lives Matter activists seek to establish a more just and equitable legal system for Black people (Harris & Edwards, 2016).

### **White Racial Frame**

Scholars have postulated that students of color represented on campuses still operate within a hegemonic system of White supremacy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Feagin, 2013; Andersen, Taylor, & Logio, 2014) that offers furtive and overt advantages to White populations over people of color (Watson, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Feagin (2006) coined the idea of the White Racial Frame (WRF), which includes Whiteness, White privilege, White supremacy and institutionalized racism. The WRF perpetuates disproportionate power, as Whiteness “becomes ‘common sense,’ includes racial stereotypes, understandings, images, and inclinations to act [that prevail] because Whites have long had the power and the resources to impose this reality (Feagin, 2008,

p. 39). This framing maintains systemic racism in the United States and its institutions (Feagin, 2013, p. 1). With WRF as the “norm,” students of color are often represented as disadvantaged in these institutions from the start (Iverson, 2007). I expand on Feagin’s WRF, and argue that most university processes still operate from a White racial frame.

Whiteness “is an epistemology...a particular way of knowing and valuing social life that relies upon an essentialist and non-relational identity” (Dwyer & Jones, 2000, p. 210). It consciously and “unconsciously denies blackness and brownness and serves to preserve the social privileges and provides a psychological cover of unencumbered fashioning of certain cultural notions of difference” (Watson, 2013, p. 130-131).

White privilege is a corollary to the concept of Whiteness. McIntosh (1998) argues that White privilege is like “an invisible package of unearned assets” that White people can use to their advantage—and are conditioned to not acknowledge (p. 109-110). Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, and Han (2009) write that White privilege within higher education institutions is the translation of Whiteness as the normative standard into “systematic advantages afforded to the dominant racial group” (p. 555). Though the use of privilege by Whites may be unintentionally oppressive, it perpetuates inequitable power dynamics and social conditions (McIntosh, 1998; Rothman, 2014). Whiteness is an identity, a culture, and an often colonizing way of life that is largely invisible to Whites, though rarely to people of color.

Whiteness also carries the authority within the larger culture it dominates to set the terms on which every aspect of race is discussed and understood (Rothman, 2014). The term White supremacy, then, further elucidates the discussion by focusing on the political and socioeconomic systems that enable White people to experience systemic

advantages over racial and ethnical groups, both at the individual and collective levels (Leonardo, 2013). Whiteness, thus, is multi-faceted and pervasive. Flagg (2005) believes it lies at the center of the problem of race in this society.

In essence, Whiteness occupies a social space of power, privilege and prestige upon which other races are compared. Flagg (2005) finds that Whiteness is institutionalized and therefore shapes thinking and behavior in daily life situations, for White people and often people of color. Feagin's (2013) WRF argues that the dominant White race engages in narratives in such a way as to minimize the prevalent nature of racism as well as to absolve its own blame in the process.

Among White people in particular, this framing is deeply regarded and encompasses many forms of racialized knowledge and understandings that together form racialized action and behavior in a multitude of ways that are often unconscious (Feagin, 2013). Clearly, the WRF is more than a cognitive exercise; it is a pervasive and embedded racial framing that includes racial images, narratives, emotions, doctrines and actions.

### **Students in Higher Education and Racism**

While racism in its many forms abounds on college campuses, Altbach, Lomotey and Rivers (2002) find that few individuals realize the effect of race and racism, citing that campus leaders and faculty see racial issues in isolation, involving an individual problem to be handled when situations arise rather than as a pervasive and important issue that necessitates continued dialogue and problem solving. Further, many campus leaders may feel that race and racism are "peripheral to the academic enterprise – that they are individual problems brought to center stage by small groups, unnecessary

distractions from the real business of education” (Altbach et al., 2002).

Even though college campuses have attempted to address racism through task forces, race forums and other initiatives, things have not improved since 2002 when Altbach et al. published their research (Robinson, 2015). In fact, students, faculty, staff and administrators of color continue to experience intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and structural racism on college campuses (Chesler et al., 2005). Many of these individuals also share narratives about micro-aggressions, micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations (DeAngelis, 2009). Although people of color do share their stories, Witherspoon-Arnold and Brooks (2013) note that the lack of attention and discourse on the part of college leaders and those in power in addressing racism represents tolerance and even support for interpersonal and institutional racism.

Similarly, Harper (2012) finds pervasive silencing of racism on predominantly White campuses in a meta-analysis of journal articles over a 10-year period in the form of 1) racial inequality attributed to issues other than racism, 2) discourse that includes language other than the terms *race* or *racism*, and 3) the seldom use of Critical Race Theory as a model to understand and address race and racism. Harper (2012b) discusses the importance of foregrounding silenced narratives, the need for genuine and authentic dialogue, and action steps that address racial issues in order to provide better experiences and outcomes for people of color on college campuses.

Attitudes and behaviors among White students, faculty, staff and administrators related to the concepts of Whiteness (Flagg, 2005), a White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2013), and White supremacy (Leonardo, 2013) contribute to racism on college campuses because they foreground White individuals and as a result, side-

line minorities. Cabrera (2012) found that White supremacy contributes to racism in higher education when he studied the racial views and experiences of White male students on a college campus. In fact, the students viewed little evidence of racism, minimized the effect of present-day racism, and identified White individuals as the victims of diversity initiatives, citing 'reverse racism' (Cabrera, 2012). The participants blamed racial minorities for racial antagonism and developed an enhanced sense of 'reverse racism' since attending college (Cabrera, 2012). Based on this study, it can be argued that higher education creates an environment that actually increases racist thoughts and attitudes among its students.

### **Effects of Racism**

The effect of racism is profound and wide-reaching as exemplified by personal, economic, social health and political challenges that plague individuals, families and society as a result (Anyon, 2009; Brondola et al., 2009). For example, studies about the effect of the stress of racism on people of color find that it contributes to disparities in physical and mental health and to numerous negative health outcomes (i.e., hypertension, depression, coronary disease) within racial and ethnic groups (Brondola et al., 2009; Paradies, 2006). Economic effects of racism include lower wages and less favorable working conditions, an effect partially driven by the pipeline of inequity in the quality and attainment of education of people of color which is yet another result of racism (Anyon, 2009).

Socially, racism leads to lack of understanding and ignorance between groups of people which can alienate individuals from one another and lessen a sense of community (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Similarly, political fragmentation caused by

racism contributes to White dominance but lack of power and influence for people of color, as well as the loss of acting in accord for better societal good (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004).

The effect of racism on personal growth and development is also acute for both offenders and their targets (Harper, 2012a). Victims of racism often report fear from experiences that compromise their emotional and physical safety (Matias, 2015). Those who manifest racist attitudes and behaviors live with ignorance and fear that hamper their personal choice and growth (Harper, 2012a). Further, forfeiture of opportunities due to discrimination and internalized negative messages can lead to significant harm and fatigue, a weariness from fighting racial battles (Martin, 2015).

**Racial Battle Fatigue.** The term *racial battle fatigue* (RBF) was coined by educator William Smith as a concept to better understand the physical and mental health conditions (i.e., anxiety, depression) of people of color caused by their experiences with racism (Mitchell, Fasching-Varner, Albert, & Allen, 2015). Different from typical stressors, RBF is a response to stressful experiences involving racism, and racial hostilities under challenging, threatening or dangerous situations (Smith, 2004; Vincent, Sanders, & Smith, 2015). RBF emerges as a fixture within the context of higher education, too.

Through microaggressions, stereotype threat, underfunding and defunding of initiatives/offices, expansive commitments to diversity-related strategic plans with restrictive actions on such plans, and departmental climates of exclusivity and inequity, those committed to diversity and equity find themselves working and fighting in hostile territory or racial badlands (Mitchell et al., 2015, p. xix).

In these environments faculty, staff, administrators, students of color and White allies find themselves exploited to promote officially pronounced vows to diversity, while simultaneously being expected to engage in difficult work spaces (Fashing-Varner et al., 2015; Smith, 2004). In the struggle to maintain self-respect and high quality work, many individuals experience an exhaustion that leads to poor health, isolation, and marginalization from the same institution where a focus on diversity has become the current chant (Jackson, 2015; Vincent et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2015).

Students have profound experiences with RBF as exemplified by research on PhD candidates of color, who discuss their surprise at having to “expend so much energy countering hegemonic social interactions and institutional forces” on campus in the form of frustration, exhaustion and self-doubt (Yee et al., p. 7). Jenkins (2015) shares her experiences with RBT in higher education centering on a classroom experience where derogatory racial statements and slurs were commonplace for the professor who led the class. Feelings of being punished for being a person of color and animosity toward the professor for his continuous disregard created feelings of marginalization that Jenkins (2015) redirected toward her own counter-narratives, or hybrid spaces, to help discount the effect of her experiences.

PWIs, in particular, represent racial climates that are brimming with racism, primarily toward Black males according to Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011). The researchers found that thwarted opportunities and routine to acute experiences with environmental stress were typical for Black men, particularly as their persistence increased toward college completion. The results suggest that PWIs are prime candidates for generating RBF among Black males (Smith et al., 2011). Students of

color exhibit lower levels of college persistence due to the effects of RBF (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011; Van Dyke & Teeter, 2014).

Although higher education institutions allow for discourse that suggests an openness to change, traditionally they have been cautious of it, choosing instead to operate within long-established educational and administrative practices rather than adjust them (Robinson, 2015). Nonetheless, researchers find that racism and RBF in higher education will continue until institutions call for systemic resistance to racism instead of piecemeal and short-term approaches that are limited at best (Vincent, Sanders, & Smith, 2015). Ultimately, racism and RBF can negatively affect persistence.

### **Overview of Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Two theoretical frameworks, Resilience theory and Resistance theory, were selected as lenses for understanding how racism and race critical incidents influence Black students' experience in college persistence. Resistance and Resilience theories help explain the complexity of power inequities, biases in social interactions, and the reactions of marginalized individuals and groups to marginalizing influences (Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004; Giroux, 2015; Masten, 2011).

Resistance and Resilience theories focus on the strengths of individuals and emphasize their agency and access to resources in helping shape their experiences rather than adopting a deficit-based approach, viewing marginalized individuals as objects that those in power act upon (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). These frameworks also spotlight the idea that thoughts, attitudes and behaviors of oppressors pertaining to marginalized groups and individuals are both overt and covert in their expression. In other words, they can be both blatant and embedded in existing social structures (Giroux, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Furthermore, Resistance theory focuses on the ways that individuals and entities push back against oppression and the consequences these actions have on those who resist (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In this study, Resistance theory and Resilience theory help explain Black student persistence pertaining to experiences with oppression in the form of racism and race critical incidents.

### **Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory focuses on individuals and groups who overcome oppressive situations and the factors and resources that facilitate their ability to minimize the negative effects of oppression (Garza et al., 2004). Resilience has evolved as a way to depict and understand success of people and groups with challenges that imply they should be unsuccessful; in the case of this study, college persistence. Further, Garza et al., (2004) posit “Resilience is defined as the ability to confront and to resolve problems and the capacity to utilize personal or social resources to enhance limited possibilities” (p. 11).

Resilience theory underscores the contextual aspects and personal and community assets that individuals or groups possess to combat challenges and tensions rather than framing them as solely as victims of oppression (Masten, 2011). Scholars have shifted the focus of resilience inquiry from a problem-based, deficit, and at-risk paradigm to a strengths-base, developmental model (Benard, 2004; Garza et al., 2004). Ubiquitous in scholarly discussions is the recognition of resilience as a *process* (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Masten, 2011; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Unger (2008) and Rutter (2007) differentiate resilience as an individual moving *toward* and using a resource rather than considering resilience as a personal trait, given the effect of both internal and external

systems in this continual process. In other words, resilience is not a single attribute but it results from the multifaceted and continual interplay between an individual's attributes (i.e., coping mechanisms, sense of worth) and the resources in the environment (i.e., caring relationships, involvement in faith organizations, positive community engagement).

**Resilience: Academics and Black Students.** Morales and Trotman (2011) provide a definition of academic resilience by connecting with the experiences of successful Black college students when they explain the idea as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles” (p.8). Exploring the resilience of Black college students promotes a better understanding of the internal and external challenges that threaten educational attainment in this student population and the resources that help buffer adversity (Kim & Hargrove. 2013). Kim and Hargrove (2013) find that the study of resilience can prompt Black students to share accounts of how they circumnavigate adversity in a cultural context. For example, William's (2014) study of high-achieving Black high school graduates and their perception of eliminating barriers for K-12 Black students identifies several themes that encourage resilience including enhanced support systems at the family, school and community level.

Morales and Trotman (2011) find that resilient Black students are the “statistically elite, those who avoid the dreadful educational outcomes associated with a historically underprivileged socio-economic status” (p. 1). Understanding resilience helps scholars, educators, and other stakeholders consider a theoretical foundation to develop effective research, public policy, and educational opportunities to encourage

Black student academic success (Harper, 2012c; Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

**Origins of Resilience Theory.** Resiliency theory has roots in the health care field but research in behavioral sciences and resiliency emerged around 1970 (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). According to Masten (2011), early scholars argued that, Critical aspects of human function and development, crucial for understanding and promoting prevention of, resistance to, or recovery from psychopathology, had been profoundly neglected (p. 2296).

Since then three waves of resiliency research have proliferated beginning with the focus on resiliency in understanding and preventing the onset of psychological problems (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990).

These early researchers acknowledged the importance of understanding how individuals develop and adapt under challenging situations (Luthar, 2000). For example, a noted pioneer in resilience research, Emmy Werner, used the term *resilience* in the 1970s when studying a group of children from Kauai, Hawaii (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). It was a high poverty area that included a large number of unemployed families with high incidences of alcoholism and mental illness. Werner found two-thirds of the children who grew up in area demonstrated destructive behaviors (i.e., substance abuse) in their later adolescent years while one-third of the youth did not exhibit these behaviors (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Werner called the latter group 'resilient' (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Thus, resilient children and families were those who demonstrated characteristics that allowed them to be more successful than non-resilient children and families.

The second wave of resilience research concentrated on discovering the processes

and systems that accounted for protective factors (person, family and community assets that buffer individuals from the negative effects of oppressive situations) associated with resilience (Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Resilience developed as a major research and theoretical focus in the 1980s from the study of children whose mothers had schizophrenia (Masten, et al., 1990). A 1989 study showed that children of parents with schizophrenia did not receive appropriate parental caregiving compared to children of parents with positive mental health and that these situations often negatively affected them (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997). Conversely, some children of mentally ill parents thrived leading scholars to attempt to learn the cause (Masten et al., 1990).

The third wave of resilience research evolved from concerns about the well-being of children growing up with adversities and emphasizing the promotion of resilience through “prevention, intervention, and policy” (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012, p. 2296). In this context, researchers focus on uncovering the protective factors that explain children’s adjustment to unfavorable circumstance, such as abuse, harsh life events, racism and poverty (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Luthar, 2000). The emphasis of scholarly work, then, has shifted to understanding the fundamental protective processes that support resiliency and discovering how some factors (i.e., family) may influence positive outcomes in young people (Luthar, 2000; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

More recent studies of resilience concentrate on psychosocial levels (interaction of social factors and individual thought and behavior) of analysis to develop deeper understanding of resilience (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Current research includes studying the individual, youth, family, health, social and ecological levels of resilience while incorporating educational, economic and cultural contexts (Zolkoski & Bullock,

2012).

**Models of Resilience.** Garmezy, Masten and Tellegen (1984) developed four typologies of resilience to explain how individual and environmental factors interact to reduce or offset the adverse effects of risk factors: compensatory model, challenge model and protective factor model.

***Compensatory model.*** A compensatory factor defuses exposure to risk. In this model, an individual does not have contact with a risk factor, rather the compensatory factor has a direct and independent effect on an individual avoiding the negative impact of a risk element (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Garmezy et al., 1984). For example, a student living in a high-crime neighborhood may be more likely to commit a crime than a student not living in a high-crime area. Adults monitoring the behavior of students may help balance the negative effects of the neighborhood. The direct influence of a compensating factor would predict student decreased involvement in crime (Garmezy et al., 1984; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005)

***Challenge model.*** In this model, a risk is understood as a potential way of augmenting competence, assuming that the level of stress and risk is not severe (Garmezy et al. 1984). Too little stress is not adequately challenging, but excessive amounts may leave the individual overwhelmed and powerless, resulting in possible maladaptive behavior (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). However, moderate amounts of stress equip the individual with an experience that when surmounted, improves competence. Garmezy et al., (1984) explain this model as an evolving process where individuals learn to activate resources as they are subjected to challenges. Individuals become better prepared to navigate increasing risk as they effectively deal with limited amounts of risk (Fergus &

Zimmerman, 2005). By experiencing low levels of adversity as they grow and mature, youth increase their ability to succeed regardless of risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005)

***Protective factor model.*** In the protective factor model, Garmenzy et al. (1984) describe that there is a provisional relationship between stress and personal attributes and environmental elements relative to adaptation. Protective factors can interact with risk factors in mitigating the likelihood of an unfavorable outcome (Unger, 2014). For example, for students with high levels of parent involvement, the relationship between living in a high crime neighborhood and involvement in crime can be reduced.

Resilience then is hindered by risk factors and promoted by protective factors (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Protective factors modify responses to negative events so that potentially adverse outcomes can be prevented. Conversely, risk factors are conditions that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes. Further, protective and risk factors are not static units; they change relative to the context, leading to diverse outcomes (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Benzies and Mychasiuk (2009) contend that resilience is enhanced when protective factors are strengthened and connected at the individual, family, and community levels.

Resilience is expressed uniquely in people but particular protective factors emerge in different situations. Werner and Smith (1982) explain that while “resilience is a characteristic that varies from person to person, protective factors or mechanisms are more specific and more narrowly defined” (p. 5). They also find that protective factors become evident when a person faces a stressor resulting in a positive outcome rather than the adverse one predicted by existing risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1982).

Protective factors are associated with the individual, the family, and the social environment (Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 2011; & Olsson, Bond, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003).

Benard (2004) summarizes protective factors as personal strengths and environmental protective factors. Included in personal strengths is social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose, for example. Benard (2004) identified environmental factors as criteria that can be used to examine the experiences of resilient youth and to evaluate and develop prevention and education programs. Some of the environmental factors include caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and serve (Benard, 2004). These factors can occur in three common environments including family, schools, and communities.

Resilience theory affords a framework to understand how Black college students persist despite the adversities of racism and in particular, race critical incidents. Protective factors, both personal and environmental stemming from family, schools and communities, mitigate the likelihood of challenges or risks like racism and race critical incidences from negatively impacting college persistence.

### **Limitations of Resilience Theory**

While Resilience theory promotes a strengths-based approach to achieving success despite adversity, the theory does not attend to the quantity and intensity of stressors that individuals encounter (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Nor does the theory address the cognitive and emotional processes that impact the resilience-stress association, or the differential between resilience and coping (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). These considerations have implications for research, policy, and practice in

understanding protective factors that individuals and groups can use to build resilience.

### **Resilience Theory Compared to Other Frameworks**

Resilience theory was selected as the major framework to explore the effect of racism and race critical incidents on Black student persistence because it offers a strength-based approach to understanding a strength-based phenomenon, persistence. Protective factors (personal, family, school, community) can offer insight into resources Black students utilize to overcome adversities of racism in order to persist (Masten, 2011). Other theories and concepts, such as Critical Race theory and Social and Cultural Reproduction theories offer insight into the effect of racism on persistence, as well and will be addressed below (Delgado, 2011; Lemert, 2013). While these lenses critique social structures that perpetuate racism and help explain its' impacts, they lack a primary focus on assets or protective factors that promote success. The Funds of Knowledge concept also complements Resilience theory and focuses on assets or strengths of individuals in overcoming adversity, but it lacks a fully developed conceptual framework to explain the nuances of protective factors and how they promote success despite adversity (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992).

Below is a brief discussion of Critical Race Theory, Funds of Knowledge and Social and Cultural Reproduction theories and how they relate to Resilience theory. The purpose of including these frameworks is to highlight other conceptual models that address the complexities of racism and persistence and identify how they complement Resilience theory while positioning Resilience Theory as the most appropriate framework for this study.

**Critical race theory.** Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework focused on

employing a critical examination of society and culture and the intersection of race, law, and power (Delgado, 2011). From a CRT stance, the lack of opportunities and positive outcomes for individuals of color can be assigned to the convergence of social and economic forces that have evolved over many years, due to historic and current disenfranchisement in employment, educational inequality, limited economic opportunity and more (Kumasi, 2011). The theory provides a lens to unmask and expose the varying forms of racism in society (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT scholars acknowledge the pervasiveness and permanence of racism coupled with determination to challenge it to lead to a more equitable future for individuals of color (Kumasi, 2011).

The following are key concepts of CRT: double consciousness, interest convergence, and intersectionality. Kumasi (2011) identifies the CRT concept of double consciousness as the “push/pull social psychological syndrome that Black individuals experience in trying to both accommodate and resist mainstream White society’s cultural and linguistic norms” (p. 209). In essence, double consciousness is the conflicting components of minority experiences that are deeply rooted and intertwined in social, political and economic structures of society.

W. E. B. Du Bois explains it as a sense of always seeing one’s identity through the eyes of others and determining self-worth through a society that views Blacks with disdain and sympathy (Lemert, 2013). Double consciousness is a concept that illustrates the dual identity and role of Black individuals and the impact of this socially imposed dynamic.

Interest convergence relates to the concept of double consciousness in the pursuit of racial equality, both identifying how the inherent dominance of a White society

impacts minority populations. Interest convergence reveals that minorities not only take on dual identities and roles to survive in a White dominated society, but that any gains toward racial equality come in spite of the desire to create a more democratic society for all, not because of it (Kumasi, 2011). The idea that White majority groups tolerate progress of racial justice only when it benefits their interest can be seen and experienced throughout society, including education (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Derrick Bell, Harvard scholar, coined the CRT term “interest convergence” in the 1980s and posits that strides toward racial equality could only be taken if also advantageous to Whites (Suk, 2012). Researchers find that the starting point is a racially unequal society in which Whites are more advantaged than minority groups so that any action that benefits both Whites along with minority groups will only emphasize the unequal starting line (Bell, 1990; Suk, 2012). According to Suk (2012), if racial inequality is to be reversed *more* assistance needs to be given to marginalized and disenfranchised populations while “giving none to the already advantaged or, more sensibly, taking away privileges that the advantaged groups hold undeservedly“ (p. 50). In this framework, interest convergence minimally, if at all, advances the pursuit of racial equality.

The CRT concept of intersectionality suggests that although race is a primary element of analysis it does not operate in isolation of other types of oppression (Kumasi, 2011). Rather, a multidimensional approach to understanding racism is the recognition that racial oppression exists in many layers based on gender, class, immigration status, and sexuality (Collins, 2000; Kumasi, 2011). Essentially, people belong to more than one demographic, cultural, and social group and are “consequently affected by

disenfranchisement or inequality in more than one way” (Kumasi, 2011, p. 210).

Disenfranchisement at multiple levels can lead to heightened inequality and discrimination such that individuals (i.e., a poor, lesbian, undocumented Latina) may become shut out of the economic, social and political workings of society, because they don't “fit” the mainstream in multiple ways. This societal alienation and oppression can create further disparities, discrimination and segregation of disenfranchised people.

What does CRT have in common with Resilience Theory? Both focus on the situations and contexts that impact marginalized individuals and while CRT highlights the embedded, institutionalized ways that racism is reproduced over time and calls for the resistance of racism, Resilience theory identifies strategies through the harnessing of protective factors to overcome adversity. CRT shines light on the underlying ways that racism exists and is perpetuated while Resilience theory ignores the reason for adversity and focuses on the building of individual, family and community assets to achieve success.

**Funds of knowledge.** Funds of Knowledge is a concept defined by researchers Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). The Funds of Knowledge concept began in educational studies that identify the resources of working-class, Latino families in order to contradict the deficit-based perceptions common in representations of these and other low income families (Moll et al., 1992). It is the prior knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom due to their unique family, cultural and life backgrounds (Moll et al., 1992).

Further, Funds of Knowledge is a strength-based approach that acknowledges individual competency, experiences that produce knowledge, and ways to use these resources in teaching and learning (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009). Researchers offer an approach to home and school relationships where teachers learn and understand youth and families by visiting them to experience their Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2009; Moll et al., 1992). The purpose of this process is to foster strength-based perceptions of teachers toward marginalized homes and utilize these strengths and resources as their defining pedagogical characteristics (Gonzalez et al., 2009). Information teachers learn about students in this process is deemed the student's Funds of Knowledge.

Ultimately, when teachers sideline their position of teacher and expert and instead take on a different role as learner, they can understand their students and families in new and different ways (Gonzalez, et al., 2009). With new knowledge, the idea is that they can begin to see that the homes of their students include cultural and cognitive resources that should be used in the classroom to facilitate culturally responsive and engaging learning that utilize students' prior knowledge and experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2009). Incorporating a Funds of Knowledge approach in schools has the potential to make students more confident in their ability to learn by illustrating that their skills and experiences are an asset, not a deficit.

What does Funds of Knowledge have to do with Resilience theory? Both utilize a strengths-based approach to explain and promote achievement and success of individuals from marginalized groups. These frameworks complement one another by reinforcing positive factors within the individual, family and community that educators can tap and

promote to increase student success.

**Social and cultural reproduction theories.** Social and Cultural Reproduction theories help explain educational disparity among many Black students by critiquing the economic and structural dynamics that marginalize racial and minority groups (Lemert, 2013). Specifically, reproduction theories expose the economic and structural powers that often reproduce class structure and cultural dominance (Allen, 2011).

Bowles and Gintis (2002) discuss the way that schools reproduce the status quo by suggesting that roles encouraged in school match and reinforce similar roles in society and the economy. Furthermore, schools foster the idea of a hidden curriculum that quietly teaches students that socially assigned roles are to be accepted (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). They find that school practices mirror comparable roles and practices in the economy, preparing students for their predestined station in the economic hierarchy of a capitalist society (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

This parallel between schools and the economy and society reinforces the evolution of marginalized students into marginalized adults who have limited chances to reach social and economic achievement beyond that of their marginalized parents (Anyon, 2009). The idea of a hidden curriculum indicates the unstated ways that schools teach students that class stratification, power, and the rules and norms of capitalist society are natural and acceptable (Anyon, 2009; Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

While social reproduction theories rely on economic factors to explain inequality, cultural reproduction theories include an analysis of dominant culture privilege reinforced by schools (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Cultural reproduction posits that the normalization and acceptance of the dominant group's practices, beliefs, and norms are the factors that

preserve inequality (Lemert, 2013). Bourdieu describes cultural attributes possessed by members of a certain class as 'cultural capital,' defined as the cultural history, knowledge, temperament, and talents that are passed down generationally (Allen, 2011; Lemert, 2013). Power disparities in society form a structure that allocates different worth to the cultural capital of different groups (Lemert, 2013). The dominant group and its' cultural capital is the yardstick by which other groups are measured.

Social and cultural reproduction theories are helpful in understanding marginalized students from a Eurocentric lens but they are also rigid and unable to account for agency and resistance of students who are engaged within these methods of reproduction (Lemert, 2013). Individuals are viewed as the outcome of predetermined social and cultural structures and systems (Allen, 2011). In other words, these theories overlook the significance of individual autonomy and agency in pushing back against the ways of the dominant society.

In order to explain the role of agency and to illustrate individual narratives of oppression, theories of resilience and resistance offer the ability to examine agency in ways that theories of reproduction overlook.

### **Resistance Theory**

Resistance theory was selected as a complementary lens to Resilience theory in understanding the impact of racism on persistence. Solórzano and Bernal (2001) contend that by exercising resiliency, individuals also demonstrate resistance to social structures that set up them for failure. Resistance theory focuses on the ways that individuals and groups 'push back' against oppression and the effect resistance has on those who resist (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

The concept of resistance is anchored in scholarship on power and marginalization and has been enhanced by critical theory, critical race theory, and Latino/a critical race theory researchers who contend that the work of early scholars is exceedingly deterministic without the possibility of individual action (Giroux, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

Solórzano and Bernal (2001), noted researchers in this field, study resistance strategies and patterns among students in schools, primarily Latino students. In addition to Solórzano and Bernal (2001) other scholars have studied the connections of race, power, privilege, class, and gender that impact marginalized groups and the types of resistance that develop from this confluence (Bell, 2009; Bell, 2005; Giroux, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solórzano et al., 2005).

In the case of my study, persistence is considered a form of resistance and a state of agency in pushing back against social structures that prepare Black students for academic failure. While Resilience theory with its emphasis on protective factors is the major theoretical framework for my study, Resistance theory offers a secondary lens in understanding the role of action and activism in Black student persistence. Resilience theory and resistance theory have commonalities including the movement from the fatalism of social reproduction theories to the role of agency of marginalized individuals and groups in overcoming adversity (Giroux, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Solórzano and Bernal (2001), borrowing from the work of Henry Giroux, say that resistance can have transformational or liberating outcomes if those involved in resistance have an understanding of oppression and are motivated by social justice. According to Giroux (2015), one of the most important assumptions of Resistance theory

is that,

Working class students are not merely the byproduct of capital, compliantly submitting to the dictates of authoritarian teachers and schools that prepare them for a life of deadening labor. Rather, schools represent contested terrain marked not only by structural and ideological contradictions but also by collectively informed student resistance. Of course conflict and resistance take place within asymmetrical relations of power which always favor the dominant class but the essential point is that there are complex and creative fields of resistance through which class-, race-, gender-mediated practices often refuse, reject and dismiss the central messages of schools (p.5).

In other words, individuals and groups exercise agency when they employ subtle to overt resistance to dominant social structures, such as skipping classes to avoid racism experiences and active parent intervention about their child's treatment. This theory posits that oppressed individuals and groups can resist or act against the oppression of a system (i.e., educational) in ways that can be either self-harming, conformist, or transformative (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano et al., 2005).

To examine resistance, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) offer a model of four categories of student resisting behavior: Reactionary behavior, self-defeating behavior, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance. This model sheds light on persistence because it allows student behavior to be understood based on their level of social critical thinking and drive for social justice. Solórzano and Bernal (2001) suggest that students who are acting out or engaging in resisting behavior are participating in reactionary resistance. They are reacting to oppression perhaps in the form of disruptive behavior. Self-defeating behavior is a type of resistance in which a student may have a

restricted understanding of the tenets of social oppression, but their actions are unlikely to result in positive transformation or social justice (Solórzano et al., 2005). Dropping out of college might be viewed as a self-defeating resistance.

Conformist resistance involves students promoting social justice, but not functioning to confront or alter systems of oppression (Solórzano and Bernal (2001), exemplified by adherence to social justice causes without action. The fourth category, transformative resistance, includes a critical understanding of social oppression and an appeal for social justice (Solórzano and Bernal (2001). In this typology, students grasp the concepts of social conditions and oppression and act upon it to seek social justice (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001). This form of resistance identifies a more complex understanding of oppression and the potential of impacting positive social change.

These four forms explain the levels of resistance that individuals employ when experiencing adversity and how they impact social structures. College persistence include acts of conformist and transformative resistance in promoting and actively appealing for social justice by rejecting the dominant culture message of academic failure and achieving academic success.

Resistance theory helps explain how Black college students persist in light of racism and race critical incidents that can impede success. Resistance strategies (conformist and transformative) are proactive forms of agency and help students push back against oppression to diminish the likelihood of racism and race critical incidences from having a negative impact on college persistence.

### **Limitations of Resistance Theory**

Giroux (2015) identifies flaws in Resistance theory concerning its' lack of

relationship with social and cultural reproductive theory. He contends that current Resistance theory scholarship,

Ignores the most valuable insights of social and cultural reproductive theory and in doing so have failed to examine and appreciate those aspects of the reproductive model that are essential to developing a critical science of education (p. 6).

Regardless of the differences between resistance and reproductive theory approaches to education neither have connected the dualism between agency and structure to support learning for marginalized audiences (Giroux, 2015). Therefore, neither view offers a framework of education that connects structures and institutions to agency and action.

### **Resilience Theory and Resistance Theory**

Resilience Theory and Resistance Theory explain how Black students utilize protective factors and push back against racism in order to persist. The term 'resilient resistance', an idea developed by theorists who study academically successful Latino/a students, offers a bridge between the frameworks of Resistance theory and Resilience theory to explain the intersection of both concepts (Yosso, 2000). The protective factor element espoused in Resilience theory combined with the model of resistance offered by Solórzano and Bernal (2001) suggest that students who utilize resources and 'push back' to persist also typically align on the intersection of conformist and transformative resistance.

By being resilient, students demonstrate resistance in allowing racism to negatively impact persistence and by being resistant to oppression, they are better able to

exercise resilience. 'Resilient resistance' is a process whereby students confront inequity, regardless of their ability to express the structural origin and maintenance of oppression (Yosso, 2000). Resilience theory and Resistance theory complement one another and can offer powerful explanations of behavior, specifically pertaining to the effect of racism on Black student persistence.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the individual experiences of Black students and college persistence, a qualitative research design was utilized. Qualitative research design uses natural settings as the context of inquiry to understand or interpret happenings in terms of the meanings people ascribe to them. (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Qualitative research typically involves collecting data in the form of verbal accounts (i.e., interview transcripts or written statements) and analyzing it in a textual manner (Creswell, 2007: Smith, 2015). The methodological focus is rigorous in interpreting the meaning of a text rather than finding numerical properties like that of quantitative research (Silverman, 2016: Smith, 2015). The interpretation is then communicated through detailed descriptive reports of participants' perceptions, knowledge or accounts of an experience (Smith, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to explore race critical incidents and Black student college persistence. The following research question guided this study:

- How does racism and race critical incidents influence Black student undergraduate college persistence at Predominantly White Institutions?

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

This study uses a narrative inquiry approach to understand the influence of racism and race critical incidences on Black student persistence. Narrative research is generally defined as the study of stories and the purpose of narrative texts is to “deepen the reader’s understanding of the text” (Polkinghorn, 2007, p.13). A narrative approach allows me to study the experiences of individuals through in-

depth interviews and data collection while utilizing other sources such as documents, artifacts, and reports for support and triangulation (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), the procedures for implementing this research consists of focusing on individuals, collecting data through the gathering of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and ordering the meaning of these experiences. In this section I provide a brief overview of narrative inquiry, narrative analysis methods and narrative thematic analysis, the methodology chosen for this study.

Narrative research gained momentum in the 1960s as part of a gradual shift away from epistemologies of realism toward relativism, a rejection of the idea of absolute truth while embracing the postmodern thought that knowledge, truth, and experience exist in relation to culture, society, and historical context (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). According to Riessman (2008) the ‘narrative turn’ is shaped by four movements: 1) critiques of social science and positivist approaches of inquiry, 2) the “memoir boom” in prose and current culture, 3) “identity movements” or focus on the experiences of marginalized groups such as people of color, and 4) an increasing acceptance and exploration of individual and relationship therapy (p. 14). Riessman (2008) finds that beyond the theoretical and political changes in the 1960s that propelled narrative as an important and accepted way of knowing, advances in recording technology (i.e., video cameras, miniature recorders) provided alternative ways of collecting data that were important in making narrative research a subfield of qualitative research.

Definitions for narrative research, what it does and how it’s done, abound

(Andrews et al., 2008; Bold, 2012; Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 2008). One definition identifies narrative research as a spoken or written text providing an account of actions or events sequentially connected (Bold, 2012; Czarniawska, 2004). The procedures for implementing this kind of research consists of focusing on the study of individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories or texts, reporting individual experiences and chronologically ordering the meaning of the events (Creswell, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004). The humanistic and postmodern traditions of narrative inquiry have a shared propensity to position narratives as a means of resistance to embedded power structures (Andrews et al., 2008). In other words, according to Langellier (2001),

Embedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalized, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and “get a life” by telling and writing their stories (p.17).

The multi-layered meaning within the story and the context in which the narrative is set is critical to consider in narrative research (Abbot, 1992; Bold, 2012). Further, personal narrative is not an exact documentation of what happened nor does it represent a universal understanding, although it might have common points with similar stories across time and space (Riessman, 2001, 2008). Each person experiencing the same event will tell a slightly different story, based on what gains their attention and how they make sense of the event in accordance with their own experience (Bold, 2012).

The data, or stories told, and analytic methods in narrative research can be gleaned from multiple kinds of text such as oral, written and visual (Riessman, 2008).

Further, the narratives that form the basis for analysis can be from individuals, groups of people, communities, organizations, or societies (Bold, 2012), although the focus of this research is individual and group narrative. A focus on the sequences of action characterizes narrative analysis – the researcher focuses on “particular actions, in particular social places, at particular social times” (Abbott, 1992, p. 428). The term *particular* seems to be a grounding concept in narrative inquiry. In other words, the researcher is interested in how a speaker or writer constructs sequences and events and uses language and/or visual images to convey meaning.

Narrative researchers often pay careful attention to intention and language – *how* and *why* events are storied, not just the content to which language refers (Riessman, 2008). For example, understanding for whom and for what purpose a narrative was created is just as important as who created it. Narrative research is also concerned with the reason a series of events is arranged in a certain way and the cultural or social context from which a story emanates (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Further, narrative research foregrounds the purpose the narrative seeks to achieve and whether or not the story has gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest favored or alternative narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) find that social context and the meaning-centered focus of narratives include five elements: 1) temporality, 2) people, 3) action, 4) certainty and 5) context. The concept of **temporality** within narrative inquiry locates events or experiences as having a past, present and a potential future (Bold, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thus, time is relevant and centers a story within pre and post narrative periods of time. What comes before and after a story shapes the present narrative. The

center of narrative study are **people** who are “always at a point of personal change” necessitating the importance of narrating in terms of ongoing process and human development over time (Bold, 2012, p. 19).

The concept of **action** is important in narrative study because the meaning of a story must be applied in order to be understood (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specific action has a reference to past actions and potential actions in the future in a sequential relationship (Bold, 2012). Action is critical or a narrative would not exist to be told.

**Certainty** (or lack of) is a fourth element of narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A narrative endeavors not to determine certainty but to establish multiple possibilities due to the meaning-making of the narrator.

Finally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize the importance of **context** in making sense of a narrative. In essence, people do not experience circumstances or situations in the same way. However, “narrative captures the contextual influences in a way that other research methods may not” (p.21).

### **Why Narrative?**

Five types of research designs, including narrative inquiry, are generally acknowledged in the field of qualitative study and include the following (Creswell, 2007):

1) Ethnography - the study of the patterns of behaviors, beliefs, and language of a cultural group (Creswell, 2007);

2) Case study - the study of an issue through one or more cases (individuals or groups) within a bonded structure or setting over time through detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information (i.e., observations, interviews, artifacts,

audiovisual data) (Creswell, 2007);

3) Phenomenology - the meaning individuals place on lived experiences of a phenomenon with the purpose of reducing these experiences to a description of a universal essence (Creswell, 2007); and

4) Grounded theory – the discovery of a theory grounded in data (generated by participants) that have experienced a process or event (Creswell, 2007)

These five methodologies have commonalities such as utilizing similar data collection processes (interviews, observations, artifacts) and the unit of analysis (individual) in some cases. A narrative design was selected for this study because it foregrounds the stories of Black students pertaining to racism and college persistence (chronologically) through a lens of local and societal contexts (critical incidents) and protective factors and resistance actions (Resilience theory and Resistance theory). The local and societal context of the story matters and the researcher often integrates these conditions in the study to help create further meaning and understanding of the narrative (Andrews et al., 2008). This study applies to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) five elements of narrative research because 1) race critical incidents are time centered (temporality); 2) the participants develop over time in their role as Black students (people); 3) the participants are agents of persistence in their active pursuit of college completion (action); 4) the participants make meaning of their experiences (certainty); and 5) participants do not experience situations in the same ways (context).

### **Narrative Research Approaches**

Different types of narrative research are distinguished by different kinds of

analytic processes (Reissman, 2008). Four generally accepted narrative analytic approaches include structural, visual, performative/dialogic and thematic. These approaches are discussed concluding with thematic analysis, the approach selected for use in this study.

**Structural Narrative Analysis.** This form of analysis focuses not only on *what* is being said in a narrative but also how content is organized by a speaker and *how* the story is told (Labov, 1997). Focus is on the structure of words, word choice, intonation, and how individuals say what they say during a narrative rather than looking only at the content or *what* is being said. As stated by Riessman (2008, p. 80) structural analysis allows topics and voices to be included that might be missing otherwise.

Labov (1997) and Gee (1991) are leading researchers in the field of structural narrative analysis and use different approaches in data analysis (Riessman, 2008). Labov examines how a narrative is organized and focuses little on the context, instead understanding how a story “hangs together” (Kuby, 2012, p.2) and how the structural elements (clauses, words, questions) are arranged by the storyteller. Labov argues for coding the narrative data according to the function of certain clauses or sections in the whole structure of the narrative (Labov, 1997; Riessman, 2008).

In Gee’s method of structural analysis, the language, the individual uses, the pauses in speech, use of metaphors and figurative speech, vocal quality and other structural aspects of speech are the focus (Gee, 1991; Riessman, 2008). In this approach the narrative is separated into stanzas and each stanza is analyzed singularly and also in the way it connects to the other parts of the narrative (Riessman, 2008). Gee’s methods are beneficial in “analyzing extended narratives of experience”

(Riessman, 2008, p. 93). Unlike Labov's approach which focuses on the function of a clause in an oral narrative, Gee's method attends to how a sequence of speech is actually said (Gee, 1991; Riessman, 2008). Both Gee and Labovian methods, and other structural analyses, place emphasis on linguistics or language to learn how participants use speech to construct themselves and their stories (Riessman, 2008).

**Visual Narrative Analysis.** In addition to spoken and written discourse, other forms of communication are also significant in conveying meaning. Narrative researchers utilize visuals such as images (photographs), body movement (dance), sound (music), and representations (art, clothing) to communicate meaning (Bold, 2012; Rose, 2001). Riessman (2008) finds that a story can be told "*with* images" and that "others tell a story *about* images that themselves tell a story" (p. 141). For example, visual analysis could include an image of college students to highlight racial experiences (i.e., a photograph of students of color sitting together in certain areas of a campus dining hall) or a sculpture intended to symbolize peace and harmony.

Studying an image closely and discerning details is essential to visual narrative analysis (Bold, 2012). Gillian Rose (2001) identifies an analysis process that includes, 1) the story of the creation of the image (how and when it was constructed), 2) the image itself (the story it implies), and 3) how it is understood by different audiences (response of observers). According to Creswell (2007) and Riessman (2008) visual representations are so embedded in our society that to sideline them and not work at integrating them as a part of analysis can reduce the meaning and understanding of participant experiences.

**Performative/Dialogic Analysis.** This form of analysis examines how talk

among speakers is interactively (dialogically) constructed and acted as a narrative (Breheny & Stephens, 2015). Performative/dialogic analysis requires close study of contexts, including the effect of the researcher, setting, and social situations in the creation and interpretation of narrative. This approach asks who the expression is directed to and for what purposes, emphasizing that communication contains two texts: content and interaction (Bold, 2012).

Performative/dialogic analysis can “uncover the insidious ways structures of inequality and power – class, gender, and race/ethnicity – work their way into what appears to be ‘simply’ talk” about an event, situation or performance” (Riessman, 2008, p. 115). Further, this form of analysis examines how larger social structures impact individual awareness and identity, and how this social construction is performed for (and with) an audience or listener (Bold, 2012). Performative/dialogic analysis follows the usual narrative methodology of examining a bounded portion of talk that is sequentially ordered and identifies a chronology of events (Breheny & Stephens, 2015).

What distinguishes performative/dialogic data analysis procedures from other narrative approaches is that it includes the researcher as an active participant in the narrative and its interpretation (Breheny & Stephens, 2015; Riessman, 2008). This form of analysis borrows heavily from structural and thematic narrative approaches and includes looking at the structure or function of a dialogue or performance as well the context surrounding the text and the themes that emerge (Bold, 2012).

**Thematic Analysis.** The focus in thematic analysis, the method chosen for this study, is on “what” is said, written, drawn, photographed and visually represented (Andrews et al., 2008; Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). It centers on the content of the

narrative, understanding a concept or worldview of the participant. In other words, what are the themes that surface from an interview, document or visual representation? As Riessman (2008) states, “data are interpreted in light of themes developed by the investigator (influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors)” (p. 54). Although thoughts vary about the value of context in understanding narratives, researchers identify that context is important in understanding themes and suggest that knowing the history, social, and economic conditions of a narrative can deepen one’s understanding of themes that surface from a transcript (Clarke et al., 2015; Tamboukou, 2008).

Context can play a role in situating themes that emerge from participant texts. Thematic analysis is case-centered and looks at narratives in an intact and holistic fashion; segments of the narrative data are analyzed but are then reassembled to create meaning representing the whole narrative (Clarke et al., 2015). Although thematic analysis may interrogate certain word choices in a text it does not generally attend to language, form, or interaction like other methods, such as structural, visual, and dialogic/performative (Behemy & Stephens, 2015; Bold, 2012; Riessman, 2008).

What is the thematic data analysis process? Multiple researchers offer different methodologies to explore thematic data (Cain, 1991; Kuby & Ferguson, 2012; Tamboukou, 2008; Williams, 2004) but for the purposes of this study one approach identified by Williams (2004) will be highlighted because it complements the research topic and approach for this study. Specifically, Williams (2004) integrates an extended account of a participant and represents the

story through lengthy interview excerpts (Black student focus group sessions to gain understanding), utilizes the participant's understanding of an experience or action as the unit of analysis (experiences with racism) and looks at both local and societal contexts in helping create meaning (race critical incidents, Resilience theory, and Resistance theory).

Williams approach focuses on interviews and separating and ordering relevant occurrences into a sequential biographical story (Riessman, 2008). After the process has been completed for each interview, the researcher categorizes the core assumptions in each account and identifies (or codes) them (Bold, 2012; Williams, 2004). Particular episodes in the text are then chosen to exemplify common patterns and themes (and sometimes outliers) and the underlying assumptions of different episodes and narratives are compared (Riessman, 2008). Williams (2004) approach includes the insertion of excerpts or segments from a text within the written report to exemplify themes. Text excerpts also support the interpretation of themes and contextualize the theoretical perspective of the study (Williams, 2004).

Further, speech quoted from interviews is "cleaned up" to some degree for readability because in thematic analysis the *what* of the story is emphasized, not the structure or formation of language (Riessman, 2008, p. 57). So, disordered or uneven spoken language is transformed into more readable accounts with the assumption that the reader will make sense of the main points (Bold, 2012; Andrews et al., 2008). As identified above, thematic narrative analysis has affordances but also limitations that will now be addressed.

### **Concerns about Thematic Narrative Analysis**

Given that it relies so heavily on individual perceptions a concern about narrative inquiry is the role of truth and whether narratives can truly represent truth, assuming there is a universal truth to be told (Bold, 2012; Clarke et al., 2015; Riessman, 2001).

However, the truths of narrative accounts emerge not in an accurate representation of history, but in the changing connections they construct between the past, present and future (Riessman, 2001). Thus, the multi-faceted relationship between narrative, time, and memory is explored to shape a story, and therefore meaning, based on the interplay (Clarke et al, 2015). In essence, as posited from postmodern epistemology, there are no universal truths. Individuals have their own conception of truth and the opportunity to use their knowledge, experiences and understandings to develop further feelings, knowledge and truths.

Methodologically, one of the challenges of thematic analysis is that the words or texts of individuals may not mean the same things (both among participants and readers) which can obscure specifics of “meaning-in-context” (Riessman, 2008, p. 76). The resulting ambiguity created for researchers and readers can result in misunderstandings and miscommunication of narratives, although narrative inquiry validation techniques can minimize this occurrence and concern (Andrews et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2015).

Another concern about narrative methods is the complexity of collecting and analyzing individual stories and ethical considerations in retelling the stories of others (Clark et al., 2015; Riessman, 2008). Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) raise important questions like,

Who owns the story? Who can tell it? Who can change it? Whose version is convincing? What happens when narratives compete? As a community, what do stories do among us? (p. 57).

Questions like these illustrate the importance of careful deliberation in probing lived experiences due to the highly personal and sensitive nature of hearing and telling a participant's story. Although the relationship between the researcher and participant is designed to be collaborative (i.e., participant and researcher review and make joint decisions about the use of texts and interpretations), care must be taken by the researcher to help create a shared relationship (Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2007). A partnership approach doesn't happen automatically and if not nurtured, a power imbalance between the participant and researcher may occur that can jeopardize trust with the participant and the telling and meaning of the story.

### **Critical Incidents and Narrative Analysis**

This study includes the use of critical incidents in evoking the stories of Black students and understanding persistence in relation to incidents. The term *critical incident* suggests turning points or changes in an individual or societal happening (Tripp, 1993). According to Angelides (2001), it is the reasoning, meaning and implications given to incidents that make them critical, rather than elements of scandal or sensationalism. For example, in the case of the incident of two White MU students spreading cotton balls on the lawn of the MU Black Culture center, the critical component involves the racist act of representing days of slavery when many Black individuals worked on cotton plantations.

In educational research, critical incidents can be documented through personal

narratives and serve as sources of data representing the reality of the participants (Howitt & Venville, 2008). Individuals may not have direct experience with critical incidents but they can still trigger second-hand feelings of stress and trauma (Brondolo, 2009; Pyke, 2010). The racist experiences of others can negatively affect participants in the form of racial battle fatigue, which can impact persistence.

Critical incident technique (CIT), coined by Joyce Flanagan in 1954 and primarily used in qualitative research, is a set of procedures used for collecting observations and data that have critical societal significance (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Malio (2005). Butterfield et al., (2005) identify the distinctive features of CIT: 1) focus on critical events that encourage or diminish the experience of a specific situation or activity, 2) data is collected primarily through interviews, and 3) data analysis is accomplished by deciding the frame of reference (critical incident), establishing categories that surface from the data, and determining the uniqueness or generality of the categories. While CIT is a procedure for gathering data about behavior in defined situations, it does not involve a strict set of rules about data collection (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954). Rather, it is an adaptable set of principles that can be changed and adapted to meet a specific situation (Flanagan, 1954).

Again, the purpose of this study is not to analyze race critical incidents themselves but to use them to illicit responses from participants about their own experiences with racism, and ultimately persistence, in a PWI. Due to its flexibility CIT allows adaptations and changes to meet specific situations such as this, in this case the *internalized effects* of race critical incidents experienced by others on Black student persistence.

## **Research Context**

The study was conducted in the Midwest part of the United States at a large PWI, an institution of higher education in which White students account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, 2010). The state in which the PWI is located has a large number of White residents (83.3%) compared to the percentage of Black residents at 11.8% (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The PWI resembles the state racial demographics in that 75.9% of students are White and 7.2% are Black (University of Missouri, 2015). Further, given 21,629 out of the total 32,777 student body are 'in-state' students (University of Missouri, 2015) the PWI has a high degree of 'White in-state' presence.

A PWI was selected because research has shown that going to a White university with few Black students may be particularly challenging because it often involves higher levels of racism experiences compared to non-PWI institutions and it often encourages assimilation to assist in persistence (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Depending on student level of awareness of culture, sense of identity, social networks and family involvement, the process of assimilation may or may not be successful (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Because of the racial demographic dichotomy in the state, which is also reflected in the institution, this PWI may make college persistence particularly challenging for Black students.

## **Participants**

Participants were selected based on recommendations from a campus enrollment management administrator, the director of the campus Black Culture Center and a recent campus alum with connections to current students. These recommenders were asked to identify students at the PWI who meet the eligibility criteria which includes, 1)

Black students currently enrolled at the PWI; 2) current college junior or seniors (this level of enrollment demonstrates persistence and therefore participant experiences with this concept; it also potentially narrows the age of participants in order to understand their experiences within a similar developmental range) and 3) gender mix in order to understand possible gender differences in experiences.

I initially choose to have six participants in the study because Clarke et al. (2015) recommends a minimum of three to six participants per study for focus group data collection in order to provide rich, detailed data that allows for the generation of themes across subjects. More students choose to participate in the study than I anticipated so I ended up with a total of seven participants. Of the seven students, four are female and three are male. Three are seniors that graduated in May, 2016 and four are juniors.

Participants consisted of current undergraduate students at the PWI. These students were juniors or seniors in college and all self-identified as Black. All are full-time students and all but one (Tiffany, last-born) of the seven participants are first born children in their family of origin.

**Tiffany<sup>1</sup>.** Tiffany is a first-generation college student from Denver, Colorado who attended a racially diverse public high school. Her mother died in 2012. She initially came to campus to study journalism but indicated she was not satisfied with the program and changed her major. Now as a 21-year old junior, she is majoring in communications with an emphasis in Interpersonal Studies and a minor in Black Studies. She received a four-year scholarship. Tiffany is involved in multiple student

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<sup>1</sup> Names are pseudonyms

organizations, serves in leadership positions in those organizations, and works at the Black Culture Center. She describes herself as a racial activist.

**Lucy.** Lucy is also a first-generation college student from Denver, Colorado and she is a junior majoring in Health Sciences with the intent of Nursing School. Her minor is in Leadership and Public Service. Lucy chose to attend the PWI because she said she wanted to go to school out-of-state to experience more diversity and “be far away enough to grow” but not be too far away from family. Upon her first visit to campus she saw “more Black people” which solidified her choice in the institution. Lucy identifies as a Black woman but also strongly connects with her Italian heritage stemming from her father.

**Chris Wright.** Chris is a junior majoring in psychology and sociology. As a first-generation college student from the south side of Chicago, Chris attended a predominantly Black high school. Chris decided to attend the PWI because a high school friend had applied to the institution. He stated that he found the campus welcoming and liked that the institution was “both close and far enough away” from Chicago to experience new environments while being close to home. The PWI wasn’t his first choice in colleges but the financial aid package offered by the institution was instrumental in his selection. Chris is involved in a multitude of organizations and programs on the campus and has several part-time jobs on and off campus.

**Harley Smith.** Harley worked for her high school newspaper in inner city Chicago and identifies as a journalist citing “it’s my only” calling. She described that the PWI was the only college to which she applied so she could attend the School of Journalism. She expressed challenges she experienced in the Journalism School that

prompted her to change her area of study to Interdisciplinary Studies with an emphasis in social justice research and family and children. Harley is very involved in her church. She is a senior and graduated in May 2016.

**Diana Grace.** Diana is a junior majoring in Journalism and International Studies. She is from Kalihi, Hawaii and attended a racially diverse high school that included Asian, Hawaiian, White and other students. Her parents have college degrees. Diana is very involved in her church.

**Mike Lerry.** Mike is from Joliet, Illinois. He is a senior majoring in Electrical Engineering and graduated in May, 2016. Throughout college Mike had full and part-time jobs both on and off campus. Financial challenges were a problem for Mike who dropped a double major in Computer Engineering due to added costs and the need for full-time work to pay for college. Mike is a first-generation student and the oldest of eight children. Mike is also highly involved in his church.

**Cairo.** Cairo is a first-generation college student from Kansas City, Missouri and the oldest of 16 children. Cairo spent time in the foster care system and was also homeless for a period of time during his youth. He transferred from a community college to the PWI at the beginning of his junior year. He is a senior and graduated in May 2016 with a degree in Secondary Education Language Arts. Cairo began his job as an educator in the fall of 2016 at a high school in Kansas City.

### **Data Collection**

A series of four focus group meetings with the same four to seven participants in each session were conducted from March through May, 2016 and included semi-structured questions as well as artifacts (self-selected items that

symbolize participant racial and persistence experiences) I asked the students to bring and describe. These kinds of data are important to include in a narrative study about racism and persistence because they allow multiple ways for Black students to tell their stories and share their college experiences in ways that are meaningful to them.

The first focus group meeting included general introductions, a summary of the purpose of the research and participant rights and role, followed by me asking them the first two questions on the interview protocol. I gave each participant a copy of the interview protocol (see Attachment A) so they would know the sequence and content of the questions. Focus group session two through four consisted of the participants and me discussing the remaining questions on the interview protocol.

These students participated in the focus group meetings as follows:

Focus group session 1: Tiffany, Chris, Lucy, and Harley

Focus group session 2: Tiffany, Chris, Lucy, Harley, Mike, Cairo, and Diana

Focus group session 3: Tiffany, Chris, Lucy, Harley, Mike, Cairo, and Diana

Focus group session 4: Tiffany, Chris, Lucy, Mike, Cairo, and Diana

During focus group meetings I utilized previously mentioned racial critical incidences, like the cotton ball episode at MU, the Michael Brown case, and the 2015 campus race incident, to explore the racial experiences of participants and the impact on persistence. The interview protocol was utilized in each focus group session for a period of 1.5 hours each time, always from 6:00 – 7:30 p.m. at the Black Culture Center on campus. I provided a meal at each meeting based on what the students voted on having. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded.

Although not an official part of the data collection process, after the final focus group session I invited the students to a celebration dinner at a local restaurant. Four students attended and I suggested that this research related experience (unrecorded) could involve them asking *me* questions as a juxtaposition from our focus group meetings. Examples of some of the questions they asked were, “what’s it like to buy a house?”, “what’s it like for you to go to the grocery store?”, “how do you feel about politics?”. I thought they might ask questions more related to racial experiences and was surprised that they seemed more interested in my personal opinions about life and living, albeit the life and living of a White woman.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic analytic approach to data analysis was selected for this narrative study. It centers on the content of the narrative. In other words, what are the themes that surface from an interview, document or observation? As Riessman (2008) states, “data are interpreted in light of thematics developed by the investigator (influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors)” (p. 54). In addition, researchers identify that context is important in understanding themes and suggest that knowing the history, social, and economic conditions of a narrative can deepen one’s understanding of themes that surface from a transcript (Tamboukou, 2008). Context plays a role in situating themes that emerge from student experiences with persistence, as further exemplified through race critical incidences.

After I transcribed verbatim each audio recorded focus group meeting and participant explanation of artifacts, I reviewed the transcriptions to get a feel for the

content and flow. I also forwarded a copy of each transcription from the four meetings to participants to review. I asked them to edit freely and to ensure that the narratives represent their thoughts and feelings accurately. One participant made changes which I incorporated in the transcription. I then combined the four transcriptions in chronological order into one final document.

### **Coding**

The transcript and artifacts were examined using Williams approach to thematic analysis, a narrative methods approach for examining and recording implicit and explicit patterns or themes within the data (Riessman, 2008). Williams emphasizes the identification of underlying assumptions in a narrative by first coding assumptions and then locating patterns (Riessman, 2008). Coding is the process of identifying what the data is about (Clarke et al., 2015). It allows researchers to be systematic about analysis rather than relying on a subjective selection of illustrative data (Bold, 2012). When something in the data is of potential relevance to the research question, it is tagged with a concise label or code. In other words, researchers *create* codes by identifying what they see in the data. Several coding methods exist including line-by-line, focused, open, and axial coding.

**Line-By-Line Coding.** Line-by-line coding involves an initial phase of naming each line of data with a descriptor or code. This initial coding involves examining each line of data in the transcript and defining the actions or incidents happening in it or as represented by it (Clarke et al, 2015). In essence, a code is a tool with which to compare other data. The next step in line-by-line coding involves using the most significant and/or recurrent initial codes to sort, integrate and organize large

amounts of data (Andrews et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2015). Line-by-line coding leads to developing theoretical (or theme) categories, some of which may be identified in the original codes.

**Focused Coding.** After line-by-line coding, focused coding can be employed to synthesize and explain larger sections of data (Clarke et al., 2015). Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent initial codes to review large amounts of data (Clarke et al., 2015). Focused coding is more discerning and conceptual than line-by-line coding and requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense for the study and groups the data most accurately and comprehensively (Clarke et al., 2015).

Focused coding helps move analysis forward in two ways: 1) it establishes the content and form of the emerging analysis; and 2) it prompts assessment and clarification of categories and the connections between them (Clarke et al., 2015). Thus, the researcher goes beyond using a code as a descriptive tool to viewing and synthesizing data. Analysis then is built from the ground up using individual line-by-line data codes, then focused coding, followed by the determination of overarching theoretical or thematic categories.

**Open Coding.** Open coding, compared to line-by-line coding, includes labeling concepts (multiple lines of data at a time) and identifying and developing categories based on the content of the data (Clarke et al., 2015). Rather than analyzing data line-by-line, open coding focuses on segments of data that convey an idea, or narrative. Open coding means that researchers do not begin with conceptions about categories or themes at the onset of the research, but examine the data for “codes to

categorize the material that emerges from the data” (Bold, 2012, p. 130). Researchers identify relevant elements in the data pertaining to the research question and give them codes, or words that describe the elements. Coding is then reviewed, searching for elements that can be combined until a system is developed to explore all of the data (Clarke et al., 2015).

According to Creswell (2012), once the initial set of codes has been developed, the researcher identifies a sole category from the open coding list as the central occurrence of interest. The open coding category chosen for this purpose is usually one which is extensively discussed by the participants or one of noteworthy conceptual interest because it appears key to the course of study (Bold, 2012). This single category identified through open coding is located from the data as the central feature of the research question and the researcher then returns to the data to determine other categories or codes that relate to the central feature (Creswell, 2007).

**Axial Coding.** Strauss and Corbin (1998) introduce axial coding to specify the elements of a category, largely used in Grounded Theory research. The purpose is to arrange, synthesize and organize large amounts of data and rearrange them in new ways after coding (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, the data is reviewed again after open coding to provide insight into individual coding categories that connect or illuminate the central occurrence or feature (Creswell, 2007). When using axial coding, the researcher also connects categories with sub-categories and asks how they are related. These categories influence the central occurrence or feature and the context and intervening conditions that shape it (Clark et al., 2015).

### **Coding in This Research**

I used a Grounded Theory methodology of coding because it is systematic and allows for the creation of codes by defining what is seen in the data (Clarke et al., 2015). A code identifies and labels items of interest in the data in relation to the research question (Clark et al., 2015). Codes emerge as the data is analyzed and meaning is assigned. Within grounded theory methodology, I chose a combination of 1) open and 2) theoretical coding beginning with open coding (using a substantive coding approach) in the first phase of analysis to determine key terms that emerged, the sequence of events, and frequency of codes. Open coding affords a framework to explore ideas or concepts in the data that are more in keeping with the story telling nature of narrative research (Clarke et al., 2015). Narratives are understood in larger segments or stories (beginning, middle and end) rather than segmented line-by-line analysis (Clarke et al., 2015). Substantive codes break down or “fracture the data” while theoretical codes “weave the fractured story back together again” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72) to form a narrative. In other words, the relationship between substantive and theoretical codes is that theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes are inter-related and help reveal patterns. I identified substantive codes associated with my research question and that represent my understanding of what I read (i.e., Black identity, racism, persistence, tired, race, family, White privilege).

In the second phase of coding I used theoretical coding, integrating the concepts (Holton, 2009) that emerged from the substantive coding cycle. Theoretical codes are not preconceived but emerge from the data, allowing researchers to discover relationships between two or more substantive codes. Multiple emergent theoretical codes may be identified. I used memoing as the method to make theoretical notes

(handwritten) about the data and the conceptual relationships between substantive categories (Hernandez, 2009). The process operates in tandem with the coding and analysis process to capture emergent substantive and theoretical codes and categories (Holton, 2009). Memo writing is an on-going process that helps to elevate the data to a conceptual level and develop the characteristics of each category and the relationships among them (Hernandez, 2009).

I initially identified 59 theoretical codes and then reread the transcript and memos to ensure that I utilized the codes consistently throughout the document. I then integrated or combined similar theoretical codes to reduce the total to 40. As Clarke et al. (2015) say, “a systematic and rigorous coding process builds solid foundations for theme development” (p. 234) because coding facilitates in-depth engagement with the data and an analysis process that goes beyond the immediate or obvious.

### **Theming**

The thematic development phase of data analysis involves a more conceptual approach of creating a reasonable and rational thematic organization of data (Clarke et al, 2015). For example, in developing themes, a complicated or complex theoretical code can be promoted to a theme (Clarke et al., 2015; Creswell, 2007). The key criteria for determining a theme is whether it identifies a coherent facet of the data and identifies something about it relevant to the research question (Clarke et al, 2015).

A theme needs to be supported by a central organizing concept, or more simply put, a “key analytic point” (Clarke et al., p. 236). In addition, subthemes can denote an important facet of the central organizing concept of a theme (Creswell, 2007). Clarke et al., (2015) finds that good themes are unlikely to be very narrow and restricted in focus

(e.g., based on only one or two analytic observations), nor very broad and sprawling – lacking a clear focus and with lots of sub-themes. Thus, the determination of themes is a careful process that involves intentional grouping of theoretical codes that compliment and reinforce one another in a clear and succinct way.

Creswell (2007) and Clarke et al., (2015) suggest drawing thematic maps, symbolic images of the relationships between codes and possible themes, as a useful method for developing themes and for studying the relationship between them. Initial thematic maps may be complex as they can illustrate many possible patterns found in the data (Clarke et al., 2015). Ideas can then be refined as theme development continues, with some themes rejected and others kept or refined (Creswell, 2007).

I used thematic maps or diagrams in my study to depict and organize the data. These diagramming practices emerged from my analysis process. Part of the analysis focused on reductive categories or forming hierarchical relationships between theoretical coding terms often used in thematic analysis (Orbe & Kinefuchi, 2008). I focused on repetition, recurrence and forcefulness. First, I searched for words and phrases that appeared frequently (repetition). Next, I explored how these terms reflected shared meanings (recurrence). Then, I examined the reactions/responses to an event or the topic I was discussing with participants (forcefulness). In addition, the use of profanity and emotion (such as voices raising, tears) were also considered as expressions of forcefulness. While the diagrams do not display every level of coding, they do highlight the ‘end-results’ of my theming.

**Theme Identification.** Themes are typically reviewed in two ways, 1) relative to the collected, coded data for each theme and 2) in relationship to the total data set

(Clarke et al., 2015). The first phase of review centers on the individual themes and determines whether they fit in relation to the coded data (Clarke et al., 2015). It involves rereading all the data related to the codes for each theme and determining whether the possible theme is a good fit with the meanings apparent in the coded data (Clarke et al., 2015). Theme revision occurs if the fit is not suitable. When the initial themes fit the coded data, Clarke et al., (2015) find it is important to review the entire data set for final check for fit. This review stage provides a check to ensure that both the individual themes and the analysis as a whole capture key meanings and patterns in the data (Clarke et al., 2015; Creswell, 2007).

After finding the 40 theoretical codes I identified in the data, I reviewed the list and looked for themes to emerge. On paper I grouped codes in ways that seemed complimentary and coherent after identifying the headings or theme statements that explained or summarized the codes. After identifying six themes I arranged the codes under the theme where they seemed to fit. I rearranged codes within the themes until I felt that the fit between them was solid. I then reviewed each theme and examined the codes to either keep them intact, reject or combine them into subthemes.

Each of the six themes has two to three subthemes, again identified by data codes, that support and illustrate the main theme. Finally, I reviewed the coded data again to insure I captured the meanings and patterns of the participant narratives. Clarke et al., (2015) recommend no more than six themes and find that the order in which themes are presented is important, citing that “if one ‘main’ theme contextualizes the other themes that it should be presented first” (p. 241). I used this guidance in ordering the discussion of the themes. The first three themes address the participant’s

experiences with racism and its' effects, followed by the fourth and fifth themes of support systems and identity development that buffer racism concluding with the sixth theme of motivation and persistence.

After finding a good fit between themes, subthemes and codes, being reasonably confident about the thematic mapping of the data, and understanding the scope and relationship of each theme, I began to finalize the name of each theme. Clarke et al., (2015) find that, "finalizing the name of each theme is another part of the theme development process. Good theme names capture the essence of each theme" (p. 240), and also suggest that creative theme names that are playful or reference popular culture can be descriptive and compelling. I employed this concept in naming the themes in the analysis and identified themes such as, "Woke: Developing Black Identity" and "Performance: Playing the Part to Achieve Legitimacy."

In order to begin writing the results section I wrote the name of each theme, subtheme and codes on a sheet of paper. I included the page number of each code that supports and describes each theme and subtheme on the transcript. Then, I wrote about each theme and subtheme by including content associated with the codes from the designated page numbers throughout the transcript. This process provided a strategy to illustrate the themes that emerged across the data, representing participant's narratives relative to the theme. Participant quotes were used extensively in the results section to exemplify and support the themes and subthemes.

Clarke et al., (2015) contend that there is no clear separation between analysis and writing in thematic analysis. Specifically, they say (p. 241-242),  
You start writing as soon as you begin your analysis (noting initial observations on the

data), so ‘writing up’ involves compiling and editing existing analytic writing as well as producing new writing. The analytic write-up contains two elements: data excerpts and analytic commentary. It’s rarely practical (or desirable) to evidence every analytic observation with examples from the data. Instead, provide examples for your key observations (your analytic ‘headlines’). So although you don’t *need* to quote every single data item, do quote a wide sample of your data items to provide strong evidence of patterning *across* data.

I adhered to the analysis and ‘write up’ guidance from Clarke et al., (2015) by including data excerpts and analytic commentary that support each theme and subtheme. I also included quotes from multiple participants regarding themes and subthemes to illustrate patterns across the data.

### **Validity**

Measures of validity are regarded differently in qualitative research compared to quantitative approaches that explore data based on correlation and causation (Creswell, 2007). Polkinghorn (2007) says:

Given the complex and changing characteristics of the human realm, narrative researchers do not ask readers to grant validity to their claims only when they reach a level of near certainty about a claim. Readers are asked to make judgment on whether or not the evidence and argument convinces them at the level of plausibility, credibleness, or trustworthiness of the claim (p. 7).

Persuasive arguments, then, are designed to engage readers in evidence statements (quotations from a transcript) and explanations about why certain interpretations about the evidence were made. Validation techniques for this study include triangulation, a

method used by qualitative researchers to test and establish validity in their research by analyzing data from many viewpoints to achieve consistency among data sources (Polkinghorne, 2007). The inclusion of participant artifacts in this study, a triangulation strategy, provides another kind or source of information to corroborate other data. It is important to note that triangulation in the narrative process does not always involve multiple data sources but multiple data *treatments* or processes and steps of interpretation to determine interpretive conflicts (Ricoeur, 1981).

Member checking (Creswell, 2007), another validation process, was utilized by asking the participants to review interview transcriptions and analysis to determine if their voice was presented accurately. This process involves participants not just in data collection phase but the data analysis and writing process as well, better insuring validity of the data and participant inclusion throughout the research process. One participant made changes in the data transcript and no students made changes in the results section.

Finally, adhering to researcher reflexivity adds to heightened validity in qualitative research. Reflexivity means that the researcher is aware of the biases, values and experiences brought to the research and makes them explicit in the study (Creswell, 2007). In essence, the researcher is also a part of the construction of participant narratives because he or she is a part of the research process by asking questions, providing commentary, and through other communication (i.e., body language). Clarke et al., (2015) find that “research has to be seen as a joint product of researcher and researched” (p. 20).

Certainly, I contribute to the participant narratives by my presence in the

process. I created the research question and the focus group protocol. The way in which I interact with the participants also influences how and what they decide to share in the research process. How I think, feel, communicate and write is a reflection of the culture, gender, class, and personal politics I bring to participants and research. As Creswell (2007, p. 179) says,

All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings. Writings are co-constructions, representations of interactive processes between the participants and researcher.

My identity as White, fifty-year-old woman with French, English and Irish heritage from an upper middle class background and a strong bent toward democratic politics positions me in a unique way as a co-creator with the participants in this researcher study. The co-construction of this same research from the lens of a thirty-year old, capitalistic Black man from Trinidad is likely to be quite different. Explicit positionality on the part of the researcher is imperative in qualitative research to enhance validity (Bold, 2012).

### **The Story of a Story Teller**

I am a third generation college student and I am fortunate to have a family that promoted, supported and fully financed my higher education. Anytime I needed help my parents were there and knew what to do. I never had a student loan and never worried about how to pay rent or buy books or food. I lucked out.

Even as an elementary school student I was sensitive about social justice issues (I hated kids being mean to other kids) and unjust treatment of people. In 1974 my school system redistricted school attendance areas, resulting in me and others in my

affluent White neighborhood being bussed to a poor, almost all Black school. As a fourth grader, I knew this worried the people around me but I didn't really understand what was happening. Although I didn't hear my parents speak negatively about the change I certainly heard others speak terrible words, issue threats and write protest letters to the newspaper. I thought it was mean and ugly and it made me feel bad.

Partially because I want to give to others what I so luckily had through my parents and partially because of a need "to do something" about White privilege, I've worked with marginalized youth for the past 25 years, primarily in the form of college readiness and access programs. This is my way of helping youth go to and graduate from college who do not have the support systems and resources I experienced. The program and the youth who participate are more than a job to me, they are family.

I now understand that part of White privilege can involve White do-gooders like me trying to "help" people by encouraging them to behave more like me, the successful White female. Ouch. My doctoral studies, the relationships I've formed with individuals and the journey of writing a dissertation help me understand that "helping" needs to be handled with great care and sensitivity. Seeing barriers that many Black students face to persist in college inspire me to understand these experiences in a deeper way and give voice to their stories as accurately as possible and with great sensitivity.

### **Research Ethics**

Throughout the research process a focus on ethical considerations was exercised by honoring participant accounts, establishing reciprocity and trust, engaging in respectful relationships with participants and minimizing potential research/participant power imbalance (Andrews et al., 2008; Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2007). Further, sensitivity to potentially vulnerable populations, such as marginalized and low income

individuals and families, is critical and was employed in this study (Creswell, 2007).

Narrating sensitive topics with participants, such as experience with racism and persistence, requires great sensitivity on the part on the researcher. Hyden (2008) finds that negative experiences have the “potential to pose a threat and even has the potential to re- traumatize the traumatized, but such talk can just as well have the potential heal” (p. 123). Discussion in focus group sessions can trigger painful memories and experiences but they can also help participants mine their internalized feelings in order to gain a sense of closure and being heard. As in many relationships, the relation between the researcher and participants is one of power, a dynamic that is particularly true when sensitive topics are involved (Hyden, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative for the researcher to facilitate a more balanced and shared relationship with participants in order to develop the trust and rapport needed to help participants feel psychologically safe in the research process.

A concern in any data collection process is that asking people questions about their views, life experiences, and stories, particularly related to sensitive phenomena such as racism and persistence, may create emotional responses that should be recognized by the researcher and the research process (McCoster, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001). By focusing on the emotional safety of participants, the researcher communicates from the beginning of the study what the research entails and emphasizes the importance of participant well-being throughout the process (Corbin & Morse, 2003; McKoster et al., 2001). Strategies include clear communication about the research topic, providing time and support for the expression of emotion that may develop during the research process and acknowledging the importance of this to the

well-being of the participant (McKoster et al., 2001).

Researchers should be aware of the cues and/or signals that indicate the participant is exhibiting distress (i.e., rapid speech, crying, disengagement) in order to support and intervene as necessary (Corbin & Morse, 2003). If the researcher communicates acceptance of participant emotional responses, they may feel safe and able to continue in the research process. McKoster et al. (2001) find it valuable for the researcher to state the strengths of the participant while also suggesting termination of the interview if distress is overwhelming.

I felt that the participants and I established trust as evidenced by them returning for repeated focus group meetings, contacting me after the meetings for advice and to just talk (2 participants), and telling me that they appreciate me hearing and telling their stories. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the participants and learning about their lives and I hope this feeling is mutual. Several times during our meetings some of the students told me they felt “honored” that someone was interested in their experiences and wanted to convey a different, strength-based narrative about Black students. The “honored” part made me feel a little uncomfortable, though, recognizing the power differential this term represents. Related, three students said they want to share this research with others and expressed a desire to work with me to submit a journal article about it.

Another form of participant safety is confidentiality. Data is kept confidential (locked computer) and participants remain anonymous throughout the research process. Participants were also informed how the data is stored, used and disseminated. At any point during the interviews participants knew that they could

discontinue their involvement in the research process without consequences.

Participants were given an alias name in the study report to maintain anonymity.

### **Goals of Study**

One goal of the study is to surface the voice of Black students and their experiences in college. Students are likely to experience self-reflection and feel empowered by telling their stories. Another goal is to shed light on the pervasive racism and persistence problems for Black students in PWIs. Perhaps the experiences and insights of students can inform higher education administrators, faculty and staff about their realities of college and how they experience persistence. Further, more knowledge of Black student persistence experiences may help policy makers, funders, families, family support programs and other interested parties create programs and policies that favorably impact college experiences.

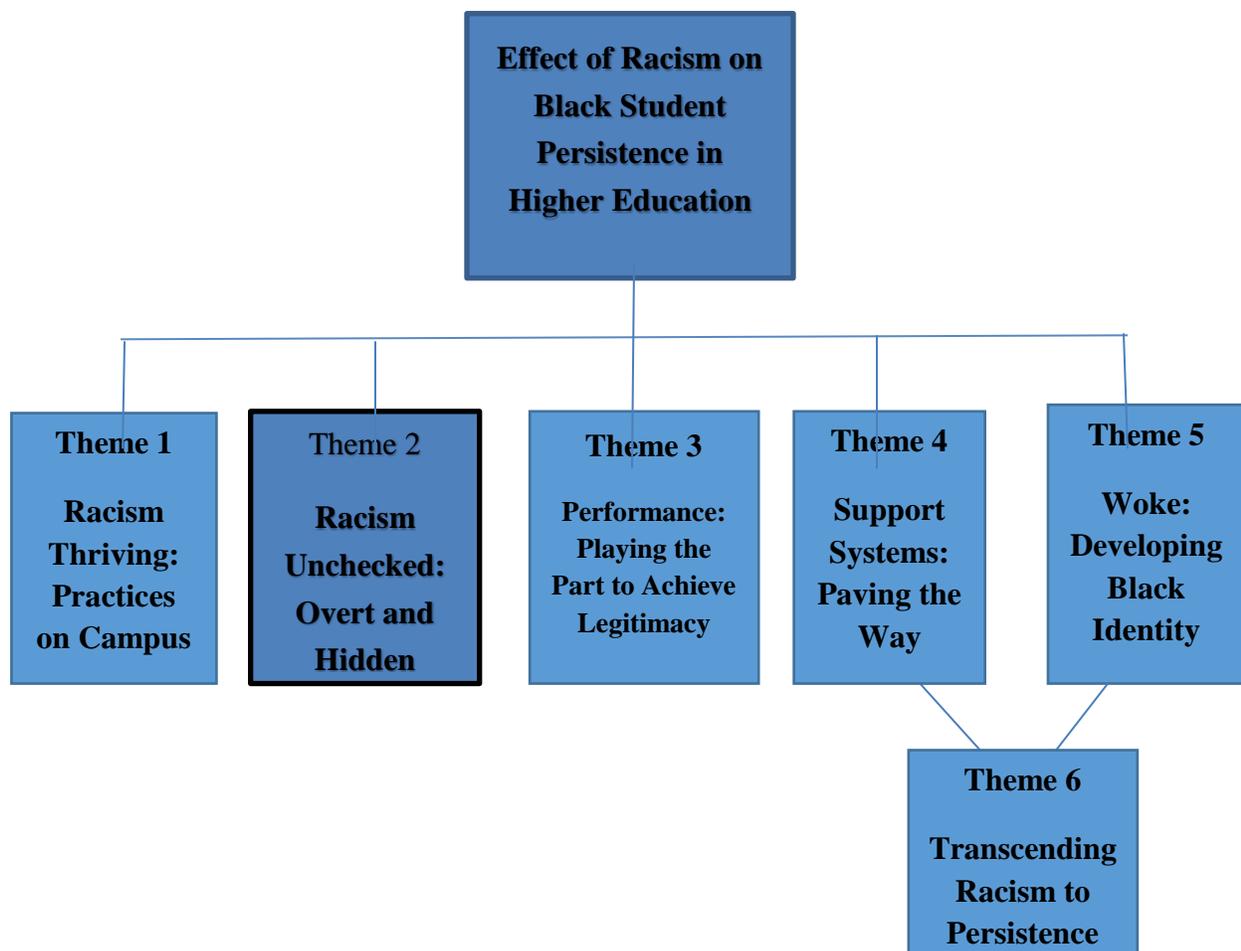
## CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

Six major findings emerged from the study: 1) students experience significant racism on campus, 2) racist incidences occur largely without consequence, 3) the Black students enact a performance to be viewed as legitimate students, 4) support systems are key, 5) having a strong sense of Black identity motivates students and 6) the multiple negative effects of racism, when buffered by support systems and a Black identity help students transcend racism to persist.

Figure 1 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of this study.

*Figure 1. Findings Organization Chart*

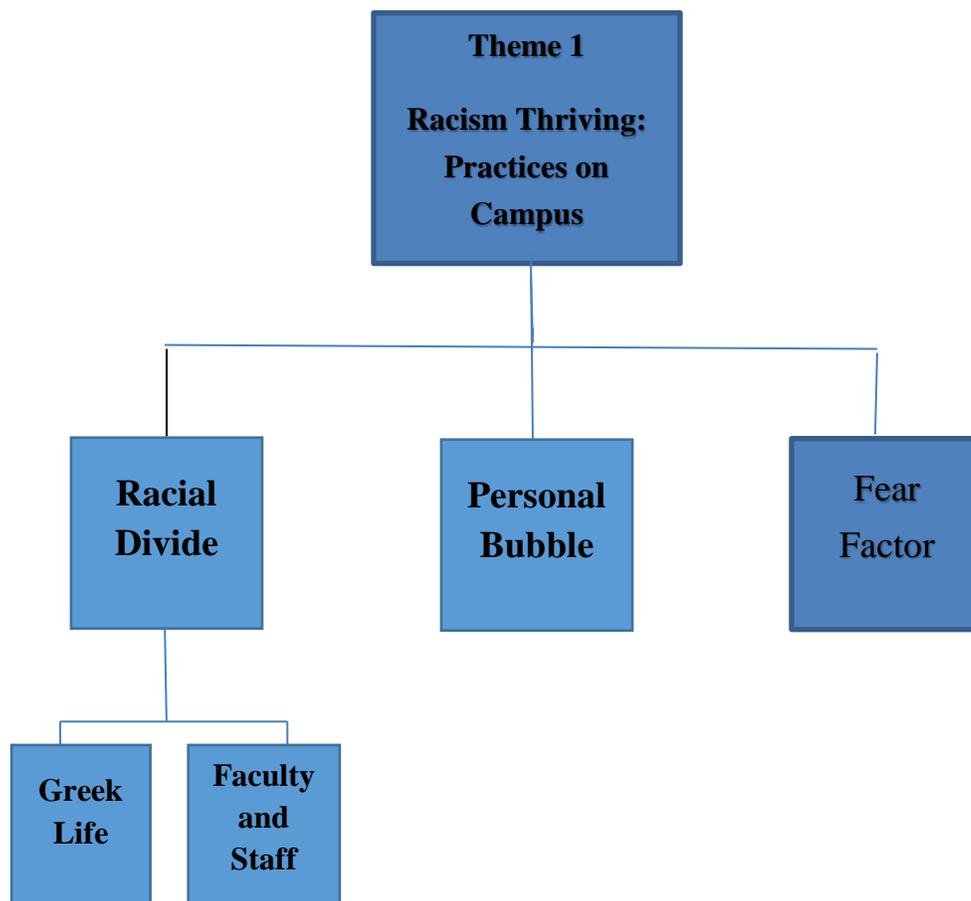


For each finding, subsections are presented to provide a holistic understanding of students' experiences with racism and persistence. Diagrams are included to provide a visual representation of the organization of each section. In order to further introduce the students and begin to situate their narratives with racism and persistence, while recognizing there is not space for every account to be told, one race critical incident for each student is conveyed in this section. The stories selected to share are ones of intensity that the students spent significant time discussing and/or conveyed a strong sense of dismay or fear.

**Racism Thriving: Practices on Campus (Theme 1).**

Next is a discussion of the students' perception of racial divisiveness on campus, followed by compartmentalization as a method to endure racism and finally narratives of fear and safety concerns following race critical incidents. Figure 2 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 1, Racism Thriving: Practices on Campus.

Figure 2. Theme 1 Findings Organization Chart



Although students had significant incidences with racism on and off campus, the ripple effect of state and national racial incidences including Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Travon Martin in Florida also mediated how they situated their experiences on this campus. Students indicated that how they felt about situations were not specific to an isolated incident, which apologists often label events such as Ferguson (Leonardo, 2013). They indicated that race critical incidents were a part of the larger structuring of society and how it had been through history (Pyke, 2010). Cairo states,

The incidents that happened in Ferguson MO, it's always been about you know,

this isn't the first incident and Travon Martin. I mean we can go back years. So it's not the first incident that happened but it's so close to us living in Missouri it really hit. Cause like when Travon Martin happened everybody, you know, we felt a certain way about it. Until it hits really close to home it's like OK this is for real happening and especially for people like a young Black male I've been profiled on many occasions. I've been put in handcuffs and they say, "I've seen you running" and then put me in handcuffs. It's crazy, even in Columbia MO I've been chased with a knife. It's really, it's happening everywhere and it's happening often so things like Ferguson it's put that on a national scale to bring more attention to it. It's just stuff that's happened all the time.

Similarly, Harley said she found the Ferguson incident was a "touchy subject" on campus and that no one wanted to "acknowledge it" but rather the mindset was to "sweep it under the rug". She said she finds that "incidents like that are always a reminder of how much further we need to go as a country."

Each student conveyed multiple accounts of racism they experienced within the campus setting. While some incidences were covert, many are overt as exemplified by Cairo's experience at an evening Legion of Black Collegians court. Other students and bystanders were in the vicinity. Cairo says,

I'd seen them [students] walking up and I thought he's about two more words away from calling us niggers and like clockwork he called across the street drunk and we said go about on your business and he yelled "niggers<sup>2</sup>."

Cairo had other accounts of being called the n-word on campus and challenges with

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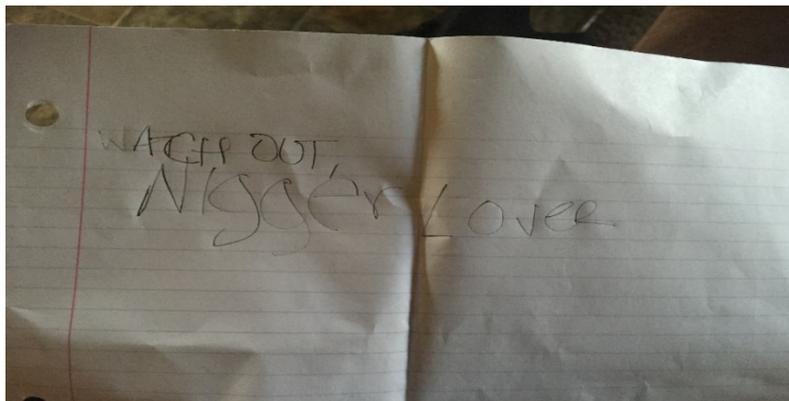
<sup>2</sup> While I recognize this word is harmful to some, the participants were insistent that the word be included in this dissertation.

White students on campus. Like Cairo, all of the students recounted multiple experiences with overt racism.

Harley had multiple experiences with racism but one particular incident exemplifies what she describes as a deep fear and lack of safety she felt during the racial incident on campus in Fall, 2015 (racially motivated activities that escalated in 2015 in a movement primarily led by a Black student group named Concerned Student 1950, cited as '2015 campus racial incident' hereafter). After class one day she was greeted by her White roommate who told Harley she didn't want her to "freak out" as the roommate handed her a note that was left on her [roommates] car that said "watch out nigger lover" (See Figure 3). Harley recalls extreme fear at that time and says,

I was like "OK, we're gonna get our stuff, we're going to leave." It was so terrifying, it was like the first time I cried about the whole thing and I was like scared, oh no it's time to leave....Like someone must have known about our household, known that it's a mixed household, which car to put it on, so it like has to be one of our neighbors. So it was just like terrifying, so it was already bad enough walking around on campus, because you're like every time a White person turned around you're like "what are you doing, what's going on". But like having to walk my dog and be like "why you coming out of the house, like seriously sir, what are you doing." It was like super terrifying.

*Figure 3: Harley's Artifact Pertaining to Racism and Persistence*



Because Diana is a roommate of Harley, she, too, said she was affected by the note on their White roommate's car. Diana talks of the night the note was found and how she stayed home after Harley and the White roommate left,

Like they had gone and I was still there and I was like trying to read a book or something and I heard banging and I'm like, "no, there's someone in the house, there's someone in the house." So I ended up calling the police! I called the police!!! (laughs). Umm, because I thought, ummm someone was in the house. They left that note. They're going to follow through with whatever that was about or whatever. And I was like crying. And there were like three guys [police] that came and one of them was like why did I call and I said I thought someone was in the house. And I said it's probably because of this note and I showed him the note and he said, "well that's insensitive of them" (laughs). Yes, that was the word. I ended up staying at like the church leader's house. Like in the children's playroom. It was like I just can't go to sleep now. But, I don't know, it's just...

Tiffany says she felt physically threatened during her freshman year following a Welcome Black BBQ on campus in the fall. She states she had been on campus only a few months and found herself walking past a fraternity house in Greek Town on the way to her dorm after the event ended. She recalls the micro-assault (Sue, 2010) she experienced during this walk,

And I remember they were all sittin on the porch and I was like [saying to herself]..... “you know you can turn around” but I was like “nobody’s back there everybody had went their separate”...you know I didn’t know how far I was going to get. And I’m like, “you got your pepper spray, you got it..you got it” (laughs). And I remember as soon as I started to walk past one of them got up and he came and he stopped, you would have thought it was like a gate or something. He just stopped right there and he stared at me directly and so like two of them come and I’m like I feel them staring at me but I’m continuously walking because I feel like much like you look a dog in their eyes you, they feel like you’re trying to challenge them. So I was like just keep walking. But I didn’t realize that two of them were coming this way [toward her] because I was so focused on looking out of my peripheral vision and so I literally ran right into them like chest to face and I backed up and I said, “oh I’m sorry”. He was like, “don’t be”. I was like, “ohhhh, I’m sorry, I’d rather be sorry”. And um, he like touched my hair, at the time I had a mohawk. He touched it, he touched my hair and the one to the left of him said, “look at how pretty she is for a Black girl” and I was like “I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die right here. It’s gonna happen.” I remember just like immediately shaking and everything my mama told not to do

and the guy behind said, “I was just thinking the same thing”. And I thought, “I’m gonna die. It’s gonna happen right here. I haven’t been on campus more than a few months.” And somebody...I have never seen this man again. I didn’t know who this man was [bystander watching the incident]. I am forever indebted to this man. And they turned and like one of them stepped back like that and I just kept, at that point I didn’t run I just kept walking. I was like, “I’m fine” and I remember, he must have known, I kept walking straight and .... he watched me and then I made it home and I’ve never seen that man again.

Racism is allowed to thrive on college campuses as exemplified by a White racial frame that positions Black students to live within a hegemonic system of White supremacy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Feagin, 2013; Andersen, Taylor, & Logio, 2014) that offers furtive and overt advantages to White populations over people of color (Watson, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The males in Tiffany’s narrative invoke racist comments and fear as a part of the White supremacy world they inhabit that likely isn’t altered by merely attending a diversity class and certainly not by a mantra of colorblindness (Feagin, 2013).

Mike tells of a racism experience with White students in a capstone class that highlights micro-aggressions and racial battle fatigue (Solorzano, 1998; Smith, 2004; Vincent et al., 2015). The professor assigned group projects and selected the members of each group. The experience Mike relates is this,

But my group I feel like, my group didn’t want me to be a part of their group cause they talked about me behind my back, like when we was working on our project outside of classroom, I would leave to go to a meeting and one of my

other Black friends he said when I left they was talking about me and he said they said the N word about me. So that made me like not want to go to class, not work with them no more and not give, I don't want to give them. And he [Mike's friend] experienced like the same thing. His group thought he was dumb and stuff like he would say he'll work on this part of the assignment and next week his group already finished what he said he'll do so like they don't think we're like capable of doing what they're able to do. So that's what I experienced last semester.

PWIs, in particular, represent racial climates that are ripe with racism, primarily toward Black males according to Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011). The researchers found that diminished opportunities and routine to acute experiences with environmental stress were typical for Black men such as Mike, particularly as their persistence increased toward college completion, again like Mike. The results suggest that PWIs are prime candidates for generating racial battle fatigue among Black males (Smith et al., 2011) as exemplified by Mike wanting to retreat from academic group work and not "give" anymore.

Chris reflects on racism and how it affects him personally, friends and others on campus. His story, one that evokes structural racism and victims framed as victimizers, involves an apartment complex where he lives and a Black friend of his who works there. The experience occurred during the 2015 campus racial incident.

The staff that works for the complex they had I guess like a group chat that, there was one Black girl in the group chat that apparently they just took it upon themselves to just state a whole bunch of racial things in the group chat. So the girl she like took a screen shot of it and posted it on social media and was

basically calling them out trying to get something together so that they can be fired or at least reprimanded for what they did and what they were saying because it wasn't right and they [complex management] threatened to fire her which was not right at all... apparently she was going against policy by saving the screen shot of the messages of the staff but the staff was being disrespectful and discriminatory. And so for a while I didn't even go into the office because I mean if this is what you got say about me and everybody else that look like me behind our backs then who know what you say when we walk into the office.....and none of the staff have been fired I don't believe.

Lawrence and Keleher (2004) find that structural racism is not necessarily a dynamic that people or institutions choose to practice rather it is systemic: an embedded feature of social, economic and political systems and therefore the most profound and all-encompassing form of racism because all other forms (e.g. institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal) emerge from it. In Chris' narrative, 'policy' is often applied inconsistently when Black individuals are involved. Policy becomes a convenient pretext to subjectively censor the oppressed (Anyon, 2009). Further, a structural racism lens frames victims as the victimizers, as evidenced by Chris's friend receiving a sanction for going against 'policy' by sharing a screen shot, but the individuals stating racist things about her proceeded without consequences.

During Lucy's freshman year at MU she lived in a dorm with three suitemates, two Black and one White student. She talks of forming a friendship with the White suitemate but relates difficulties in this cross-racial relationship. Lucy's story is indicative of Interpersonal Racism and the fallacy that cross-racial relationships can

protect Black individuals from racism (Brondolo et al., 2009).

She [Lucy's White friend] had a good friend who did not understand why she would hang out with me and my friends at times. And they would just be like so rude to her, umm, they just wouldn't understand like why she wanted to hang out with us at times and they were just not good friends. But you know the predominantly White friends they would like, when they would see her with us they like make faces and um, they were just, um you know. I don't even know the dialogue that happened behind that but we got invited to a party one time and she invited us to a party at a White fraternity and those are always interesting....cause it's like either, either everything's fine, there's a few scenarios, so it's like everything is fine, good and they really don't notice that you're there or you don't even get in or you get in and everyone expects you to know how to dance and everybody like crowds around you to wait to see what you do. So....so those are very interesting and um, so this is freshman year of course and we ended up going with her again it's that scenario of everyone expected us to dance and be around us and recording us and things like that and it's just very uncomfortable.

Lucy's story reveals that having close White friends does not provide Black individuals safety from racism. In fact, White relationships can cause additional exposure to racism and create a false expectation for belongingness and acceptance. Interpersonal racism includes harm that the targeted individual credits to conscious or unintentional racial bias on the part of the offender (Pyke, 2010). These experiences happen in a wide variety of settings and can be communicated through a range of

attitudes and actions such as social rejection, stigmatization, unfair treatment, and/or threats, harassment, and persecution (Brondolo et al., 2009). Lucy's White friend experienced social rejection from her White peers as a result of their relationship. While Lucy was included in White fraternity parties it comes at the expense of racist and stereotypic treatment.

**The Racial Divide.** One of the outcomes of racism in any setting is the potential for racial divisiveness. The issue of racial divide emerged several times during the focus group sessions and largely speak to the tensions the students experience on campus, contrasted with greater racial harmony they experience in other settings. Harley explains that she grew up with diverse individuals her entire life including family members who had married individuals of diverse ethnicity and race and a racially diverse friend group in high school. Unlike her experiences at home in Chicago she asked herself about the PWI "so do I gotta pick a side? Why can't we all just be friends?" Further, diversity was what she was accustomed to but "when you come here [PWI] it's like 'choose.' It's really weird."

Black students experience a lack of trust even when and where there are personal and even close relationships with White individuals (Leonardo, 2013). This lack of racial trust, spoken about by both Harley and Lucy, often comes in the form of generalized mistrust attributed to past and contemporary racism, environmental context such as college campuses, and ethno-racial (ethnic and racial) socialization (Smith, 2010).

Harley's experience is indicative of Black individuals often bearing an undue burden of feeling like relationships and social membership must function as binaries (Leonardo, 2013). In essence, Harley says she finds that she must pick between Black or

White friend groups, not a blending of both. Erroneously, this binary assumes that race primarily consists of only two racial groups, Black and White (Perea, 1997; Westmoreland, 2013) thus negating and dismissing the realities and concerns of other races.

Chris's experience touches an element of racial trust and binary in that cross-race relationship dynamics on campus may appear positive but could be nothing more than superficial harmony without true progress toward racial unity,

You know I've had to choose my years here that I have been in meetings with umm, White people and been in meetings with other organizations and faculty and I've kinda grown close to them and just like we've been in most locations with each other so now we do have those regular conversations once we see each other but it's still that divide where [I wonder], can we go certain places in public, can we talk about certain topics, if I go to this place will you come with me, are you going to even consider inviting me to wherever you're going? So you kind of, you embrace yourself and know that in an ideal world where racism should not exist and you want it at least to fix where you are, you don't always want it to be tension between you and someone else.

The students identify several dynamics which seem to perpetuate the racial divide on campus including Greek Life (White), and faculty and staff, social media.

**Greek life.** While the students in this study spoke of general racial tension with White students on campus they indicated that they feel a significant racial divide between White Greeks (Greek Town) and Black students. All the students nod in agreement about statements that Black students in general don't feel safe in Greek Town and that you

“don’t walk in Greek Town and if you do you have people with you,” according to Tiffany. The students’ experiences mirror research findings that indicate racially motivated verbal and physical assaults continue to grow, particularly on PWI campuses and those that have large numbers of White students, faculty and Greek student life populations (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014).

Chris, Tiffany, Harley and Mike speak at length of this disharmony. When asked about specific contexts or experiences with Greek Town Chris says,

They look at you funny. They might yell out things. Sometimes when they’re outside playing games they may throw something in your direction. It’s just never a good experience.

I asked if racist behavior is worse in Greek Town or if it happens equally elsewhere with Greek students to which Tiffany replies,

Umm, both. But much like a team in like their home stadium as their territory so. So you’re deep in the middle of Greek Town and you want to scream “help” everybody is just going to look at you.

Overall, the students say they find that sorority members are less threatening than fraternity members. Tiffany says she “doesn’t really get bothered by the girls” and Chris finds that “girls may just indirectly say micro-aggressions. Pretend that they don’t know about it but they know what they’re saying.” Chris further compares male and female Greek students by saying that “guys are more verbal and like Tiffany said they’ll try to challenge you....Yah I don’t think I even drive through Greek Town.”

Mike works at a campus library and comes in contact with groups of fraternity members who study there. When Mike tries to enforce library rules with them such as no

talking and no tobacco he says Greek students are “always rude to me for some reason and when I walk into the room they just stare me down til I leave the room so. It makes me feel ....it makes me feel disrespected in a way.”

When I asked the focus group members if they know of any White fraternity or sorority members that date a Black person Tiffany quickly responded, “not unless they’re a football player ‘bloop.’” All the students laughed at this statement and Tiffany and Chris went on to describe it as White student intrigue at “sexualizing” Black individuals. An illustrative example about White Greeks and racism comes from Harley,

I had this class and I think basically it was all White, maybe one other Black kid I think...that showed up (laughs). Finals, though, there was all kinds of people coming in but um....I used to sit in the same exact place all the time or like in the same general area....and these guys [fraternity students] come up and they’re like, “oh can you move we need to sit here and I was like, ‘NO’, I always sit here especially on like test days.....They were like well, ‘we all need to sit her together.’ It was all frat boys and they were like ‘we need to sit here because and.... you don’t remember where you’re supposed to sit”

I commented and Harley confirmed that it was an overtly racist statement stemming from Blacks having to sit at the back of the bus during segregation in the 1960s. All of the students in the study concluded that the fraternity students wanted to sit together so they could cheat and that they didn’t want to be closer to the front because they would more likely be caught. Further, during the focus group session, Chris accurately predicted from the beginning of Harley’s story how it would end. I asked if the professor was aware of this situation to which Harley replied “the teacher’s just up there” even though

“everybody else was looking at what was going on.”

Racism can appear and operate in multiple ways as evidenced by language and behaviors that spotlight overt or blatant ways to more covert or hidden manifestations (DeAngelis, 2009). Sue’s (2010) classification of aversive racism occurs at multiple levels in addition to racial micro-aggressions, including micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations with each typology resulting in damaging, hostile messages that negatively impact the recipient. As illustrated, many of the participants in this study experience the levels of aversive racism identified by Sue (2010) within the White Greek environment.

**Faculty and staff.** While most of the students experienced overt racism from the White Greek community, some students say they have had very positive experiences with faculty and staff members (advisors). Cairo speaks of professors being “very like understanding and supportive as far as students of color” during the 2015 campus racial incidents. He also comments that,

I had professors that like they’re not Black so they don’t understand like through and through but they understand that the situation is not the best situation. Um, so if we like needed to leave class and have a moment that was fine, um. That day when it was like we’re gonna kill that Black person on campus, like that day it was like stay at home we understand we don’t know what’s going on but it’s something serious.

Unfortunately, Cairo’s experience is not the norm and the narratives of two students, Harley and Tiffany, speak specifically to the College of Journalism and racist acts. Harley says, “t’s so evident in the J-school. So evident. I’ve had friends drop out of

Mizzou because of the J school.” Tiffany follows up saying,

I had one person [professor] who changed my entire decision to stay in the Journalism School. It changes you. I changed my entire major and I didn’t care if it was going to hold me back a year because I had to get out of that environment.

Tiffany cited three examples of negative experiences with this professor including a micro-insult he made about her hair, “it looks so natural...how does your hair feel” in front of the class. Tiffany recounted that this professor attempted to create a relaxed classroom setting and had nicknames for students in class thus creating a “jokey joke” environment. Tiffany was surprised when he then responded to an email from her saying, “you need to watch your professionalism in emails.” She says, “I would never address a professor in that way [informal] unless he made me feel comfortable to do so.” Her final experience with this same professor, and the last straw, was him denying he had approved her project when she had evidence that he had done so.

We had to get our project approved by the professor. I remember getting an email from him at 2:15 saying “approved” and a week later I get a nasty email...I’m not going to cry...no,no. Umm, I got a real nasty email and I was like it’s been a week and he tagged everybody. He said, “to say I’m disappointed is a gross understatement, this is a class where you need to perform and uphold expectations.” He was like tearing me into pieces in this email.

Tiffany said she choose to respond in the “right” way to this professor by apologizing for the confusion, calling him “professor” and including a screen shot of his previous email approving the project. Tiffany says the professor responded, “oh, I did approve it.” At that point Tiffany decided “this is not for me [Journalism School].”

Cairo says racism in the College of Education is uncommon but that he experienced one professor making “sketchy” comments exemplified as follows,

Yah so one of my English professors had, it was for a final project and we had to do a paper and stuff like that and uh, he made a purpose to come over to me and said, “I’m just afraid you’re not going to get this done in time.” And not only did I have the paper done in time, I had the paper done before everyone in the class because he told me the wrong due date. So I had my paper in a week before anyone else. It’s just little things like that....

Cairo’s professor assumed he would struggle with the assignment and this seemingly nonracial interaction becomes racial in nature (microaggression) because a dominant and subordinate relationship (teacher-student) is involved (Leonardo, 2013). Cairo’s experience is also consistent with literature that finds that teachers have lower expectations for Black students than White ones (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008). Specifically, Gershenon (2016) finds that non-Black teachers have considerably lower academic expectations of Black students than do Black teachers and that effects are greater for Black male students and math professors.

On the other hand, Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann (2015) find that faculty and staff can mitigate the effects of racism by validating students and helping to create a sense of belonging in the classroom and other academic settings. Direct contact with faculty and staff that is positive and meaningful can reinforce student self-worth and value in the educational setting (Hurtado et al., 2015). Faculty can play a key role in respecting and empowering students, although little effort is extended on most campuses to assess and train faculty and staff members to do so (Hurtado et al., 2015).

Mike said he attributes racism on the part of college advisors to challenges he had with graduating. He talks of an advisor who questioned why he took some classes when she had told him to take the class in the first place. And then she said, “oh I did tell you to take this class.’ So I feel like they try to set us up for failure.” When Mike then said, “and I’m not the only one” referencing he’s not the only Black student in the college that has had this kind of experience.

It’s like a handful of us. And before I started college here at the University I was only going to come here for computer engineering but they talked me into doing electrical engineering as well and that’s a five-year program but then I would have lost my diversity award after my fourth semester...I was in financial trouble last semester and nobody told me or prepared me for that. So originally I was to be here for four years now I found out my fifth year. I feel like they set me up for failure. I found out that there’s only three out of X amount of Black students that are double majors in computer and electrical engineering but that was my senior year. Imagine how many people started in the same process I did. Like the dropout rate is not good. I prayed a lot. I had people praying for me. I had to drop my computer engineering side as hard as it was to let that go. I worked so hard to get both degrees. I just felt bad. I’m only graduating with one.

I asked Mike if the advisor or others in the college realized the impact of this situation on him and he just shook his head. Tiffany reasoned that “it’s not the majority of their students so they don’t have to worry about it.”

Lucy said she has not experienced direct racist problems with faculty or staff members but wishes faculty members addressed the 2015 campus racial incidents in a

more meaningful way,

I was fortunate to have a lot of really great, understanding and educated professors, um at the time so they addressed it in class, they talked about it. I think the only issue I had was they would address it in class, they would personally address it the way that they should but as soon as they opened up the dialogue to everyone else they never corrected anything. And they just kinda let everyone go on tangents and that's kinda where the problematic stuff came out and then you had comments like, "well they...those people and so I just don't understand why they just didn't do what they were supposed to do, just to school and you know, X, Y, and Z and everything we're heard throughout that whole time and my issue was like, I guess, please do bring up the conversation but don't let them become disrespectful. So that was like my big issue on campus.....

Wexler (2016) writes that despite the proliferation of nationwide media attention and discourse about the 2015 campus racial incident, Black Lives Matter campaign and other recent race critical incidents, college professors are typically reluctant to address racism issues in the classroom. Scholars find that some professors don't know how to fit conversations about race and diversity into course content and others steered away from emotionally charged racism conversations and worried about saying the wrong thing (DeAngelis, 2009; Wexler, 2016).

**Personal Bubble.** Lucy's narrative in dealing with racism on campus is different than her focus group peers. She says she "detached from the situation" pertaining to the 2015 campus racial incidences. She says she stayed off social media and says "after a while I like had to put my phone on silent...it was just stressful for me. I didn't want to

deal with it.” She talks about the whole “plethora of micro-aggressions” and that,

Honestly during that time when everything happened [2015 campus racial incidences] I really tried to block everything out. I just personally couldn’t and I know me I get anxiety pretty easy so I was just like, school, class, home...

Harley, too, said she deals with some of the stress of racial incidences by “compartmentalizing stuff.” She describes visiting friends on campus at their apartment during the 2015 campus racial incident and “just had a girl’s night in” even though they could hear “screaming and marching outside” and we were just like, “this High School Musical movie, though.”

In compartmentalizing their experiences with racism Lucy and Harley’s are able to disengage from the tensions of a race critical incident. Lucy’s self-disclosure of anxiety speaks to the effect of the stress of racism on people of color and that prolonged encounters contribute to disparities in physical and mental health and numerous negative health outcomes (i.e., hypertension, depression, coronary disease) within racial and ethnic groups (Brondola et al., 2009; Paradies, 2006).

**Fear Factor.** Victims of racism often report fear from experiences that compromise their emotional and physical safety (Matias, 2015). Parallel to this finding is that the most frequent feelings students voiced about racial incidences were words relating to the concept of fear. Students relayed 40 accounts of being fearful, terrified, feeling unsafe and parental worry about their physical and emotional safety not only related to campus, state and national racial incidences but general racism on the MU campus before and after the 2015 campus racial incident. Following are narratives that exemplify fear, lack of safety and worry,

- I just remember being terrified when stuff happened (Ferguson) – Tiffany
- I never remember as a child being as scared as I was in that moment (Ferguson) – Tiffany
- And we were kind of left to fend for ourselves. I remember being afraid and upset at being afraid because I knew that's what they wanted (2015 campus racial incident roommate was missing and wouldn't let people know where she was) – Tiffany
- My mom always used to say “the monster only gets bigger if you feed it” and just kind of watching that monster grow has been something that scares me, like I said it's terrifying to watch and be a part of. It's as close to me as Lucy is right now. Everyday it's in my class. When I think about those YikYaks, I can literally be sitting right next to the person who did it and never know (reference to 2015 campus racial incident and threats on social media) – Tiffany
- It never got to the point where we had to go into hiding, but we went home early. My family made me come home early. A week before Thanksgiving. (reference to 2015 campus racial incident and racial threats) – Tiffany
- Now I'm about to be president of the Legion of Black Collegians so now they're [family] really worried. They're like, “so you couldn't just die down?” They don't want me here and I don't necessarily blame them (reference to 2015 campus racial incident and racial threats) – Tiffany
- I've got a lot of friends in Ferguson. I was afraid at times and I was afraid. I knew some police officers there as well. So I was afraid for them too. My

parents didn't want me to go to St. Louis because what was going on there and they still don't want me to go there but I feel like I have to because of the personal connections I have there. It's hard just to be there. And, it can happen anywhere. It's kind of scary knowing the same thing can happen here in [PWI city] as well (reference to Ferguson racial incident) – Mike

- I was just so upset that I was scared because that's not me (laughs)...and I think it didn't hit home but one of the things that really hit home to me and one of the things that really hit home for me was a day after all the YikYak threads and my parents kept calling me and I was saying "I'm good, ok, I'm really good. I'm fine, I'm not leaving" and so the next day I didn't go to class cause I'm not dumb but I came to the [Black Culture Center (BCC)] that morning and I saw a couple of people, like the [BCC director] in the front with like baseball bats. And I was like, "ok, we're not playing games" and we're getting in here and it was crazy and I was like, "wow" this is really really serious (reference to 2015 campus racial incident and potential violence) – Harley
- So my mom found out about it and she wanted me to come home immediately. I told her "no" and she said if I didn't come home she would leave work and come and get the night. I talked her out of it not to come and get me. It's my last year. I want to finish and I really had to call my dad and have him talk her out of it. I was hard for her to let go. But, I had to suck it up and finish what I started. As a supervisor, my staff was afraid to come to work and it's my responsibility to come in and cover their shift (reference to 2015 campus racial incident) – Mike

- I have one friend [Black student] who just kinda went MIA for a while cause like one night this guy, she used to work at [cookie store]. Like she got off work really late and was walking back to her car in one of those garages downtown and this guy chased her all the way to her car with a knife and so. It was the same night that all the Yik Yak threats were going on so if you were Black walking around...then you're just exposed I guess so she made it to her car and apparently got into the car and like tried to block her in but she got out (reference to 2015 campus racial incident) – Harley
- I still have moments if I'm walking my dog at night or there was this weird moment on Tuesday when my teacher in class had this panel of ex-inmates and one of them got out like a couple of days ago...it's like how do you verify that you....and one of them was talking about some of the big things going on in [PWI city] right now like this Neo Nazi movement, how they were gaining traction and recruiting people and stuff. And I'm like, I don't want to live here now, I don't want to live here no more (aftermath of 2015 campus racial incident) – Harley
- So like dealing with certain things like my very first, yah, my very firstish protest where I was like, you know, spat on.....(reference to 2015 campus racial incident) – Tiffany
- I was probably literally shaking. I was every piece of me, like if ears could shake. I was just so scared and he literally stood right there on that corner and he watched them and like I watched him turn his head back and forth. And that was like why I do not like going to Greek Town. Ever. I don't go near it. It's

gotta be groups, like groups of guys and that's almost worse because there's like that whole feud and this idea of challenging the Black man so I avoid it at all cost (reference to freshman experience walking past a fraternity house in Greek Town where she felt physically threatened) – Tiffany

- I know like me personally, like all my friends, we checked on all of our friends and made sure everybody was safe. Like a lot of people who were on campus but didn't feel safe. We picked them up that same night, even like the next day, the couple of days just to have a safe space like the BCC to come and talk to people and feel safe (reference to 2015 campus racial incident and violent threats) – Chris
- And I was like crying.....(reference to fear she felt over racial hate note stemming from 2015 campus racial incident) - Diana

The effect of racism on personal growth and development is acute (Harper, 2012a) and the feelings of fear are by far the most intensive and pervasive narratives expressed by the students.

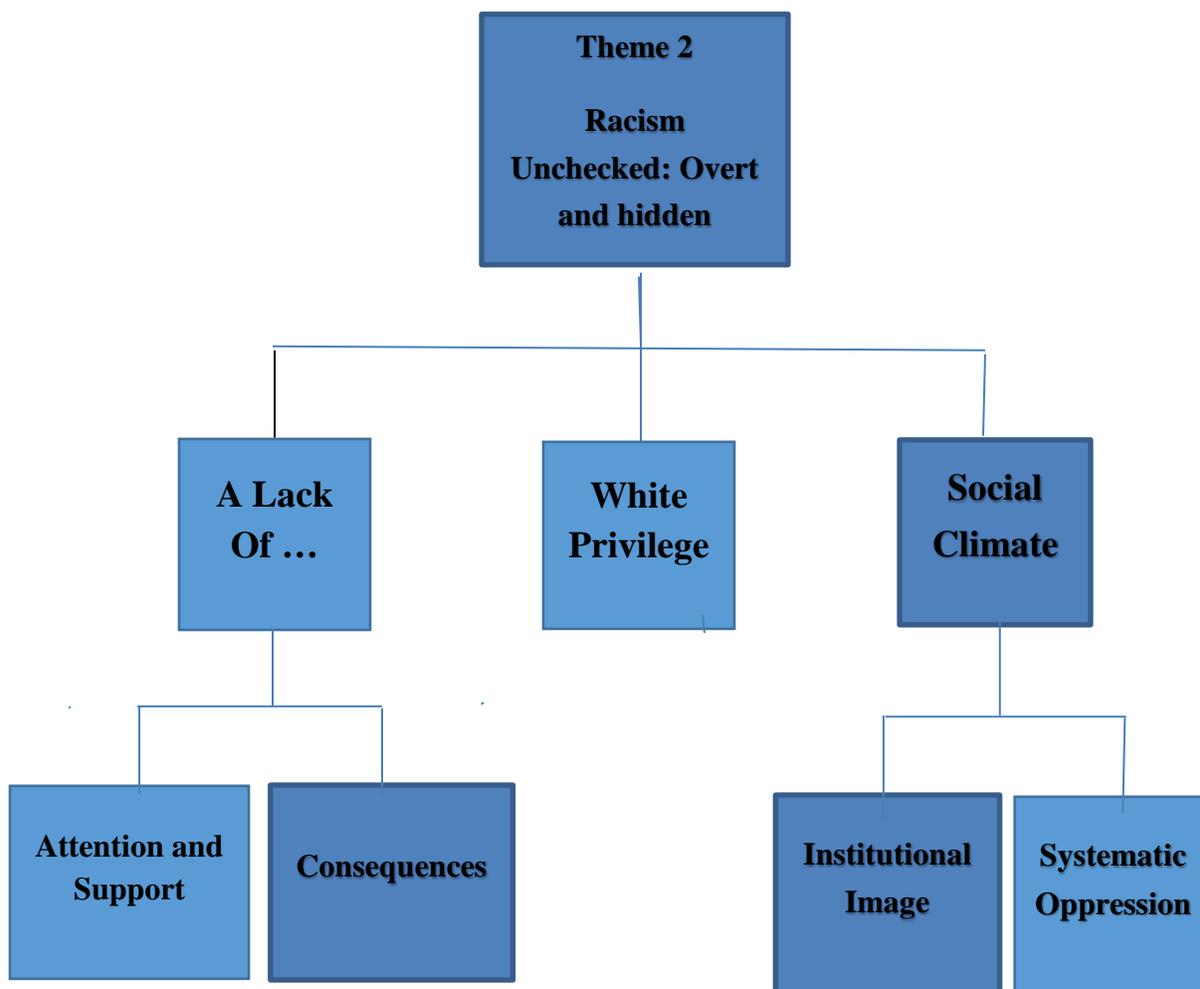
### **Racism Unchecked: Overt and hidden (Theme 2)**

The students had multiple narratives about racism problems and what they experience on campus as a result of both long-standing and recent racial incidences that are not addressed or resolved. Students communicate lack of support and attention as well as a lack of consequences for racial perpetrators on campus. Several students reference the concept of White privilege as a covert but deeply engrained status that perpetuates racism on many levels and contributes to a social climate that ignores incidences in order to maintain an institutional image of racial harmony. Figure 4

provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 2, Racism

Unchecked: Overt and hidden.

*Figure 4. Theme 2 Findings Organization Chart*



### **Lack**

Describing a lack of support and attention, the students say they find campus is an environment where marginalized students, like Blacks, do not feel like they belong. This lack of support and attention serves to alienate Black students who sometimes feel like outsiders within the institution. Further, the lack of consequences for individuals and

institutional systems that contribute to or engage in racism solidifies the idea that the campus tolerates versus addressing and solving it.

**Lack of attention and support.** Tiffany talks about the PWI and campus leaders (president and chancellor) who stepped down from their position or were let go because of the 2015 campus racial incident and finds that this outcome and racial unrest stems from lack of attention to students of color,

I wanted them to have to stay in their positions. I wanted them to have to fix it. I wanted them to make their changes and use this as a way to educate, and the same thing can be said for any ethnicity. If you don't understand the culture, some of the things you're going to say may be those stereotypical things you hear. I just feel like that's a lot of what comes out. Like take time to get to know us, like I've heard, I've heard White people say like, "I don't understand why they just don't get up and go get jobs and do stuff, they just want to live like that." Like, how many Black people do you really know? (students laugh). Because nobody really likes to be poor, you know (students laugh). It's like "no" it's not like that so it's like have you really taken the time to understand the culture, to understand what it's like to understand how things have played out historically? We didn't just happily come to America and Civil Rights weren't just given to us but you know, like, it's been a fight for years and I just feel like nobody really wants to talk about these things. Every time it comes up in a conversation or a classroom we want to back away from the topic and we're going to continue to have these problems.

Tiffany further emphasizes the lack of attention to Black culture as it relates to summer

orientation practices for incoming freshman students. Tiffany and Chris are summer orientation leaders and although she says she didn't find fault with the fact that six out of the 36 leaders were Black she expressed concern that of the two weeks of training they received, 30 minutes was spent learning about the Black Culture Center and two hours were devoted to learning about the Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic Council, both White Greek organizations. She says, "everything you need to know before the students get here about the Black community is like shrunken...." The things the leaders had to know about the Black Culture Center is that the facility has a "computer lab and a kitchen."

Tiffany's experience reflects a Eurocentric campus culture, a dominant culture that is racially and ethnically homogenous and reflective of a White racial frame (Feagin, 2013; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Eurocentric campus cultures do not adopt diversity principles and those principles do not substantially manifest in the "student body, everyday conversation, decision-making, or curriculum" (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012, p. 14) such as what Tiffany found in the lack of campus attention to the Black Culture Center. Given that the preponderance of colleges and universities at their start employed faculty and staff who were predominantly affluent White men and were designed to serve the needs of that same demographic, the cultures that developed within these institutions were intended to meet the needs of a single dominant, White racial group (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Consequently, these institutions began as campuses with Eurocentric cultures and norms.

Some institutions have made limited efforts and slight progress toward diversifying their faculty, staff and student bodies (Ortiz & Santos, 2009) but the

Eurocentric focus persists and is deeply engrained in the institutional structure. Norms, values, and assumptions, in addition to the policies and procedures that materialize from them, echo a pledge to upholding the systemic status quo and dominant White culture (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). This practice is reinforced during the summer orientation training by allocating 30 minutes of attention to the Black Culture Center and two hours on the Eurocentric White Greek organizations.

Further, Cairo talks about the systemic lack of attention to racism and cites the involvement of a former professor in the 2015 campus racial incident and her notorious use of the word “muscle” that led to her being fired as evidence of lack of concern for the Black community,

You’re worried about this lady saying “muscle” and you have a body of students being referred to as niggers – all these derogatory names but you’re going to fire this woman for supporting a group of people who have been targeted or have been oppressed from the very day they step on campus. Umm, so I think that is very petty to fire because that is actually, you know, one person who is doing something to help the situation.

Cairo’s narrative speaks to a long-held belief that the most important strategy for persistence of students of color is the recruitment of administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are truly committed to racial diversity, including the college president and other high-level administrators (Davis, 2002). The firing of a faculty member who opposes oppression and actively worked with Black students to support their rights and interests is an example of institutional policies and practices that negatively impact persistence. Students say they find a lack of support in dealing with racism at

multiple levels. Harley talks about the role of friends during the 2015 campus racial incident and says,

I think one of the hardest things of that situation was like a friend group we're a part of, the support group, was not supportive. It was like, what Diana said, a lot of our friends are White and one guy comes over and says, "I didn't know any of this was happening." I was like "OK, I'm gonna go home, I'll see you in a few weeks." That was kind of like the first time I shut down I was kind of like "I don't want to talk to anybody but Black people at this point." No one talked to me so it was just really frustrating.

Similar to Lucy's story earlier, having close White friends does not provide Black individuals safety from racism. In fact, White relationships can cause additional exposure to racism and create a false expectation for belongingness and acceptance (Pyke, 2010).

Mike and Harley also talk about lack of support concerning student advising. Both say they find that their advisors provided incomplete and poor advisement which they attributed to lack of racial understanding. Tiffany describes this lack of awareness of the needs of Black students and first-generation students as "it's not the majority of their students so they don't have to worry about it." Mike says,

I remember my freshman year I went to my advising appointment and she [advisor] said "what classes do you want to take?" I'm like I'm not sure because I don't know what I need to take and I thought you supposed to help me with it but she just expected us to understand it by ourselves so. With my friend she uh, she picked all her classes out and the advisor said "OK, you'll be graduating like May

2016.” And then like closer to like last semester she said “OK, why you take this class if, you didn’t have to take this class and my friend said, “you told me I could take this class cause it’s on track to graduate on time.” And then the advisor act like she don’t know what she was talking about but my friend she said, “go look back in these, your documents. And then she said, “oh, I did tell you to take this class.” So I feel like they try to set us up for failure.

Mike followed up saying “my advisor almost dropped me out of engineering as well.”

This story speaks to Mike feeling a lack of communication and support from an advisor who held key information about his future,

They put me on probation without me knowing last spring. She said my GPA was too low but I was like, “no, my GPA was high enough for me not to be on probation.” So she made a mistake in it. Luckily I went to her office hours because she said, “I was literally about to make a call to drop you out of the whole program.” Without calling or anything. So she had me on probation for like a whole semester.

Tiffany interjected by saying what an advisor should say in a mock voice, “how are you doing? Why are your grades like this? What is your plan?” Mike responded by saying, “she was like, ‘I’m glad you came in because I was about to call you to tell you...’. She said it would have been a headache to put me back into the system.” I furthered the conversation by asking Mike if she was apologetic or concerned about this potentially damaging decision and he responded, “no she wasn’t. She was just happy I came to help her to clear it up.”

In general, students seek academic advising and counseling more than any other

type of services on college campuses and students of color are three times more likely than White students to use these services (Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). Given the rate of use of students of color and the negative experiences Mike reported with his advisor, it is important that racial and cultural awareness undergird these services to meet the needs of students. Strong advising and academic counseling centers can assist students in need, particularly those on academic probation who need to regain a sense of control over their educational experiences (Davis, 2002; Habley et al., 2012).

Harley also talks of advisors and said that her first two years of college her “advisor was great, like he was really supportive and he, he just he cared like more about my well-being and I talked about everything that was going on my freshman year.” She says she struggled with her new advisor and describes her as “just the worst.” Harley says,

So like my last meeting with him he was like...I came down with so many credits I had the opportunity to graduate early, I could have graduated in December, umm, and so I was just like, “oh, ok, cool!” Like I can get out of her sooner. And um, so then my first meeting with my new advisor I told her that and she just laughed. She just like, “well, I don’t know who told you that information but it’s false.”

Harley said she feels like her new advisor is uncaring, unsupportive and provides bad advice. Feelings of disconnectedness, experiences with racism, and not knowing how to navigate higher education systems are some of the factors that can negatively affect student persistence (Braxton et al., 2013; Lotkowski, et al., 2004; Van Dyke & Griff, 2014).

Academic advising is a critical component of academic progress and advisors have an important role in helping students traverse the college completion path (Habley et al., 2012). Without adequate advising the result can be students taking unnecessary courses that negatively affect their persistence (Braxton et al., 2013). Or, important and needed classes can be missed. Students of color, sometimes lacking other support networks to turn to for assistance, can be dually affected by poor advising (Van Dyke & Griff, 2014).

**Lack of consequences.** The students discuss the ramifications of the lack of consequences for racism both societally and on campus. Tiffany talks about problems that emerge when racism is not addressed referencing the 2015 campus racial incident,

They're saying these things, they're doing these things, they're oppressing us and they don't care. I guess it's like the first time I've seen it so blatant. Because when it happens in elementary school, when it happens in middle school, when it happens in high school there's punishments. And you know, like, it stops. But there are no punishments, for police, there's no punishments for these fraternities and these people who say these things. And when they see no punishment it just continues to fuel the fire.

Cairo also expresses frustration about the lack of consequences for racism and reference racial slurs [n-word] he hears on campus,

And for me people say oh it's just a word don't be offended by a word but when you go through event after event after event and things like this, I'm frustrated because nothing is being done.

Chris said he feels that the lack of consequences for racism comes from "some

people not really understanding the problem and not wanting to take ownership of the problem.” He references institutional and campus leaders and others regarding the 2015 campus racial incident and says,

They’re not really seeing what’s going on and what’s been going on and what the problems were. People don’t get at what needs to be changed and they just attack the situation for one thing and it doesn’t really help.

Harley’s story about a classroom experience with fraternity members asking her to move to the back of the room before an exam is another example of lack of consequences given the professor ignored the disturbance. Harley said that “everyone was looking at what was going on” including the professor. The professor did not say or do anything.

Tiffany, Cairo, Chris and Harley speak about lack of consequences for racist acts, an inattention that can be attributed to structural racism, or a system in which policies, practices, symbols, and other norms work in numerous and frequently supporting ways to preserve racial inequality (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). A deeply embedded structure of racism leads to a lack of negative consequences for those who engage in and promote racist acts. This structure includes dimensions of history and culture that have permitted White privilege and inequity for people of color to persist and adapt over time (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Cairo also discusses the lack of consequences for the media pertaining to racism in society and on campus. He talks about how easily misconstrued situations can become when instantaneous messaging through social media can “hit the national scope and you don’t have anyone there who actually experienced it, you only have what was put out there on the media.” In essence, context matters and Cairo said his concern is that the

“world perception or view of us here at the university” is created without “authentic knowledge or information.” Lack of accurate information can inhibit understanding and create divisiveness.

**White Privilege.** White privilege, a term for societal privileges that benefit people identified as White, is a concept that helps explain how race affects White individuals and in turn, how White privilege affects people of color (Irving, 2014; McIntosh, 1989). White privilege signifies both overt and covert advantages that White people may not know they have, which distinguishes it from overt prejudice or bias (Irving, 2014; McIntosh, 1989). While the students in this study did not specifically use the term ‘White Privilege’ when describing their racial experiences with White students and professors, their examples nonetheless point to the ability of White individuals to maintain a heightened status in society that disguises racial inequality.

Lucy talks about how some professors responded to concerns of student safety during the 2015 campus racial incident by cancelling classes. Her example stems from White students performing White privilege in their reaction to these cancellations,

As far as comments from like the White students here, I either heard like, nobody ever really addressed the situation of what was happening, they were like, “oh ya, my teacher cancelled class I’m so happy because finally I get a day off or I hope this keeps going so they keep cancelling classes and it’s like you’re totally missing what’s happening. You’re like, you know. Like he said, class is not cancelled for you. And, so just being frustrated by that, you’re so just living in this bubble, like “yah, I’m glad class is cancelled. It’s like the teacher was sick or something.

Clearly, Lucy felt like White students did not have to concern themselves with the realities of Black students during highly charged racial situations. As she says, “it’s like you’re totally missing what’s happening.” Feagin’s (2006) concept of White racial frame (WRF), which includes Whiteness, White privilege, White supremacy and institutionalized racism speaks to the perpetuation of disproportionate power, as whiteness “becomes common sense,” because Whites have long had the power and the resources to impose this reality (Feagin, 2008, p. 39). This framing maintains systemic racism in institutions (Feagin, 2013).

Chris’ discussion of the concept of White privilege centers on the idea that White people don’t have to think about their race and Black individuals do. He says,

Cause I was kinda thinking what Tiffany said when people ask us, ‘what does it mean to be Black’ or ‘how do you define your Blackness’ and I was kinda thinking, what if you was to ask a White person ‘how do you define your Whiteness, what is Whiteness, what does White mean to you?’ I don’t think they necessarily will have a concrete answer to that because it would just be, ‘yah, this is me, I’m going to school, blah, blah, blah...But never really put any thought going into it.

Tiffany reiterates this lack of racial awareness of White students by sharing an example from a class in which students were asked to write down how they identify. She notes her response as “I’m Black, I’m a woman, I’m this.” She noted that as the professor asked people to verbally share their identity, “never once did he or she or whoever else he called say I’m White.”

Diana weighs in on the discussion and adds,

If I were to answer the questions for a White person and I think like the biggest difference between the two answers to that, like if I and a White person responded, I just think they would just say college persistence is like “doing what you’re supposed to, as far as like studying and going to class and stuff like that.” But I think for like me or for many Black students I think the difference would be it’s like not just do what you’re supposed to do to get the grade but it’s not being freaked out by the fact that most of these people don’t look like you or it’s resiliency in the way that you like handle racial slurs or emotions or micro-aggressions.

White privilege results in a social climate that perpetuates lack of understanding and racial tension. Jayakumar et al., (2009) write that White privilege within higher education institutions is the translation of Whiteness as the normative standard into “systematic advantages afforded to the dominant racial group” (p. 555). Though White privilege may be unintentionally oppressive, it perpetuates inequitable power dynamics and social conditions (McIntosh, 1998; Rothman, 2014). As exemplified by Diana, Tiffany, Chris’ and Lucy’s experiences, Whiteness is an identity, a culture, and an often colonizing way of life that is largely unseen by White individuals, though often by people of color.

**Social Climate.** Social climate refers to the perceptions of a social environment that tend to be shared by a group of people. The students said they view the social climate on campus as lacking in supporting the needs of Black students, largely stemming from the practices and policies initiated by institutional leaders. While Chris finds many positive things to say about the campus explaining “I have had so many different

opportunities to do things and work with so many different people,” he follows this statement by sharing,

I think the resource part of [PWI] is probably one of the best but the social climate is unwelcoming everywhere that you go.

The students provide examples of how an adverse social climate can stem from campus leaders 1) wanting to maintain a problem-free institutional image, 2) lack of dismantling systematic oppression and ignoring the needs of Black students and racial disharmony.

*Institutional image.* Cairo and Lucy speak significantly about the campus and public outcry of the involvement of a White professor in advocating on behalf of the Black student protesters during the 2015 campus racial incident. This professor was ultimately fired by the PWI governing board, for what they perceived to be inappropriate conduct on the part of a faculty members (professor asked students for “muscle” to help keep news coverage out of the protest area and used curse words when communicating with police officers). Cairo says,

Yah. I think that was, for that situation some of that was petty there the word “muscle” because you’re worried about this lady saying muscle and you have a body of students being referred to as niggers – all these derogatory names but you’re going to fire this woman for supporting a group of people who have been targeted or have been oppressed from the very day they step on this campus.

Umm so I think that is very petty to fire because that is actually, you know, one person who is doing something to help the situation.

Lucy furthers the discussion by voicing concern about what the action means for the support of Black students in the future,

So, does that mean we're not going to have faculty that stand up for us, because they're going to be afraid of losing their jobs, um and the first thing that comes to mind is um, Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham jail about the White moderate and they are the most dangerous group because they see what's happening and he talks about the whole you know negative peace versus positive peace and he goes on to say.....a good Samaritan asks not what happened to my job, my prestige, my wealth, if I step up and do something but they say what will happen to that person if I don't. And it was like, that was [the professor]. She said what will happen if I don't step up and I don't speak out on their behalf. As a White faculty because I have privilege I have power in this situation so what will happen to them if I don't speak on their behalf. It's disheartening like you said that they will target her, they will go after her for doing something helpful, that was desired, who was White to step up and speak on our behalf.

The image of the university was on national display during this period of history and institutional leaders chose to reprimand a White faculty member for ultimately supporting Black students. Cairo and Lucy feel that "they [institutional leaders] just needed something, you know, to throw to the wolves. And they chose her and it was so unfair." In other words, creating the image of the university clamping down on a faculty member during a tense racial protest trumped the needs of Black students and a White ally. Habley et al. (2012) and Lang (1992) unpack this trend of maintaining an institutional image steeped in a White racial frame in the following narrative,

If the boards of trustees and chief academic officers at these institutions were to commit themselves to equal opportunity and direct their underlings to carry out

their directives, minority access and retention would improve virtually overnight (Lang, 1992, p. 519).

When higher education institutions lack commitment to support students of color, the outcome is tokenism or negligible response to their needs.

Similarly, Tiffany says she feels that institutions generally focus on maintaining a certain image to draw students, faculty and donors at the sake of solving racial problems.

She says,

When we went to public school you know bullying and everything, that's take care of. Why? You're not paying to go there. So when they kick you out they're doing it based on "we're letting you come to this school" as opposed to when you get to college you ...have to wonder "hey" the university functions off money so what becomes greater? Who can we silence? If you do kick them out are they going to ask for their money back, who do they know, what does alumni look like, whose son is this? So, it's a business...When you're in high school it's nothing. Kids are tossed around high school all the time. Kids are expelled, they'll go to different schools....However, if you're kicking out people left and right for racism, "I'll not be sending my child to your school." It has to become more hushed and I think that's why, it's they have to find a discrete way of handling it which is why everything did get so big last semester (reference to 2015 campus racial incident). It's like the national news was here and it was like, "oh, oh, we probably should have handled that."

Chris says he agrees that the campus doesn't want to acknowledge a problem with racism,

Because you're not going to want to invest your education so the name is something quick that a lot of people it just brings back all of the information that somebody can think of at that moment and it's not good information that they're keeping in their mind, they're not going to want to invest no time in it.

In essence, the students say that to maintain power, prestige and financial security the university promotes an image of a racially neutral environment and downplays the needs of diverse students and problems with racism by not addressing them. Clearly this approach backfired during the 2015 campus racial incident, forcing the university to take a closer look at systemic changes to address racism. Institutions that engage in honest dialogue about racial issues, involve people of color, and address core causes of racial problems are more likely to meet the needs of students of color and resolve retention challenges (Fischer & Massey, 2007).

***Systematic oppression.*** Systematic oppression is the systematic ill-treatment of people within an identity group, reinforced by society and institutions and based on the person's membership in the social group (Feagin, 2013). Tiffany and Cairo reference the concept of systematic oppression in their description of the social climate on campus and the community. Tiffany says,

It's not like this in Colorado. This is the first time I've seen racism and oppression that is systematic. It's so not hidden, it's there. You have some professors that are working to eradicate it you have some professors who don't – if we're outside of this class you probably don't like colored people do you. Because you feel it.

Systematic oppression is a part of societal and institutional fabric and serves to

marginalize people of color (Feagin, 2013). Systematic oppression exists also within the realm of cyberspace. Tiffany also talks about the effects of racism in Ferguson, Missouri and how social media and messages can widely convey information but it can also serve to further oppress marginalized groups through hate speech. She says, “they’re saying these things, they’re doing these things, they’re oppressing us and they don’t care.” Cairo finds that,

People won’t allow the Black community to progress and uh, looking at a historical standpoint in just looking at all of that it’s like, “OK” there’s a reason why, like at this point it’s not a coincidence.

The hidden yet entrenched presence of systematic oppression is parallel to the student’s experience with society and campus ignoring or hiding from racism rather than addressing it. In reference to racial protests in Ferguson, Missouri Harley says,

Like it was a touchy subject. Like no one wanted to talk about it. No one wanted to acknowledge it and I think like for me it was like “ok, well we’re just not going to talk about it.” And I kind of got used to that mindset so I thought “well, that’s America,” sweep it under the rug we’re not going to about it....” Like we need to talk about it, we need to get out there and not shop on Black Friday, you know.

Hit them where it hurts which is like their pocket. So I think like for me incidents like that are always a reminder of how much further we need to go as a country.

Similarly, Tiffany refers to race critical incidences in Ferguson and on campus and finds that people have little interest in authentic discussions about racism,

It’s been a fight for years and I just feel like nobody really wants to talk about these things. Every time it comes up in a conversation or in a classroom we want

to back away from the topic and we're going to continue to have these [racial] problems.

Although not always named as such, Tiffany and Harley talk about the nature of systematic oppression and its effect on them personally and larger society. Seemingly hidden yet pervasive oppression creates a vacant space where racism is experienced but not addressed or resolved.

### **Performance: Playing the Part to Achieve Legitimacy (Theme 3)**

The students talk about the multiple roles they feel they need to play in order to be perceived as a legitimate student and worthy of attending [PWI]. Many say they feel they are deemed as less intelligent, capable and responsible by White peers, faculty and staff because of their race. Chris says,

Being a Black student you have to stay on top of things, you can't slide, you just can't. You can't just have experiences, you have to have internship experiences, you have to have work experiences. You're trying to balance a million different lives. It takes a toll on the mind and body. I try to put my best foot forward and sit in the classroom where I feel like most people expect me to fail or expect me not to show up or expect me not to say anything. You always over do things trying to make yourself live up to their expectations.

Chris follows up on this comment saying, "We [Black students] have to know when to turn it up and turn it down. People will judge and make their decision about you based on how you look...so just try to battle that every day."

The students speak to the Critical Race Theory (CRT) concept of double consciousness, theorized originally by W. E. B. Du Bois as a sense of always seeing

one's identity through the eyes of others and determining self-worth through a society that views Blacks with disdain and sympathy (Lemert, 2013). Double consciousness illustrates the dual identity and role of Black individuals and the impact of this socially imposed dynamic (Kumasi, 2011), thus the performance of Black students to measure up in the eyes of dominant White society.

Lucy says part of being a Black student encountering racism involves knowing the script of a "Black woman" and performing as a student regardless of the struggles. In evoking gender, Lucy references the CRT concept of intersectionality. In other words, although race is a primary element of consideration it does not operate in isolation of other types of oppression, such as gender, class, and sexuality (Kumasi, 2011). While Lucy mentions gender she does not expand upon it leaving it an unpacked part of her narrative.

In light of the 2015 campus racial incident, Lucy's father advised her to focus on school and perform regardless of general racial threats. She says her father told her that, "You're going to have racial incidents happen to you for the rest of your life, you're Black. At some point you've got to stop letting it affect you like that and do what you need to do. He was like, 'now it's a different situation if someone personally threatens you in some way but as of right now it's what you're around so suck it up and go to class.'" And that's what I do because that's what I'm paying for. This is your life as a Black woman, that's how it is, I'm sorry but.....

Tiffany talks about Black student awareness of trying to "act the part" given the mixed messages they receive about their worthiness and ability as a student. In essence, it's harder for Black students to feel accepted in the learning, social and leadership

aspects of college because of the perception that they shouldn't be there in the first place. She says,

One thing I will hear Black parents, families, so on and so forth tell students in college or even we tell ourselves, we constantly remind ourselves, "you know, you're not supposed to be here."

This statement alludes to a feeling of being an imposter or rather acting the part of student rather than simply being a student.

Mike says the performance means sometimes being overlooked for a part [as a peer, student, employee] because people often judge him based on what they see [Black man] instead of who he is as a person. Mike says he chose a penny as his artifact (See Figure 5) to describe his experience with racism and persistence,

I feel like a penny represents um, my experience with racism here on campus because throughout my lifestyle, like a penny is only worth one cent and a lot of people don't really like to keep pennies so some throw it away in the garbage or throw it on the floor, so some people don't value the type of person I am but they you got other people who really values, value pennies and pick them up off the ground and I feel like some people connect to me and once they connect to me I add some type of value to their life and so that's pretty much why I picked the penny.

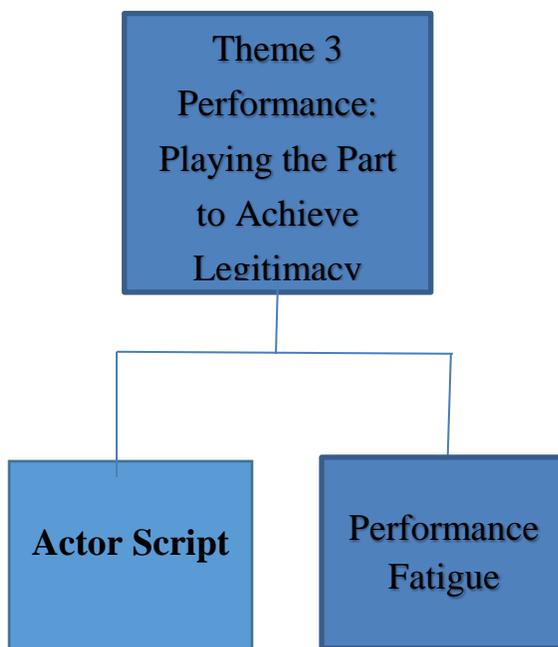
Mike says he must prove his value to others because otherwise they disregard his worth, much like some people disregard pennies.

*Figure 5: Mike's Artifact Pertaining to Racism and Persistence*



The performance theme is further explored in students' narratives about scripts they follow and fatigue they experience as a result of the performance. Figure 6 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 3, Performance: Playing the Part to Achieve Legitimacy.

*Figure 6. Theme 3 Findings Organization Chart*



**Scripts.** Part of the performance is to continually prove themselves as worthy to others in the college setting, including fellow students and professors. For example,

Tiffany shares that because she's Black, a professor made assumptions about her and associated her with the racial problems in Ferguson, Missouri. She says,

So when a professor says "oh Tiffany you're from St. Louis how do you feel about Ferguson" and I'm awkwardly there saying I'm from Denver, Colorado. You have to constantly prove that you're supposed to be here. That's the best way to describe it. You're just as good. Even though we're all getting the same education we each have different obstacles to overcome. Trying to prove that you're supposed to be here and the pressure is always there. I would say everybody gets bad grades sometimes but you feel like you're the example and your professors are expecting you to fail and expecting you to get a bad grade. It's just like, I don't know, I'm playing this huge game of chess or checkers. Everyday I'm trying to make the right move and some days I'm good and some days I'm stuck and [PWI] gets to win.

Chris also discusses proving himself as a college student compared to White students and says,

Not to discredit them and say they don't work hard but they do, it's not, they don't have to wake up every day and remind themselves, "hey, I need to wake up and make sure I do this, this, this, and that to make sure that I can get to this place and that place to prove to this person and that person and prove to myself and then make a name for myself here and there.....

Some students spend time and resources trying to reconcile the multiple cultures that compose their identity, including race and gender. The "push/pull social psychological syndrome" of double consciousness that Black individuals experience in trying to both

oblige and resist dominant White society expectations (Kumasi, 2011, p. 209) results in the expenditure of significant mental and physical energy as evidenced by Chris and Tiffany.

The dual identity may lead to negative outcomes for Black students as they traverse this continuum of identities imparted by a socially imposed dynamic. For example, a continual effort to prove their ability as a student can cause self-doubt. Lucy shares that she is conscious about her image as a Black student and makes decisions in the classroom based on an inner dialogue of creating a perception that she wants others to hold about her,

In my classes I struggled with self-doubt. Just trying to prove, trying to prove I'm good enough to be here. Being conscious about the type of student I am. I'm not one of those students who sits in the back. If I sit in the back it's not because I'm not paying attention it's that I'm afraid people will think I'm just a Black kid that sits in the back. I am intentional about raising my hand and answering questions.

Cairo expressed times of self-doubt about his ability to attend college due to life situations, which he overcame and reflects upon as follows,

So there was a point in time where I didn't think I would be here in college. Um, I thought I was going to be dead or in jail, literally, it's almost a cliché now but just opportunities that I had over my lifetime like being able to move to California, like even that wasn't that much better of a situation for me but I managed to get out of the space where I was at and on my own to where like I had to make progressive moves.

Part of the script of the Black student performance in college is being asked to

comment on the ‘Black’ experience of all Blacks. By essentializing the Black experience, non-White individuals assume there is a universal Black experience identifiable with characteristics viewed as being specifically Black. Several students expressed discomfort in being put in the role of a representative of the Black race. Diana talks of this role and emphasizes her experience with this phenomenon by choosing a button (See Figure 5) as her artifact that signifies racism and persistence. She says,

So it’s been interesting, most of my talk, contrary to Harley’s have been with people who are not minorities...and um it’s been weird because sometimes I feel like, you know, my thing that I brought is like a button, you know when say, you know, vote for so and so. You know I feel like I’m a representative. That’s how I’m treated sometimes like I’m supposed to be a representative. It’s like my opinion but people expect me to say certain things.

Diana found the button at the Memorial Union facility on campus that promotes the Women’s Health Center (See Figure 7). The design reminded her of “Black power and feminism at the same time” even though it wasn’t the intent. She said it made her think,

Part of it is like the whole button thing representative of Black people, not really, but feeling like I have so many White friends I feel like I was put in that position like, “what do you think, like what is the Black position about that perspective and I’m like, like even when all those news people where here [2015 campus racial incident] like I got to be interviewed like three times by three different syndicated channels or organizations and I asked some of my friends like how about you guys talk about it and they’re like, “no.”

*Figure 7: Diana’s Artifact Pertaining to Racism and Persistence*



**Performance Fatigue.** Part of the performance and playing the part to achieve legitimacy leads to fatigue as discussed at length by the students. Students say there is no intermission for rest and regrouping after being on stage as a Black student. The word students used to describe this feeling is “tired.” Eleven statements of feeling tired as a result of performing as a Black student were expressed:

- I think just being a student in college is an exhausting experience but being a Black student is like going to college twice. That’s the best way to describe it – Tiffany.
- It’s tiring. You would think if we experience this all of the time (reference to experiencing racism in the community and campus) – Tiffany.
- I got really sick second semester so I would go to class, come home, sleep, go to class. Between every class I would sleep. Just because I was so tired....Transition to sophomore year was like....I really had to deal with “am I supposed to be here?” (reference to adjusting to college) – Lucy.

- I can probably say I've been tired the whole time [in college]. It's like nothing stops, you just keep going. Being a Black student you have to stay on top of things, you can't slide, you just can't (reference to college life) - Chris.
- So sitting in the classroom alone is tiring. Trying to focus on everything the teacher is saying, you don't want to miss anything. And while others in class are sitting there on Facebook or they have something else, or they're not paying attention...I can't. That's tiring – Chris.
- It's tiring from the time we wake up in the morning till the time we go to sleep maybe 1:00 the next morning. It's always something to do and it's always something you have to rely on yourself – you have to rely on your professionalism and social skills, personality and figure out who you are as a person so nobody can knock you down. A lot of people, their main goal is to take you out of the University or take away from your college experience....College is twice as hard being a Black student – Chris.
- I've had x amount of jobs throughout my college just to pay for school. That created so much stress like one job I wasn't getting off until like 7:00 in the morning out there starting at like 10:00 p.m. so it was like rough balancing my schedule. My jobs and homework – Mike.

Tiredness as the result of racism and the daily performances of being a Black student can also lead to stress and physical and mental health challenges (Mitchell et al., 2015). Harley talks of tiredness and problems with mental health,

After high school and when I came to [PWI] my freshman year it was just rough. I slept all the time, it was weird, a lot was going on....I was having anxiety, panic

attacks, I was doing everything I was supposed to do but it was nothing like high school. I found I was mildly depressed and had anxiety. And this kind of stuff is soooo not talked about in the Black community. This is a predominantly White community which is hard. My freshman year was hard, I got through all of my classes.

The students' examples of feeling tired, physically ill and struggles with mental health correspond to the concept of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBT), a response to stressful experiences involving racism and racial hostilities under challenging, threatening or dangerous situations (Smith et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2015), such as the 2015 campus racial incident. A critical incident like this compounds other racism experiences that can accumulate to a breaking point for some individuals who become overwhelmed with racial dangers and threatening experiences (Mitchell et al., 2015). Although their narratives convey fatigue in response to the 2015 campus racial incident and other forms of racism, the students in this study persist nonetheless. Themes identified later in this study help explain how these students persist in a racially hostile environment when other Black students do not.

Chris speaks about the general well-being of Black freshmen students during the 2015 campus racial incident and how hard it was for them to adjust to college *and* deal with overt racism having been on campus only two months. He says, "they were probably, their body, their mind and their nerves were probably in shock. It was just so much stuff." The 2015 campus racial incident was also emotionally challenging for many students as evidenced by Cairo,

Umm, so for me um a lot of my friends...well quite a bit of my friends had been

involved and everything in like Tent City (protest site) and stuff like that, uh a lot of them were like mentally going through a lot, like some of them seek counseling and stuff because of everything that was going on like some of them had actual breakdowns and it was a lot and for some, they had never experienced anything like that. It was like a shock to them.

Lucy also speaks about the emotional well-being of herself and friends during the 2015 campus racial incident and says,

Well, all of my friends, most of my friends they all kinda started off protesting and stuff like that. But then it got too much for them, umm and so they all just kinda drew back and I think all of us were just kind of overwhelmed with everything and we stayed informed we stayed up to date with everything that was happening, but we couldn't be there physically. Just because it was too much for us. So it was just a hard time. Mentally and emotionally and a lot of my friends just weren't able to do things that they wanted to do to help support because they couldn't.

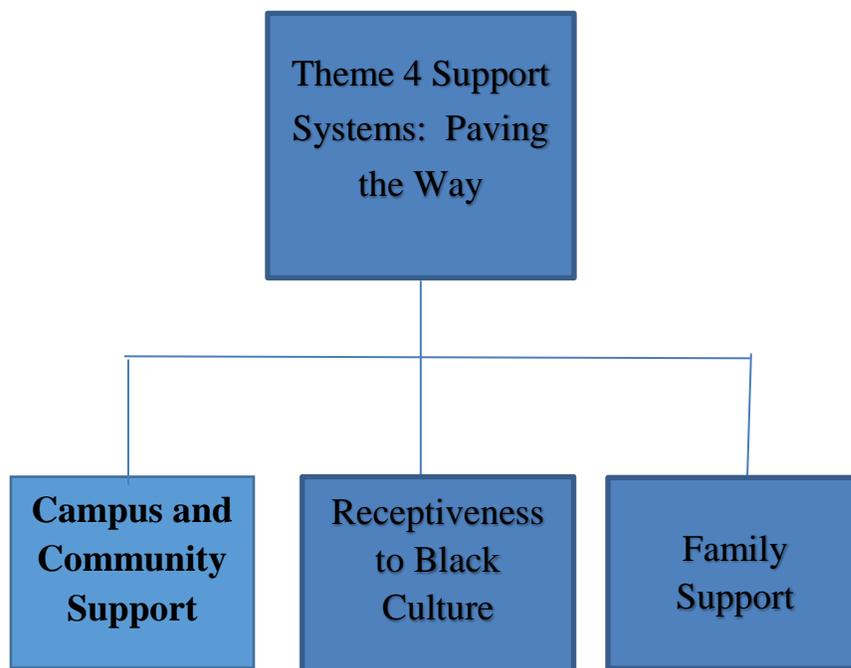
In the struggle to maintain a focus on school and work in a racist environment, many students experience an exhaustion that leads to poor health, isolation, and marginalization from the very institutions that espouse appreciation for diversity (Jackson, 2015; Vincent et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2015). Further, PWIs have been found to be prime candidates for generating racial battle fatigue among Black males in particular (Smith et al., 2011). Consequently, students of color exhibit lower levels of college persistence due to the effects of RBF (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011; Van Dyke & Teeter, 2014).

### Support Systems: Paving the Way (Theme 4)

Although racism makes it challenging to focus on the already difficult task of being a college student, the students cite the support systems that provide information, buffers, and encouragement to help them succeed. Campus and peer support, receptiveness of others to Black culture, and family support are key indicators in helping students in this study persistent.

Figure 8 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 4, Support Systems: Paving the Way

*Figure 8. Theme 4 Findings Organization Chart*



**Campus and Community Support.** Campus organizations and resources, such as the Black Culture Center, provide a support network that connects Black students with mentors and advisors on campus, reinforces leadership and career development and

contributes to academic success and persistence (Strayhorn, 2010). Although BCCs have existed at PWIs for over forty years (and on the PWI campus since 1972), only a small number of studies have examined their roles and functions (Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, n.d.; Sanders, 2016). Patton (2010) finds that due to declining campus budgets and demands for accountability, cultural centers such as BCCs are asked to validate their work by demonstrating how they affect student outcomes.

Detractors question the contributions of BCCs, contending that they promote segregation and inhibit Black students from integrating with the larger campus environment (Sanders, 2016). Citing the mission of BCCs as too narrow in supporting Black students only and serving a social mission only (Patton, 2010), these viewpoints which parallel a White racial frame that foregrounds Whiteness (privilege) and backgrounds other races (Feagin, 2013), pose a threat to the existence of BCCs. The students in this study, however, challenge the detractor perspective by attributing their ability to persist to support systems like the BCC. Chris says the BCC,

Does a lot and as long as you support other people and surround yourself with positive influences, it does a lot for the community and especially the Black community because it is not really looked out for by a lot of other people so having those inside connections really and have those inside support systems it really, it makes the experience of the Black student a worthwhile experience whereas on the outside you see all the negatives and you get the backlash. That was just something that was important to me.

The artifact Chris choose to share is reflective of the value he places on supports such as the BCC and BCC programs like the [PWI] Black Men's Initiative (MBMI). The MBMI

shirt (See figure 9) symbolizes Chris' engagement with this support system,

I have been a part of this organization since I entered the [PWI] as an incoming freshman and it symbolizes a lot to me because coming in to the [PWI] I went to a predominantly Black high school and lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood so I didn't really have very many interactions with other races, with White people and coming to a PWI I thought that I didn't really know what to expect and coming into this program it pretty much told me what it's like to be a Black man on this campus but also teach me that there are other Black leaders and Black men and other surround you, who uplift you, who and that's not something that they necessarily teach you that Black people can succeed in this program and it was something that taught me the resources and taught me to teach other people that you can be successful and that your Blackness doesn't define your failure, it only uplifts you and I brought this shirt because this is the shirt we give the incoming class this year and just seeing how much the program has grown and much of an impact incoming freshman males...have made on this campus.

*Figure 9: Chris' Artifact Pertaining to Racism and Persistence*



Lucy shares a similar story about the importance of support systems, particularly those that are facilitated by the BCC. She describes the [PWI] Black Women's Initiative (MBWI), a BCC program, as an entity she joined her freshman year and appreciates the "experience of just being around other Black women who are educated, who are striving to improve themselves every day and finding and being able to see that." She goes on to say that,

We're really trying to push that and trying to create a space for Black women on campus who maybe don't necessarily feel like they fit in with the classic Black [PWI]. I don't feel like I fit in all the time in this area, I'm not Greek, just in being Greek is what they'll see. Like I don't, like this [Black Culture Center] is my home for me, these are my sisters. So just being able to create that has been important and also like I'm an introvert...and an extrovert. I'm an introvert until I get to know someone and so in MBWI it really pushed me to talk to people, push me to get to know people and that's really like when the BCC became my home because I didn't even know about it, nobody took me by on the college tour, I just kind of stumbled into it and really like MBWI really helps like BCC became another home for me. It helps me connect to other really great Black students on campus and really just using them as a network and resources. And, I learn something new every day, whether that's about leadership, communication, whatever it is I learn something new by being a part of MBWI.

Again, similar to Chris, Lucy selected her MBWI shirt as her item to represent racism and persistence.

The BCC is a major support system for Tiffany, too. She recalls working at the BCC but not yet fully recognizing the breadth and scope of this support network until being asked to help plan the Welcome Black BBQ. Her response to the BCC staff was,

You just said a Welcome Black BBQ not a Welcome Back BBQ? I was like, “Black people, what? In one space?” So I’m like, they’re not just secluded to Black people but it’s for us. But over there I was literally taken aback. Like everyone is doing dances in unison and all the Greeks [Black] are strolling and doing their own thing in the lines and there’s food and there’s Black BBQ food and I’m seein pulled pork and ribs and all that stuff and I’m like....

Chris interjects at this point in the conversation and says, “love it” [the food] as Tiffany continues her story and concludes, “I called my sister up and I told them like, ‘I’m home...I don’t know what’s going on.’” Clearly, the BCC is an important part of the college experience for many of the students in this study. The BCC and the staff who work there provide a support system that provides Black students with the opportunity to learn about their cultures, socialize, receive advice and network. As a support system, the BCC is “home” to many of the students. When I asked the students what it would be like for them on campus if the BCC and staff didn’t exist, Tiffany said, “I would not be here, that’s the quick answer.” Support groups and cultural centers like the BCC provide a way for students of color to interact, learn and be supported (Strayhorn, 2010).

Researchers find that by connecting with other Black students on campus, individuals have a reference group with whom to identify and a culturally relevant space to connect and experience support (Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

Some students talk about the support of teachers and advisors in helping them

adjust to college. Harley says,

My first two years of college like my advisor was great. Like he was really supportive and he, he just he cared like more about my well-being and I talked about everything that was going on my freshman year.

Lucy talks about it being “so hard to find those professors that are like comfortable being with Black students” but references a specific professor and that “she truly cares about her job and she cares about all of the people that she teaches and it’s not just like, I don’t know, there’s something different about her – that specific teacher.” Harley and Lucy discuss the importance of faculty members who can relate to Black students in creating an educationally safe environment. To provide better academic support for Black students, scholars find that institutions need to recruit and retain more Black faculty, sensitize administrators to the time and energy needed by faculty to mentor and support Black students, and reward and recognize faculty who support students (Braxton et al., 2013; Schexnider, 1992).

Cairo identified that during the 2015 campus racial incident that [PWI] provided counseling and support services to students that wanted it. These supports were offered defensively after severe racial discord but they did provide a mechanism for students to get help at a critical time. Cairo says,

Yah, yah. So there were resources so within the group of people that were like in resource life you would like talk to each other, help and stuff like that but then I believe the counseling center, like they have, like if you were part of that they like would get you in there immediately. So there were a few things that were happening to try to help people uh..

Caring friends on campus are a significant source of support for many students. And although the following passages pertain to students in the focus group *giving* not necessarily *receiving* support during that racially difficult time, the narratives speak to the high value the students place on support and the role it plays in college persistence. For example, during the 2015 campus racial incident Chris talks about friends rallying together to support other Black students, particularly freshmen,

One of my friends, he, one of my mentees he's a freshman and when everything was happening he was kind of afraid and he didn't know what was happening, didn't know where to go. So he called his parents and his parents actually came up here the same night and they were kind of actually packing his bag. Like I tried to tell them, like "it's ok, he's good, we'll take care of him, we'll watch out for him and make sure nothing happens."

This freshman student ended up staying in college.

Tiffany also talks about the importance of support, and like Chris, she feels a strong sense of obligation to support freshmen students who were only on campus two months before the 2015 campus racial incidence. Normal college adjustments were severely compounded by racial hate speech and messages of violence. Tiffany says,

Like sleep schedules, jobs what does this look like, what does it look like going to the doctor in a different place to have to deal with that so I definitely feel some form of leadership and some form of like a motherly role because they were, it was like the little baby cubs in the wild for the first time so there's a hunger, you know, it's racism and oppression is the hunter. I am the mama bear and there are all these little cubs just like, "ahhhh!"

Chris follows up by reiterating the value of support in persistence efforts,

The main influences that are like around and then come into your life it's a lot of different things and a lot of different factors that people don't consider and it's a lot of small influences that may trigger that persistency in you so just your family at home and those people that just call here and say "hey, what's going on just checking to make sure that you're still pursuing through and even being on a college campus the people you come in contact with it's just take that small amount of time out to help you, it just, it makes you want to stay because it makes you feel like you have a sense of importance and that you can continue even if you have people who reach out and help you and want you to succeed and put those resources you don't have to set you up for your future.

Diana agrees about support systems and says, "I think a lot [persistence] has to do with my,

Support system even here on campus. And I think a lot of my persistence has had to do with almost learning on other people sometimes and being vulnerable about those things and like a lot of it is like "OK, you've got to study Diana" and you can't watch Hulu right now, do this, read this, whatever but also another part of it for me was in those moments where I felt like my resources, like my personal resources were diminished, like umm, being vulnerable enough to be like "OK" and having the persistence to learn on them in those moments.

Finally, Mike mentions the role of religion as an important support mechanism. He says, "I almost quit [college] twice. The first time I felt like my church pushed me through it." Another time he says, "I prayed a lot. I had people praying with me." All

seven students talked about support systems and the importance of these resources (BCC, faculty, friends, religion) in college persistence. Similarly, researchers find that a combination of academic and non-academic (support systems) solutions is important to strengthen student success and ultimately increase persistence (Braxton et al., 2013; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Seifert et al., 2006). Both approaches are more likely to address the academic and social/emotional issues that impact college success such as learning study skills and test-taking tips, finding supportive friends, staff and faculty members, and accessing health care and daily living advice when needed (Habley et al., 2012).

**Receptiveness to Black Culture.** While the element of receptiveness to Black culture is voiced in just a few segments of the narratives, Tiffany and Harley say they place significant value in the non-Black MU community wanting to learn more about Black culture, Black experiences and an environment of racism. Tiffany tells the story of the year that she and Chris were summer orientation leaders and educated other leaders about the Black Culture Center, the needs of Black students and more. She says,

At that time, we were extremely fortunate to work with a group of people who were very receptive and even though they might not have asked those questions right directly in front of everybody there were numerous times we got pulled to the side [by Summer Welcome leaders], “hey, so what if one of my students come up and asks me where to get their hair done what do I say?” So I was like, “ok they tried to be in the least way inoffensive and genuinely curious and Chris and I made it clear you can come to us at any point and we said at any time a Black issue came up that they just brought it to us. And I just think we were fortunate to actually work with people who were willing to learn.

Tiffany's experience with the summer orientation leaders seemed very powerful to her as evidenced by the animated way she gestured and sat up straight in her chair when she was talking about it. She continues her story saying,

We would hear them [summer orientation leaders] and they would actually talk about it and if it came to a point when they didn't know, that's when they came to us to ask us, it wasn't like, "why don't we go get someone who can help you. Oh look it's a Black person!" That experience I would say I was extremely fortunate and that was a time, like people were knocking on my door at 12:00 a.m. and saying we have a big test the next day and students [summer orientation leaders] would say things like, "OK, so I was thinking about this, and certain things that like you do, you use certain things in your hair, where can they buy this?" And like even beyond hair stuff, where do you party? And they genuinely care, like sitting down taking notes so that was the thing.

Harley also discussed her appreciation of non-Black students asking questions about racism and Black culture. She cites the 2015 campus racial incident as a noteworthy experience of White friends wanting to learn about and discuss the issue with her,

I had a friend that, just like when everything was happening last semester that really just like asked A LOT of questions. I think it like kinda sort of was like defensively but like he asked me basically "why are you sharing all this stuff, like sharing it on social media, I don't understand." And slowly I started opening up and he's like "oh, ok, why do people feel this way, you know and I think a lot of the conversation centered around like White people are talking about it because

they like feel White guilt and like all of this stuff but like this is something that needs to be talked about. And um, so he asked a lot of questions like how can we talk about it and how can White people use their privilege to be an ally and so it was a really, really good conversation but that was one conversation (laughs).

Finding other students who are receptive to Black culture and experiences is clearly very important to Tiffany and Harley, as well as the other students in the focus group as indicated by their nodding in agreement about the stories they heard them tell.

Receptiveness can signify racial understanding, learning and acceptance, thus creating a more inclusive racial climate (Griffin et al., 2016). Museus (2013) contends that students who experience a more culturally inclusive campus climate are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging, demonstrate greater academic confidence and achievement, and ultimately be more apt to persist to graduation. Just two accounts of receptiveness to Black Culture, however, surfaced during the focus group meetings.

**Family Support.** By far, the students identified family support as one of the most important factors in persisting. Even though the students said that most of their family members had not gone to college (all but two of the seven students in the focus group are first generation) they actively encourage their children to persist, they “want more” for them and they provide emotional support. Scholars cite the impact of family of origin on student persistence (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Tinto, 2007; Habley et al., 2012), finding that Black students are often first-generation college students whose parents or caregivers lack first-hand knowledge of the college experience (Habley et al., 2012). The result, according to researchers, is that these students are two times as likely as those with a college educated parent to leave before their second year (Choy, 2001;

Kuh et al., 2008). These findings are in opposition to the experiences of the students in this study. Tiffany says she appreciates her family and the support they provide,

There's so much going on especially in the Black community so many things, like I'm fortunate to have a family who for the most part has everything together at home. Because I don't necessarily need to think about a lot of stuff like that but I couldn't imagine like going through the financial stuff that I go through here and them not being ok back at home....Yah things aren't ideal at home but they're good..

Lucy says she has a highly supportive family as well and furthers the discussion of the role of family in encouraging her and taking pride in her being the first person in their family to graduate from college. She says,

I just have an amazing, encouraging support system at home and there were a lot of people who sacrificed a lot of things so that I could go to college and ummm....I know just as a child like I saw my situation. I saw my parent's situation and I saw some of my families' situation and I refused to live that life, too. And I made up in my mind at a very young age that I was going to go to college, that I was going to break the cycle that I wasn't going to be like them.

Umm and so for me this is just something that I have to do for me, for my family for my children like it's kinda not an option [to not succeed in college].

Mike says his parents also want him to succeed in college and give him words of encouragement,

My dad always told me to be a better person than he was. He always told me the system wants me to fail so I had to work that much hard, no matter how hard it

was. And my mom helped support me as well and she only had so much money as well so I felt that was not an option [to give up].

Cairo firmly believes that family support is a fundamental part of college persistence for Black students and explains his view based on his own experiences and teaching Black high school students,

Like I work with high school students so like I have scholars that are coming from the same socioeconomic background, coming from like the same project areas or whatever but you have like one that like in the situation you were talking about, like one doing his thing then you have other one who he has like all the potential but he's not, for some reason, it's not clicking. Yah, umm, and a lot of that it comes from, it comes from that first, that essential piece of that, the household, you know. So, um, what is happening at the household? Although both of you guys is coming from the same area, and the scholar that's doing well in his household although they might have the same, the best life, they understand what it takes to get to the better things in life, that's what's being instilled in him. OK. And that's probably been instilled from generation to generation and so on and so forth. While in the other house you may have that scholar that's not doing so well, he doesn't, his parents for whatever reason don't, might not necessarily understand that or that scholar in particular like he may have those parents that understand.....

Tiffany aligns with Cairo in stating the importance of family support in college persistence. Tiffany and Cairo say that it's families providing that push or support to succeed in college, even though the family may not have direct experience themselves or

know how to help their child in certain circumstances (i.e., choosing a dorm, registering for classes, selecting a meal plan, etc.). Tiffany says,

Like I definitely agree with Cairo that it starts at home and like if you're never told. Like he was told he was supposed to go to college and if you're just told you have to stay home so you can help the family or if you're consistently told like they didn't want you to go to college anyway and stuffs going on at home, that's what your mind is going to focus on, that's all you're going to know. So I think it's like, very, developing into who you surround yourself with but also like what home was like, like what Lucy said. She has an extremely supportive system at home. If you don't have that and you're doing this all on your own like, college in itself is like a lot it is something you can't, especially a first generation student, deal with like financial aid and everything!

Chris talks about the pride his mother has in his college success and that this pride furthers his desire to persist.

My mom is like whenever I tell something I'm doing or I'm involved in, some award that I've won, she always just tells me how proud she is. I'm a very humble person so I don't really think about a lot of the different stuff that I do but every time I say something it's kinda small to me it seems so big to the rest of my family and I feel like that's enough motivation in itself.

Of all the support systems the students identified (campus, friends, religion), they say by far the role of family support is the most powerful in terms of persistence. Again, it's not that the students had family members that could necessarily help them navigate specific college processes and systems, but that family promotes college and provides

emotional support and encouragement to maintain success. This phenomenon is reflective of the Funds of Knowledge concept that illustrates ways in which families are involved in their children's education through the construction of beliefs, knowledge and actions about college-going processes (Kiyama, 2010). Resilience theory also helps explain the significance of support systems, such as family, in college persistence by underscoring the contextual aspects and personal and community assets that students possess to combat the challenges and tensions of racism (Masten, 2011).

The students say they rely on family support and campus connections to persist. These protective factors, both personal and environmental stemming from family, campus and communities, mitigate the likelihood of challenges or risks like racism and race critical incidents from negatively impacting college persistence. Benzies and Mychasiuk (2009) contend that resilience is enhanced when protective factors are strengthened and connected at the individual, family, and community levels.

### **Woke: Developing Black Identity (Theme 5)**

The students recall many instances of learning more about Black identity and becoming more aware of racism once they came to college. In other words, they have a heightened sense of awareness or becoming "woke" as Tiffany says. Woke is a term that signifies knowing "what's going on in the community" (Urban Dictionary, 2015). As it relates to racism Tiffany says, "like my roommates and people I hang out with are very, the terminology is 'woke' so they understand what is going on around them...they see beyond what's just given at face value." Tiffany describes a heightened sense of personal awareness of the different words and concepts pertaining to racism (double consciousness, intersectionality, White privilege) and how these levels and layers impact

Black students and society.

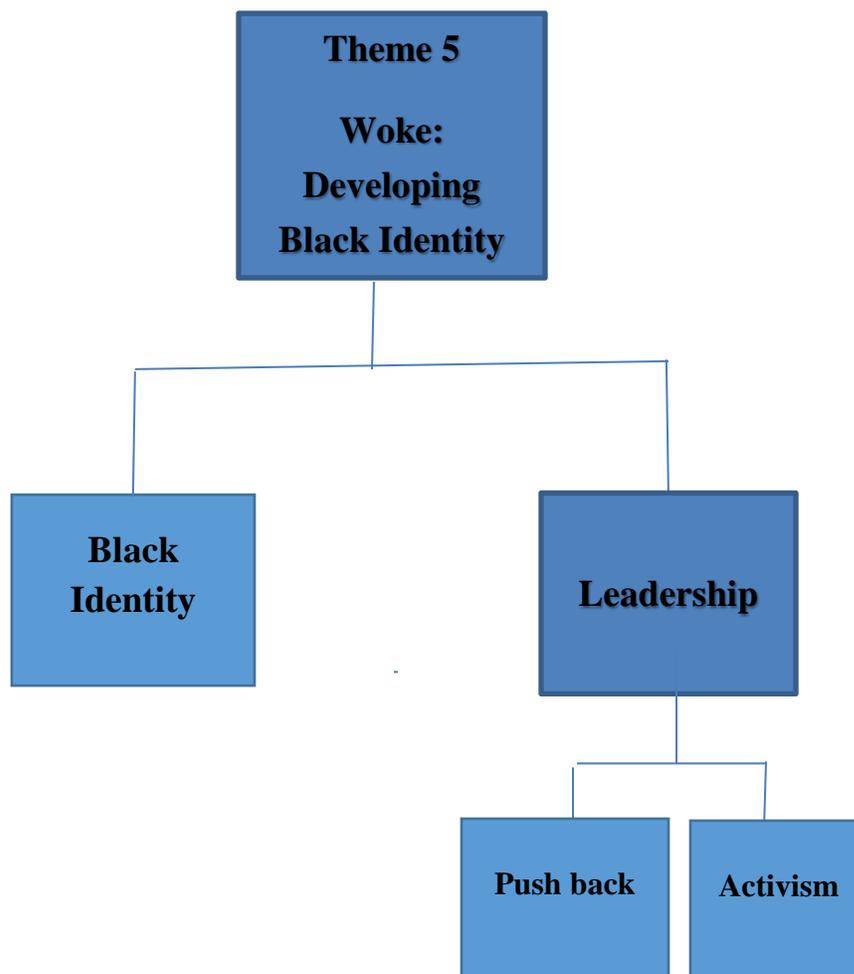
I equate Tiffany's use of the term "woke" with Critical Race theory, a framework focused on employing a critical examination of society and culture and the intersection of race, law, and power (Delgado, 2011). As Tiffany and the other students learn more about their Black identity they become more critical of societal and cultural structures that reproduce racism and lead to race critical incidents.

Cairo also internalizes the concept of "woke" as it relates to the struggles of racism as he states,

So I go to this rapper name J Cole and he says there's beauty in the struggles...essentially what that means to me no matter like what the issue is or how bad the issue is there's still like something good that can come of that situation ummm, for something like this [racism and persistence], we're educating ourselves not only as people but as a university as a community.

Adding to the concept of "woke" the students shared multiple narratives about the development of Black identity in college and learning about Black heritage and culture, understanding the levels and layers of racism, and learning the vocabulary that speaks to the many forms of racism. Students also say they engage in leadership roles on campus to promote Black empowerment and achievement, some in a more activist capacity and some as thought leaders. Figure 10 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 5, Woke: Developing Black Identity.

Figure 10. Theme 5 Findings Organization Chart



**Black Identity.** Black identity is a “multidimensional concept that encompasses a wider array of feelings than simply closeness to other Blacks” (Hughes & Hertel, 1990, p. 1109). As discussed by Wilder (2013), the legacy of slave trade and colonialism defines perceptions of race still today. Because of these legacies, African descent reduces Black individuals to a lower social position, which is reinforced by a White racial frame and institutionalized policies preventing their full involvement in society (Feagin, 2013). Many of the students discuss that college has helped them become more familiar with Black history and better aware of their Black identity, leading them to value

persistence even more as a way combat racism. Cairo explains,

I look at the timeline between slavery and the Civil Rights, you know what I'm saying? It took all that time just to get Civil Rights and the Civil Rights movement wasn't all that long ago. I think we're still, people who were like putting fire hoses on and their ancestors, those people are still living today, they're still living. So I'm not like not understanding that. I'm just of the mindset, unfortunately I expect it. And that's just kind of like how I see it. For a minute like, dude I want to lash out but at that point, I've already been chased by someone with a knife. I've already been handcuffed because I was a little Black kid runnin. I've been called a nigger. All of these things I just wanted to lash out because I was so angry. But at the end of the day, if I would have lashed out at tha dude I would have taken the bigger loss. You know? So just understanding those certain things like real victory comes through perseverance and getting yourself in a position so the ones after us don't have to necessarily experience everything we did.

Tiffany says,

I knew I was Black but I didn't really know I was Black until I came here to [PWI]. And even though sometimes I hate being here and I don't want to be at [PWI], I had to learn how to be Black, I didn't have any other choice, I had to be prideful. It was embraced here [BCC] and it was encouraged here but if I denied my Blackness I'd be denying a lot of myself. Because everyone outside of here [BCC] is trying to deny my Blackness.

In essence, Tiffany is saying the BCC has helped her embrace being Black and this

support helps her take pride in her heritage, making persistence an important goal.

Chris talks of learning more about racism concepts and terms in college and how it has influenced his experiences on campus,

Me pretty much paying more attention to micro-aggressions. You would think a lot of things would be more evident now but it's been evident but you just didn't know what to call it....

Chris goes on to say that the BCC has helped him develop into a Black man and to embrace his Black identity,

[BCC] Pretty much told me what it is like to be a Black man on this campus and be a Black man in general on this campus but also teach me that there are other Black leaders and Black men who surround you, who uplift you...

Diana also talks of her experience of wakening to a stronger sense of Black identity in college and how it affects her sense of identity,

It was sort of what Tiffany said like not knowing I was Black when I came to [PWI] like back home people were like Polynesian so it wasn't really that much of a race thing not like for Black people anyway and so like coming here, like the first time I wore my hair natural and learned about that whole world. I became like more Black pro but I didn't know a lot. Like I learned about like the history and things like that was just pretty cool. It was also the first time I encountered people who though actually in real life dislike or disliked people who look like me just because I looked the way that I look or I sound.

PWIs have struggled in their ability to foster environments where Black students can successfully develop their identity (Brown, 2016; Ritchey, 2014). As a result,

identity conflict is primarily the cause of lower numbers of Black student persistence on college campuses, according to Harper and Quaye (2007). Defined as how an individual comes to understand oneself, identity is a multifaceted concept that is influenced by aspects like race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Jackson, 2012). Particularly salient for understanding the students' experience with Blackness is the framework of Black Identity Development (BID), a concept originated by Cross in 1971 in the Civil Rights era and expanded as changes in thinking about social issues, such as racial frames, emerge (Jackson, 2012).

Expanding on the stages of BID originated by Cross and modifying his own work in this field, Jackson (2012) promotes an understanding of Racial Identity Development that includes the effects of racism and Black culture elements. Jackson (2012) identifies five stages of development: 1) the Naïve stage is described as individuals having little or no conscious social awareness of race; 2) the Acceptance stage is internalized (and rarely positive) messages of what it means to be Black; 3) the Resistance stage is understanding and identifying racism in its intricate and numerous expressions—“at the individual and institutional, conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional attitudinal, behavioral and policy levels (p. 43).

Redefinition (stage 4) occurs when a Black individual is concerned with defining their sense of self in ways that are free of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of White people and White culture (Jackson, 2012). In other words, a redefinition conscious is not bothered with either imitating or rejecting White people and White culture; 5) the Internalization stage is when an individual begins to utilize and/or apply aspects of Black culture (Jackson, 2012). The transition to this stage includes the coalescing of growth

and development from the previous stages such that individuals at this final stage no longer feel a need to explain or protect their Black identity (Jackson, 2012). However, they may recognize the importance of cultivating their sense of self, especially when the environment discounts, demeans and/or assails Blackness (Jackson, 2012).

Based on the students' narratives it appears that they are generally in the Acceptance and Resistance stages of BID as they internalize messages of Blackness and learn about the multiple and complex expressions of racism and how it shapes their thinking and actions as Black students. Identity plays an important role in how students foster and navigate subsequent academic and social identities (Brown, 2016). Racial identity development and appreciation can lead to more confidence and a higher self-esteem, variables that contribute to college persistence (Davis, 2002; Ortiz & Santos, 2009). Further, racial identity development can emanate from multiple sources on college campuses including courses, research, cultural events and programs, conversations and more (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). One study found that Black students pursuing Black Studies minors describe a heightened sense of self and express a more positive racial identity development contrasted to students who did not enroll in a Black Studies class (Fuller, 2016). Given that racial identity development is tied to variables that lead to persistence, commitment to structural change that integrates Black culture in multiple ways throughout campus is critical.

Cairo also talks about becoming “woke” on campus and learning more specifically about both overt and hidden racism,

Right, like labels and stuff like that. And at [PWI] I wasn't like really focused on that I was caught up in the aesthetics of [PWI]. This is really nice over here, this

is nice, the atmosphere on this campus is just amazing but it's like I get into the semester and it's like crumble (Cairo crumbles a blank sheet of paper – See Figure 11). So at that point I started like learning about things, I started getting into books, I started talking to people and stuff like that and that was the part, I'm coming out of that and becoming involved and it's like I'm not going back to that same state that I was, you know. And it's like those things that I've learned have allowed me to grow and understand things differently than what I did when I first got here. It's like just because like I unraveled the ball here it doesn't, the paper is useless, I mean the paper so when I share these stories, my life stories they're saying I went through. OK.

*Figure 11: Cairo's Artifact Pertaining to Racism and Persistence*



Like the crumpled sheet of paper Cairo shares as his artifact pertaining to racism and persistence, his initial ideas about college (more simplistic aesthetics) crumbled upon learning more about Black history, culture, and racism.

Tiffany addresses Black identity as it relates to White fraternities and sororities and that there are some Black students who join them. I was shocked by this because the students talked vehemently about the horrible racism experiences they and their friends have had when simply in Greek Town, not even living there. Tiffany says she perceives the phenomena to relate to identity and how Black individuals experience their Blackness in unique ways,

Unless he himself [Black student] is in an Interfraternity Council or like one of the White fraternities and he's usually more fair skinned ummmmmm you can barely tell he's Black. I don't want to invalidate anyone's blackness more so he himself has chosen to invalidate or create his own experience for what Black means to him which is often denying it to any substance in himself, that is, I see that more often. But not anybody who is very embracing of their culture.

Lucy's identity is unique given her family heritage. She says,

I also find that I straddle like this weird fence because I am part White. So it's like I do have a White side of my family. It's like having those conversations with my White family about the things that happen and really trying to get their side of view and I don't know It's just very interesting because of like my family I'm a lot more educated on things that they don't understand and that's always been hard like figuring out my identity what that looks like as a Black woman, a Black and White woman like where do I fit in, do I fit on the White side but am I Black enough to fit in on the Black side. I've always identified more with my Black side.

After hearing the students speak about developing a Black identity in college I asked,

“How does that happen, for those that it happens too? Is it just being around new ideas, or new people? Tiffany says,

Um, you kind of have to you don't really have a choice in that sense. Coming here, you feel it and everybody here makes sure you feel it, the professors, the students.

Like I'm in the Journalism School you know, you very much feel like the Black dude in the room you know, it's when something comes up, everything happens in Ferguson and they're all like blah, blah, blah. It's everywhere, it's when students walk into like the Black Culture Center and they say, 'so I have a project and I was told to go somewhere where I feel uncomfortable.'”

Tiffany furthers her narrative by saying,

When there was a Black Culture Center, when there was like learning history and learning through campus, there's like so much it just comes through experience, experiences that like Lucy and I can agree with. You don't have that in Colorado. You don't, normally you don't feel Black in Colorado, you know you're Black but it's not a big deal, like you're just Black. But it's like here, you got a head scarf, 'do you see what's on her head (mock whispers) what's in there, what do you think in there.' Like you're it's literally, hey...the questions about the hair, the questions about like different stuff, you're just like, yah.

Tiffany and Lucy say that college has helped them understand different kinds of racism experiences and the vocabulary to better reflect and communicate their feelings and thoughts. Tiffany says,

Umm it's like, I tell people all the time I think like to tie it to your question it

happens like, the realization happens as you get older too because like when we're younger we're very much fed the idea that Martin Luther King, we were fed Rosa Parks, a little bit Malcom X. But they're not going to tell you that Claudette Colburn was one of the first people to say 'no.' There's so much that comes to it you know, you don't realize like you know racism isn't necessarily dead it's just in the form of systematic oppression now. I feel like coming to college has helped me to find the words umm, because I remember in high school being able to point out stuff like that but just I'll just call it racism, it's always racism, it's really the only word that I need to describe that (Mike laughs and nods as Tiffany says this). Like, 'you're racist', like and having to explain that to somebody was so much harder because I didn't have the vocabulary and then it made you just look like a complaining...

Lucy says,

Angry Black girl in the class. Sensitive Black girl in the class and it's like, no that was wrong. But I can't prove that it was wrong so if we went to administration and talked about what you said and why it was problematic I would still look like the sensitive Black girl in the class and so I feel like going to college just help me to find that vocabulary because I was always able to spot it. I was never able to properly label it.

College affords Black students the opportunity to learn more about Black history, culture and the work of others who have helped pave the way for future generations. Cairo says knowing more about Black history and culture is,

Definitely something that's helped moving forward [persistence], um, just

because well I will speak for me it's starting to like learning the things about my culture, learning things about my ancestors and stuff like that and those that came before me. It was like I had so much more appreciation for them and the things that they did so it was like, how dare I like mess up the opportunity like the one I have. And respect to them I stay motivated but it's also that main drive, that initial drive came from my family. It's just that additional learning about my ancestors. It's like, it just, it just continues to give me more drive, give me more drive – things to fight for.

College provides a venue for students to better understand and internalize their Black heritage, what it means for them as Black people, and the importance of college persistence as a vehicle to affect change in racial understanding. Compared to HBCUs who enroll about nine percent of Black undergraduate students and award over 20% of bachelor degrees, the larger percentage of Black students nationwide attend and graduate from PWIs (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Thus, a higher percentage of Black students attend colleges and universities that have struggled to offer environments where Black students can successfully develop their identity (Brown, 2016).

**Leadership.** Several students talk about leadership roles they've assumed as a part of becoming more involved with the Black community on campus. As students learn more about their cultural heritage it fosters more interest in becoming campus leaders to further the Black "cause" and in being campus leaders they learn more about their Black heritage and the political, social, economic societal climate. Tiffany says,

I started working here [BCC] and working here kinda intertwined just me working under the [student leadership club]. My brother was vice president for the

[student leadership club] so I kinda just went into that and [BCC staff member] encouraged it.

Tiffany brought two nametags (Black Culture Center staff and college leadership secretary nametags) as her artifacts representing her experience with racism and persistence. Tiffany talks further about wanting more leadership roles on campus and references a student senate meeting she attended that involved the president, a Black woman, addressing a concern over a survey that was problematic for Black students. She says the president,

Brought the man who sent the survey out pretty much to apologize to everyone and answer everyone's questions. And I was like, "so there's this White man standing in the room with at least 100 Black students and they're talking and it's not like what everyone makes to be you know like what everyone thinks of us on TV. Everyone is talking with an education, everyone is raising their hand. No one's cutting up, everyone's getting their point across and [the president] is there like "and you're going to answer" and I was like and it wasn't even...it was intense. So I talked to [people] afterwards and I said, "I want to be president. That's what I want to do. What do I need to do?" Like she [president] did that, that's where I see myself.

Having been at the meeting himself, Chris affirmed the scenario and supported Tiffany's interest in engaging in more leadership roles.

Chris talks about leadership in a different way than Tiffany and emphasizes that being a leader in the Black community means being a successful college student who persists,

It just keeps us going and keeps us motivated [college degree] just not necessarily get to a higher standpoint or a successful plane but just to be better as a culture than we are like not necessarily someone who wants to get a degree but just growing as a group of people who are always pushed back.

Part of the leadership role as described by the students involves pushing back against negative racial messages and behaviors for themselves and other and involvement in activist work.

***Pushback.*** The students speak of fighting back against racism by engaging in leadership roles and proving themselves. Tiffany says,

Uh, I think it means succeeding when everything around you expects you to fail. Um it's like what Chris said, it's attaching yourself specifically here to an environment that doesn't really want you here and making a name for yourself and getting into those organizations that never see you and getting into that position that you're not supposed to be in and getting those stares and still be who you are and not looking like what you go through. Cause if we look like what we're going through, LORD!

Lucy talks about pushing back against the lack of diversity in the Nursing School by sharing her concern with administrators,

It's been very frustrating but it's also been like a motivating factor as well. Um, like when I look at my own personal situation, like the nursing school and really speaking up about the lack of diversity in the nursing program and how and questioning like why I didn't get in, it's like OK, I got a perfect score on both of my interviews every time I applied. I had, my GPA is good enough to get into the

program and so it's like so why only two Black students, Black girls got accepted into the nursing program when there are 75 other White students.

Resistance theory provides a lens for exploring Tiffany and Lucy's narratives in pushing back against racism and a lack of diversity. Solórzano and Bernal (2001) argue that when individuals demonstrate resistance to social structures that set up them for failure they are exercising resilience. Resistance theory focuses on the ways that individuals and groups 'push back' against oppression and the effect resistance has on resisters (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Specifically, Tiffany and Lucy exercise transformative resistance which includes a critical understanding of social oppression and an appeal for social justice (Solórzano and Bernal (2001). In this typology, students grasp the concepts of social conditions and oppression and act upon it to seek social justice (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001), such as engaging in leadership roles and voicing concern about social injustice.

Cairo explains that his push back is more global than specific to college, perhaps given he is now a secondary school educator and preparing to teach in a Missouri school district in the fall of 2016. Cairo says,

I set out to defeat any stereotype that's been placed on me, um I'm just a curious raging soldier. It's like having those experiences only furthered that curiosity and

I want to know why, you know.

In reference to the 2015 campus racial incident, Tiffany talks about staying at [PWI] when many Black students left campus due to feeling fearful and unsafe. She says that staying in school is the utmost in pushback against racism and race critical incidents,

It's kind of like the way of fighting back and I think we can all say this. Us being here is like our way of fighting back. Cause in some ways we can't fight back,

really. Or we don't feel like we know how.

Cairo finds that a sense of obligation to his ancestors and family that drives him to continue to fight for the rights of Black people. He says,

And respect to them [ancestors] I stay motivated [as a student] but it's also that main drive that initial drive came from my family. It's just that additional learning about my ancestors. It's like, it just, it just continues to give me more drive, give me more drive – things to fight for.

Similarly, Chris talks about the importance of pushing back against racism by focusing on being successful as a student and helping others succeed, too. He says it is necessary to,

Figure out who you are as a person so nobody can knock you down. Take away who you are and take away your experience. A lot of people, their main goal is to take you out of the University or take away from your college experience or take what they don't have or get what the next person can get. I've done a lot of focusing on myself, focusing on school, focusing on helping others get through who are in the same position as me or could be and trying to get them what I didn't have so they can get what they deserve or should know because college isn't easy.

Harley's form of push back is persistence, particularly in light of the 2015 campus racial incident. Many students left the campus in fear of violence, forfeiting their college career on the campus. She says, "So I think you know, the most I can do now is come back and finish. That's the greatest victory I personally have right now so that's what I'm trying to do." In essence, resistance strategies are proactive forms of agency and

help students push back against oppression to diminish the likelihood of racism and race critical incidences from having a negative impact on college persistence.

*Activism.* Activism is policy or action that utilizes strong campaigning to facilitate political or social change. Tiffany says a significant part of her identity as a student is that of an active protestor and activist regarding racism. She says that her friends and roommates share a similar stance as activists in light of the racial happenings in Ferguson Missouri and the 2015 campus racial incident. Tiffany says,

So.....I would say everybody in the house looks at everything, the best way I can describe it is an Angela Davis way like, so like someone will say “so, let’s have a meeting” and we’re like, “alright” (claps her hand). “What are we doin? Are we wearing black, are we protesting?” So I’m like I’m gonna get my boots, I’ll sneak upstairs” (whispers this). Like everybody in the house is very, I wouldn’t say we’re not afraid but confrontational when it comes to racism and a lot of us from Black studies classes and wouldn’t start off that way, I wouldn’t say we started out that way but you’ve become that way. So like dealing with certain things like my very first, yah, my very firstish protest where I was like, you know, spat on...

I was shocked to hear that someone spit on her so I said, “Here in Columbia” and she said,

Uh huh. It was when the big one happened in protest of [bar] for the Hands-Up Pants Down bracelets (racially insensitive) and we shut down like [streets] and like right by [bar], and right by [bar] and I remember I saw red, so much red and I was, I was, I was ready to fight, there was like a car driving around with water making sure that we were ok and it was freezing and cold. I wanna say it was maybe on a good night about 7 degrees that night. And I remember like instead

of just immediately going off, two of my roommates, two of my roommates grabbed him [man who spit] along with one of the Original 11 [the collective name of the 11 original student protesters who identify themselves as "Concerned Student 1950,"s, derived from the year the campus admitted its first Black student] and just started educating instantly. Like “what, do you even know why we’re out here, do you know what this is, do you know what that is, do you know Black.” A protest over here, I’m in the car screaming over here, the police are talking over here and right in the middle of the street with cars turning around because we’ve blocked down the street there’s an educational moment happening and an apology comes [from the man who spit] – “I respect what you guys are doing out here and I was just mean and drunk and being an idiot.” So I think, you don’t spit anyway, that’s just um common courtesy (laughs). So I would say in that moment we’re very reactionary but we react how we need to so I think everybody noticed that he was drunk so we took that moment as an educational moment.

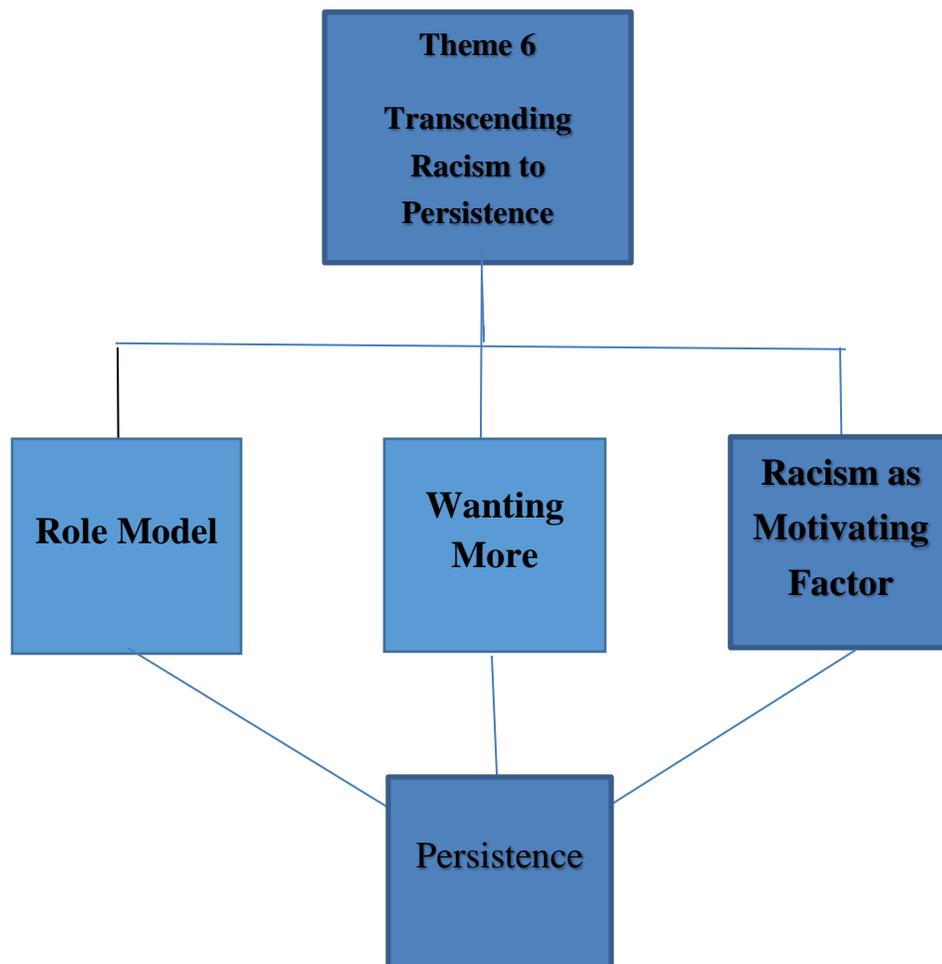
Tiffany is the only student in the group who describes herself as an activist and shared a story of active protesting and campaigning against racism. She says that this kind of leadership is important to her and defining in how she promotes social justice.

### **Transcending Racism to Persistence (Theme 6)**

Not only have the students persisted, they have a strong commitment to persistence as a way to transcend racism. Many of them talk of the sacrifices and leadership of individuals who came before them to help further the rights and opportunities of Black individuals. They also talk of commitment to continuing the

legacy of education as college graduates as a way to combat racism and join in solidarity to encourage others to go to college and graduate. Specifically, the students speak of their ability to persist as being tied to their role as a role model to others to demonstrate that Black students can succeed. The students also talk about “wanting more” than they had growing up. This internal motivation to succeed relates to their desire for personal as well as a “Black community” achievement. Figure 12 provides a visual diagram of the organization of the findings of Theme 6, Transcending Racism to Persistence.

*Figure 12. Theme 6 Findings Organization Chart*



**Role Model.** Although numerous articles speak to the importance of Black role models and culturally competent administrators, staff and faculty members (Habley et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, & Tinto, 2012) in student persistence, very little attention is given to Black students who persist because they see themselves as role models to others.

Some of the students say that having younger family members look up to them motivates them to persist as a way to demonstrate that college is attainable. They say,

- I was put into a position where I had to be an adult like rather quickly. I was the oldest of 16. And then like experiencing some of the things for instance like being homeless and foster care and things like having to grown up quick. So it put me into a position where I was like had to figure out a way to help them, my siblings. So that was a huge motivator for me (Cairo)
- I think it's because I never had a choice. Like I literally never had a choice....I was put in a circumstance that, you know, the way my dominos fell, enabled me to do so, like even though they're like my cousins I do have eyes watching me like just yesterday my cousin called me and she said my GPAs not high enough what's going on, we have to do this, we have to do that. I am the reason my cousin, even after he took a semester off he came back to school so there are so many people watching me. I have older sisters who got their degrees but we're the only ones who went to a physical university and got them....so, everybody else has like community college and technical degrees, stuff like that. So we are their

motivation so when...they call me and say 'I'm so proud of you' or I get an award my cousin is like I want to be just like Tiffany I don't have a choice because if I don't finish then that means they don't. What does that look like for them, you know? But we are very much in a position where we have to take care of each other so I very much take on that mother/sister, older cousin role (Tiffany).

- I want to be that motivation for the little people in my life just because they look up to me so much (Tiffany).
- Ummm and so for me this [college] is just something that I have to do for me for my family for...my children like it's kinda like it's not an option (Lucy).
- And because I'm the oldest of so many sisters, um, I had to be an example because, just do it (Mike).
- Looking at them [siblings] it's like, I want to show them in spite, it can still be done [college graduation]. So that's my main motivation so to hear some of my siblings say things like, "I'm proud of you, I want to go to college, too". They hit me up to ask me questions about the FAFSA, college applications like, it's just like, it's just.... Me dropping out? It's just like "well Cairo dropping out, I thought he was smart." So now it's like extremely hard, so I'm not going [to drop out], that motivation has always been there (Cairo).
- I know in my family they kind of look at me, I am a first generation student so a lot of my cousins, my mom, dad didn't go to college at all so

they look at me as kind of the role model for my younger cousins and to just always be that example (Chris).

- That support system [family] helped me through it all [college] and I wanted to be a role model for my sisters and my cousins (Mike).
- So as much as I do it [persistence] for my family I do it for the generations that's coming after me as well which is why I chose my major [secondary English education]. So I can like, that reach, you know I'm not going to be able to save every child but that reach, it's a lot, it's a lot broader being in the classroom. Umm, so that's just something, it keeps me persisting. And, it's just like our ancestors that came before didn't even make it to see a day of college because they died so we could see a day of college (Cairo).

Many of the students are motivated to persist regardless of challenges and racism because they value their role as a role model to others.

**Wanting More.** Cairo talks about living in foster care and being homeless and how these experiences affected his decision-making. He says being,

On my own to where like I had to make progressive moves. I think that's what helped me along the way in terms of persistence and I didn't want to go back to those things I experienced as a kid.

Lucy also talks about knowing she wanted more out of her life from a young age and that college was the way to achieve it. She says,

I know just as a child like I saw my situation, I saw my parent's situation and I saw some of my families' situations and I refused to live that life, too. And I

made up in my mind at a very young age that I was going to go to college that I was going to break the cycle that I wasn't going to be like them.

Chris talks about wanting more for the Black community and speaks to this idea using a metaphor that references intentional efforts to "hold back" Black individuals. He says,

I think that goes hand in hand with kinda like it goes with the old saying, "if you want to hide something from a Black person, put it in a book." Just like the stereotype that Black people don't read, they're unknowledgeable they're not informed at all, they don't want to learn, they don't want to be educated. And like we are proof that like yes, we come to college, we want to learn, we are reading those books, we are increasing our vocabulary, we're learning the terminology and we're sharing this information with everybody so it's kind of combatting that stereotype that Black people aren't educated but we are educated, we are learning.

Wanting more in this instance means a collective view of the value of college and persistence and the desire for the Black community to have access and supports to succeed.

**Racism and Race Critical Incidents as a Motivating Factor.** Lucy, Cairo, and Diana speak to racism and the 2015 campus racial incident as a motivating factor in their college persistence. Lucy says,

It's been very frustrating but it's also been like a motivating factor as well. It was frustrating .....and at the end of the day it was like we're going to be faced with these racial experiences like, I don't know, that's just how it is. The only way to really handle it is to use it as a motivating factor because we're going to

experience it so instead of allowing it to defeat you and allowing it to keep you down and hold you down like us being here is I'm using it as motivation.

Harley says the 2015 campus racial incident, although a frightening experience that affected her health, also fueled her fire to persist. She talks of returning to campus after the incident and says "so I think you know, the most I can do now is come back and finish. That's the greatest victory I personally have right now so that's what I'm trying to do."

Similarly, Cairo talks about racism and how he uses negative racial experiences as a way to learn and know more about race relations. He says,

I set out to defeat any stereotype that's been placed on me, um I'm just a curious raging soldier. It's like having those experiences only furthered that curiosity and I want to know why, you know.

Diana shares Cairo's view about defeating stereotypes and moving forward in her education. She says,

Yah I think I just sort of what Cairo said, I think that those types of things are kind of emboldening almost, like to persist. It's almost like a reinforcement, like there's something else to be persistent for. Um, it's something you can look back on and say that's just another thing I was able to overcome. It's like flexing the persistence muscle.

While racism experiences are clearly painful, exhausting and invoke fear, they also motivate the students in this study to persist. The students persist because they see themselves as role models to others and feel connected to the legacy of Black scholars and activists before them to further college attainment and anti-racism.

**Persistence.** The students attribute their ability to persist to support systems, Black identity development, being a role model, wanting more for themselves and utilizing racism as a motivating factor. These statements demonstrate what persistence means to the students and how they persevere,

- Just understanding that real victory comes through perseverance and getting yourself in a position so the ones after us don't have to necessarily experience everything we did (Cairo).
- We made it through this [2015 campus racial incident], there's not too many other things you can't make it through (Harley).
- It means succeeding when everything around you expects you to fail (Tiffany).
- I think that's what helped me along the way in terms of persistence [foster care and homelessness] and I didn't want to go back to those things that I experienced as a kid (Cairo).
- As long as I'm on a full ride scholarship and I have to get done in four years, like they're paying for four years, they pay for me where I live, they pay for lab stuff, they pay for my books, they pay for school but you got get that in four years...I don't have a choice [to drop out] (Tiffany).
- And because I'm the oldest of so many sisters um, I had to be an example because, just do it. And um it's been my dream to like graduate with a computer engineering degree since I was in fifth grade. I can't give up on myself (Mike).
- I didn't really come up with like a Plan B or an option. It's like OK, this is what it is. So, if this scenario now has like these things added to it [racism] then that's how it's going to be. Like if college is, if going to Mizzou for journalism is what

the plan was and race incidents on campus are a part of that experience then I'm like, 'OK, we'll just have to figure out how to adapt, basically' (Harley).

- I'm persistent until the moment I wake up (laughs). Like I don't know, like some of the things I touched on, just like every day is like a struggle almost. If I'm not struggling with school I'm, with the stories like Mike Brown and Travon Martin that's in the back of my head too (Cairo).
- Every time I say something it's kinda small to me it seems so big to the rest of my family and I feel like that's enough motivation in itself and I'm also a very goal oriented person so I've always been just persistent to do my best (Chris).
- So I can like, that reach, you know, I'm not going to be able to save every child but that reach, it's a lot, it's a lot broader being in the classroom [he is a secondary education major]. So that's just something, it keeps me persisting (Cairo).

I asked the students to think about persistence in a different way by quantifying it. Specifically, I asked them to talk about how challenging persistence is on a scale of one to ten (one equals low challenge and 10 equals high challenge). Cairo said '100', Tiffany said '10', Chris said, '10 every day', Mike said '10', and Lucy and Diana both said, '9.5'. Lucy expanded on her response of 9.5 by saying that for her to do what she wants to do [nursing],

I can't be a nurse and drop out, I can't do it any other way but by going [to school]. So I just feel like always having that in the back of my mind, this is what I want to do, this is what I'm passionate about, this is what I'm excited to wake up to every day and do what I do. It keeps me, it keeps my head above water.

In essence, Lucy says her passion for her major and future career outweigh some of challenges of persistence as a Black student. Similarly, Chris summarizes why some Black students at [PWI] do not persist and finds that,

Sometimes people get distracted and their dream [college education] isn't higher than they're obstacles....get themselves in trouble with too much partying, with too many relationships, when they go to college they all this freedom that they wasn't used to at home.

Transcending Racism to Persistence (theme 6) includes multiple factors that foster persistence including, 1) the value students place on being a role model in higher education to younger family members, 2) wanting more from life that a college degree affords than what they had growing up and 3) transforming racist experiences as a motivation to succeed rather than being shut down by it. These factors plus support systems, particularly family support, and the emergence of a stronger sense of Black identity contribute to persistence among the students in this study.

While “emboldening,” as Diana says, racist experiences cause racial battle fatigue and cost students greatly in terms of their physical and mental well-being. And, while the application of support systems and protective factors to achieve persistence may be a way to overcome challenges and oppression (Zolkowski & Bullock, 2012), research shows that the college experience necessitates that Black students exercise *more* perseverance than their White peers if they want to achieve academically, given racial biases, threats and racism in academia. Leonardo (2013) says that it is ultimately the responsibility of institutions to actively promote a positive racial climate rather than asking students to persist in light of unaddressed racism and oppression.

Sultan (2015) says that “by suggesting that students of color who struggle academically don’t have as much grit ignores the social resilience that they are already employing simply by being present at school.” Further, Howard (2007) finds that it is negligent and biased to talk about grit without the context of the social environment or how campus culture affects learning.

Green (2016) says that,

Colleges rely on all the positive aspects of grit to define the “college experience” by paying attention only to its static definition: courage, resolve, the innate ability to bounce back from obstacles. But history, the researchers argue, has shown that the types of institutional biases that are at play in the U.S. education system are structured to devalue the work of students of color, which can’t be fixed with an extra dose of mental toughness.

Further, Green (2016) asks whether it is appropriate for colleges to ask historically marginalized students to exercise more grit and persistence efforts or whether efforts should focus instead on institutional changes that promote greater racial justice so that Black students do not have to compromise their well-being by being resilient. This issue, in addition to others, will be discussed in the following section.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Despite experiencing racism and race critical incidences, the students in this study say they are motivated to persist even though other Black college students often have significant challenges in college. Black undergraduate students have the lowest persistence and lowest college graduation rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups at college and universities (Fleming, 2012). Racism and race critical incidents pose immense challenges for Black students and can negatively impact persistence (Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2005). If Black students feel unsafe and experience racism, they are more likely to drop out of college (Grier-Reed, Madvun & Buckley, 2008; Ortiz and Santos, 2009).

While racism in its many forms abounds on college campuses, Altbach et al., (2002) find that few individuals realize the effect of race and racism, citing that campus leaders and faculty see racial issues in isolation, involving an individual problem to be handled when situations arise rather than as a pervasive and important issue that necessitates continued dialogue and problem solving. Further, many campus leaders may feel that race and racism are “peripheral to the academic enterprise – that they are individual problems brought to center stage by small groups, unnecessary distractions from the real business of education” (Altbach et al., 2002).

Even though college campuses have attempted to address racism through task forces, race forums and other initiatives, things have not improved since 2002 when Altbach et al. published their research (Robinson, 2015). In fact, students, faculty, staff and administrators of color continue to experience intrapersonal, interpersonal,

institutional and structural racism on college campuses (Chesler et al., 2005). Many of these individuals also share narratives about micro-aggressions, micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations (DeAngelis, 2009). Although people of color do share their stories, Witherspoon-Arnold and Brooks (2013) note that the lack of attention and discourse on the part of college leaders and those in power in addressing racism represents tolerance and even support for interpersonal and institutional racism.

Further, Harper (2012) finds pervasive silencing of racism on predominantly White campuses in a meta-analysis of journal articles over a 10-year period in the form of 1) racial inequality attributed to issues other than racism, 2) discourse that includes language other than the terms *race* or *racism*, and 3) the seldom use of Critical Race Theory as a model to understand and address race and racism. Harper (2012b) discusses the importance of foregrounding silenced narratives, the need for genuine and authentic dialogue, and action steps that address racial issues in order to provide better experiences and outcomes for people of color on college campuses. My findings echo these higher education scholars as it relates to Black students' experiences with silenced narratives, multiple forms of racism, microaggressions, White privilege and more (Chesler et al., 2005; DeAngelis, 2009; Harper, 2012; Harper, 2012b).

Attitudes and behaviors among White students, faculty, staff and administrators related to the concepts of Whiteness (Flagg, 2005), a White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2013), and White supremacy (Leonardo, 2013) contribute to racism on college campuses because they foreground White individuals and as a result, sideline minorities. Cabrera (2012) found that White supremacy contributes to racism in

higher education when he studied the racial views and experiences of White male students on a college campus. In fact, the students viewed little evidence of racism, minimized the effect of present-day racism, and identified White individuals as the victims of diversity initiatives, citing 'reverse racism' (Cabrera, 2012). The participants blamed racial minorities for racial antagonism and developed an enhanced sense of 'reverse racism' since attending college (Cabrera, 2012). Based on this study, it can be argued that higher education creates an environment that actually increases racist thoughts and attitudes among its students. The findings from my study are in keeping with the concepts of Whiteness (Flagg, 2005), a White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2013) and White supremacy (Leonardo, 2013) in that the students identify a 1) lack of attention on the part of campus faculty, staff and administrators in dealing with racism and 2) a lack of consequences for those committing racist behaviors. Perhaps when higher education institutions do not effectively address racism, race critical incidents and the effects of a White racial frame, racist thoughts and attitudes on college campuses may increase.

The effect of racism is profound and wide-reaching as exemplified by personal, economic, social health and political challenges that plague individuals, families and society as a result (Anyon, 2009; Brondola et al., 2009). For example, studies about the effect of the stress of racism on people of color find that it contributes to disparities in physical and mental health and to numerous negative health outcomes (i.e., hypertension, depression, coronary disease) within racial and ethnic groups (Brondola et al., 2009; Paradies, 2006).

Socially, racism leads to lack of understanding and ignorance between groups

of people which can alienate individuals from one another and lessen a sense of community (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Similarly, political fragmentation caused by racism contributes to White dominance but lack of power and influence for people of color, as well as the loss of acting in accord for better societal good (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004).

The effect of racism on personal growth and development is also acute for both offenders and their targets (Harper, 2012a). Victims of racism often report fear from experiences that compromise their emotional and physical safety (Matias, 2015). Those who manifest racist attitudes and behaviors live with ignorance and fear that hamper their personal choice and growth (Harper, 2012a). Further, forfeiture of opportunities due to discrimination and internalized negative messages can lead to significant harm and fatigue, a weariness from fighting racial battles (Martin, 2015). The participants in my study speak at length about the negative effects of racism, specifically Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith, 2004) and how it has affected their physical and mental health in the form of tiredness, depression, fear and more. Although they continue to persist despite these detriments, they pay a price in the form of mental, emotional and physical well-being.

While my findings regarding Black student experiences with racism and persistence are consistent with higher education scholarship (Harper, 2012; Harper, 2012b; Robinson, 2015), my research expands the literature by focusing on the effect of Race Critical Incidents. My study contributes to the research base by foregrounding student experiences with Race Critical Incidents and the role they play in college persistence. Specifically, the students express that these incidents serve as a motivating

factor in persistence, regardless of the physical, mental and emotional toll these experiences place on them.

As stated previously, a part of my thesis argument also posits that there is a resiliency to and resistance of race critical incidents that determine how racial experiences occur, are experienced and understood. In essence, Resilience theory and Resistance theory explain how Black students utilize protective factors and push back against racism in order to persist. The term ‘resilient resistance’, an idea developed by theorists who study academically successful Latino/a students, offers a bridge between the frameworks of Resistance theory and Resilience theory to explain the intersection of both concepts (Yosso, 2000). By being resilient, students demonstrate resistance in allowing racism to negatively impact persistence and by being resistant to oppression, they are better able to exercise resilience. ‘Resilient resistance’ is a process whereby students confront inequity, regardless of their ability to express the structural origin and maintenance of oppression (Yosso, 2000). Resilience theory and Resistance theory complement one another and can offer powerful explanations of behavior, specifically pertaining to the effect of racism on Black student persistence.

In this chapter I interpret and describe the significance of the findings relative to the concept of persistence and Resilience theory and Resistance theory in light of both previous scholarship and new insights gleaned from the findings. Specifically, I explore 1) the idea of college persistence and resistance as a form of resilience from racism and race critical incidences, 2) the concept of John Henryism and 3) the combination of Black Identity Development, family support and race critical incidents as motivating factors in

persistence and how they influence one another. Finally, I discuss implications of this study.

### **Persistence and Resilience as a Form of Resistance**

The participants say they persist in higher education despite experiences with racism due to many factors such as support from family, the desire to be a successful college student role model to others, wanting more than they experienced growing up, and a desire to prevail against racism by succeeding in college. They also demonstrate resistance to racism and race critical incidences as they embrace Black Identity Development, campus leadership opportunities, and ideologies and experiences that empower them to question racism and histories of racial oppression.

While literature abounds about Black student persistence (Habley et al., 2012; Harper, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010), 2) and resilience (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Masten, 2011; Morales & Trotman, 2011; Williams, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012) as a way of bounding back from adverse experiences such as racism and race critical incidences, a dearth of research explores the intersection of persistence and resilience as a form resistance against oppressive and racist experiences in pursuing college. The combination of persistence and resilience as expressions of resistance (Persistence + Resilience = Resistance) creates a narrative that students defy or push back against racism as they continue their education not just for personal gain but for the collective good of Black individuals in combating racism. Thus, resistance is two-fold:

- 1) As an **individual** the student attains resistance to racism through college persistence and resilience. Diana says “I think that those types of things [racism] are kind of emboldening almost, like to persist. It’s almost like a reinforcement,

like there's something else to be persistent for. Um, it's something you can look back on and say that's just another thing I was able to overcome"; and

2) a **collective** resistance emerges when Black students persist and engage in resilience. Cairo says, "So as much as I do it [persistence] for my family I do it for the generations that's coming after me as well which is why I chose my major [secondary English education]. So I can like, that reach, you know I'm not going to be able to save every child but that reach, it's a lot, it's a lot broader being in the classroom. Umm, so that's just something, it keeps me persisting. And, it's just like our ancestors that came before didn't even make it to see a day of college because they died so we could see a day of college."

Therefore, students don't resist racism and persist in college for personal gain only, the drive to persist is also reinforced by racism experiences that motivate them to succeed to help pave the way for other Black individuals. As Cairo says, "just understanding that real victory comes through perseverance and getting yourself in a position so the ones after us don't have to necessarily experience everything we did." Cairo's choice of the phrase "real victory" is significant because it relates to the concept of college persistence (pursuing victory), resilience (victory as the ultimate form of 'bouncing back' from adversity) and resistance (resisting racism obstacles to achieve victory).

Further, several students use language that reference concepts of fighting back and battling racism to achieve resiliency: "I set out to defeat any stereotype that's been placed on me, um I'm just a curious raging soldier" (Cairo). Tiffany says, "Us being here is like our way of fighting back" as she pursues college. Harley talks of returning

to campus after the 2015 campus racial incident and says “so I think you know, the most I can do now is come back and finish. That’s the greatest victory I personally have right now so that’s what I’m trying to do.” These narratives exemplify the tenets of Resistance theory, that when individuals demonstrate resistance to social structures that set them up for failure they are exercising resilience (Solórzano and Bernal (2001), and provide a lens for exploring Cairo, Tiffany and Harley’s narratives in combating racism.

### **Self-Determination**

Narratives about college persistence and resilience as a form of resistance to racism also invoke the concept of self-determination. Self-determination is based on the belief that people have the ability to grow and develop and overcome challenges but only within a supportive social environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In other words, important and supportive individuals and institutions in the person’s life provide an environment conducive to self-determination. Certainly, the students in this study activate self-determination as they demonstrate resistance and resilience in college persistence. And, environmental protective factors like family support and Black Identity Development (encouraged through coursework and the BCC) help create a supportive environment conducive to self-determination within the racially charged campus environment.

Self-determination within a supportive context enables students to persist in college in light of a larger context of racism and race critical experiences. According to Martin and Marshall (1996), a self-determined individual practices life skills like setting goals, making decisions, seeking options, resolving problems, advocating for self, identifying support systems for success and understanding how to evaluate outcomes. Similarly, Sapp, Kiyama and Dache-Gerbino (2016) examined the college-going

behaviors of Latinas by exploring their agency in navigating opportunity for college at the college, family and community levels. The students serve as both agents of resistance by pushing back against educational inequities and agents of support for Latinas.

The students in this study reflect the qualities of self-determination and agency as they set and achieve educational goals, positively influence their college trajectory by exerting agency and questioning discriminatory practices, seek academic and student life advice and advocate for college practices that are inclusive and equitable. In essence, self-determination strategies are tools students use to achieve persistence and resiliency as they engage in resistance to racism. Carried further, self-determination may help explain the students' focus on creating a legacy of college completion as a way to combat racism in general. They say they see their role as students as larger than just themselves; seeing themselves fundamentally as role models to others as a way to fight back against racism and provide a counter-narrative to negative stereotypes and oppression. For example, Chris says,

I know in my family they kind of look at me, I am a first generation student so a lot of my cousins, my mom, dad didn't go to college at all so they look at me as kind of the role model for my younger cousins and to just always be that example.

Further, Mike says "that support system [family] helped me through it all [college] and I wanted to be a role model for my sisters and my cousins." Chris and Mike espouse the importance of their role as college role models as a resistance strategy to racism. As the students exercise resiliency, employ self-determination strategies and resistance skills to combat racism and persist in college, the price of this activity can be compromised mental, physical and emotional health, a concept known as racial battle fatigue (Mitchell

et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2015). RBF is similar to John Henryism, a concept that explores the relationship between the pressure of coping with longstanding stresses and health (Steele, 2011).

### **John Henryism**

While the concept of resilience focuses on individuals and groups who overcome oppression and the factors and resources that minimize its' negative effects (Garza et al., 2004), the concept of John Henryism (JH) espouses that strategies for coping with prolonged stresses, such as racism and race critical incidences, can cause individuals to spend high levels of effort which results in mounting physiological costs (Steele, 2011).

The term John Henryism was named by a researcher investigating racial health disparities in the 1970s (Claude, 2011). One of the people interviewed was a black man, John Henry Martin, who emancipated himself from a poor sharecropper system and farmed his own land but developed significant health problems by age 50 (Steele, 2011). His circumstances are reminiscent of folk hero John Henry, a Black man who worked hard enough to compete effectively with a steam powered machine but died as a result of his effort (Steele, 2011). John Henryism relates to this study because it surfaces the idea that in exercising resiliency to persist in the face of racism, often considered a positive and strengths-based approach to overcoming adversity, Black students must over-cope (Green, 2016; Sultan, 2015). Over-coping to achieve legitimacy and survive as a Black student can lead to fatigue as discussed by the students:

- I think just being a student in college is an exhausting experience but being a Black student is like going to college twice. That's the best way to describe it – Tiffany.
- I got really sick second semester so I would go to class, come home, sleep, go to class. Between every class I would sleep. Just because I was so tired....Transition to sophomore year was like....I really had to deal with “am I supposed to be here?” (reference to adjusting to college) – Lucy.
- I can probably say I've been tired the whole time [in college]. It's like nothing stops, you just keep going. Being a Black student you have to stay on top of things, you can't slide, you just can't (reference to college life) - Chris.
- So sitting in the classroom alone is tiring. Trying to focus on everything the teacher is saying, you don't want to miss anything. And while others in class are sitting there on Facebook or they have something else, or they're not paying attention...I can't. That's tiring – Chris.
- I've had x amount of jobs throughout my college just to pay for school. That created so much stress like one job I wasn't getting off until like 7:00 in the morning out there starting at like 10:00 p.m. so it was like rough balancing my schedule. My jobs and homework – Mike.

Tiredness and over-coping as the result of racism experiences can lead to stress and physical and mental health challenges (Mitchell et al., 2015). Harley talks of tiredness and problems with mental health,

After high school and when I came to [PWI] my freshman year it was just rough. I slept all the time, it was weird, a lot was going on....I was having anxiety, panic

attacks, I was doing everything I was supposed to do but it was nothing like high school. I found I was mildly depressed and had anxiety. And this kind of stuff is soooo not talked about in the Black community. This is a predominantly White community which is hard. My freshman year was hard, I got through all of my classes.

The students' examples of feeling tired, physically ill and struggles with mental health correspond to the concept of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBT), a response to stressful experiences involving racism and racial hostilities under challenging, threatening or dangerous situations (Smith et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2015), such as the 2015 campus racial incident. A critical incident like this compounds other racism experiences that can accumulate to a breaking point for some individuals who become overwhelmed with racial dangers and threatening experiences (Mitchell et al., 2015).

While the students in this study persist, a phenomenon partially explained by Resilience theory and Resistance there, it may come at a high price of compromised wellness. John Henryism is relevant to Black college students because it is considered a form of overachievement (Ford, Daniel, Earp, Kaufman, Golin & Miller, 2009), a common reaction to oppressive social circumstances among marginalized individuals (Ford et al., 2009). While over-achievement may initially appear to be helpful, it can ultimately lead to exhaustion and breakdown, which can result in decreased academic performance and college completion, in addition to other damaging outcomes (Blackmon, Coyle, Davenport, Owens & Sparrow, 2015).

Similarly, a study of Black women enrolled in doctoral programs at PWIs finds that participants were determined to persist regardless of the consequences and frequently

pushed themselves without support and resources to persist in a healthy manner, exceeding their limits and neglecting self-care needs to establish that they were succeeding (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Thus, the persistence coping strategies may be in direct conflict with their overall well-being. Shavers and Moore (2014) find that these women “faced a double-edged sword, forced to choose between persisting academically and overall well-being” (p. 32).

The students in this study also convey the double-edged nature persistence for Black students. Chris says,

Being a Black student you have to stay on top of things, you can't slide, you just can't. You can't just have experiences, you have to have internship experiences, you have to have work experiences. You're trying to balance a million different lives. It takes a toll on the mind and body. I try to put my best foot forward and sit in the classroom where I feel like most people expect me to fail or expect me not to show up or expect me not to say anything. You always over do things trying to make yourself live up to their expectations.

In essence, Black students who persist expend a significant amount of energy not only engaging in typical college activities (academics, student life, employment, etc.) but also proving to others that they belong. Thus, resilience is not always a ‘good’ thing, especially when Black students forcibly blind themselves to the effects of racism and race critical incidences and jeopardize their well-being in order to persist. The quote that says, ‘what doesn't kill you makes you stronger’ flies in the face of John Henryism.

### **Persistence: Motivating Factors**

The students identified factors that motivate them to persist including family support, learning about and developing a sense of Black identity in college, and critical race incidents (CRI). While CRI may appear to be an unlikely motivator for persistence I will show how it, combined with family support and Black Identity Development “embolden” students to persist in order to push back against racism and pave the way for other Black students to pursue higher education as well. In essence, based on the narratives of students in this study, persistence can be understood as the combination of **family support** plus **Black Identity Development** plus **Race Critical Incidents**.

#### **Family Support**

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature about the importance of family support in college persistence among Black students (Carter, Mosi Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Harper, 2012c; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). For example, in a study about Black male success in higher education, Harper (2012c) found that the participants, unlike their peers who were not enrolled in college, “unanimously cited parenting practices” as the reason for their achievement specifying that high expectations and involvement were key (p. 8). Although they had little or no direct experience with higher education, these parents fostered within their children a belief that college was valuable and worthy of pursuit (Harper, 2012c).

Similar in this study, of all the support systems the students identified (campus, friends, religion), by far all say the role of family support is the most powerful in terms of persistence. Mike says his parents want him to succeed in college and give him words of encouragement,

My dad always told me to be a better person than he was. He always told me the system wants me to fail so I had to work that much hard, no matter how hard it was. And my mom helped support me as well and she only had so much money as well so I felt that was not an option [to give up].

Likewise, Tiffany and Cairo say that it's families providing that push or support to succeed in college, even though the family may not have direct experience themselves or know how to help their child in certain circumstances (i.e., choosing a dorm, registering for classes, selecting a meal plan, etc.). Tiffany says,

Like I definitely agree with Cairo that it starts at home and like if you're never told. Like he was told he was supposed to go to college and if you're just told you have to stay home so you can help the family or if you're consistently told like they didn't want you to go to college anyway and stuffs going on at home, that's what your mind is going to focus on, that's all you're going to know. So I think it's like, very, developing into who you surround yourself with but also like what home was like, like what Lucy said. She has an extremely supportive system at home. If you don't have that and you're doing this all on your own like, college in itself is like a lot it is something you can't, especially a first generation student, deal with like financial aid and everything!

Again, it's not that the students had family members that could necessarily help them navigate specific college processes and systems, but that family promotes college and provides emotional support and encouragement to maintain success. This protective factor may help mitigate the likelihood of challenges or risks like racism and race critical incidents from negatively impacting college persistence. Benzies and Mychasiuk (2009)

contend that resilience is enhanced when protective factors are strengthened and connected at the individual, family, and community levels.

### **Black Identity Development**

Also consistent with the literature are the findings in this study of the importance of Black Identity Development among Black students in college persistence (Brown, 2016; Davis, 2002; Fuller, 2016; Ritchey, 2014). Greater racial identity development and appreciation can lead to more confidence and a higher self-esteem, variables that contribute to college persistence (Davis, 2002; Ortiz and Santos, 2009). A recent study looks at Black student enrollment in Black Studies courses to determine impact on racial identity development (Fuller, 2016). The findings suggest that those pursuing Black Studies minors describe a heightened sense of self and express a more positive racial identity contrasted to many of the students who did not enroll in a Black Studies class (Fuller, 2016). Many of the students discuss that college has helped them become more familiar with Black history and better aware of their Black identity, leading them to value persistence even more as a way combat racism. Tiffany says,

I knew I was Black but I didn't really know I was Black until I came here to [PWI]. And even though sometimes I hate being here and I don't want to be at [PWI], I had to learn how to be Black, I didn't have any other choice, I had to be prideful. It was embraced here [BCC] and it was encouraged here but if I denied my Blackness I'd be denying a lot of myself. Because everyone outside of here [BCC] is trying to deny my Blackness.

In essence, Tiffany is saying the BCC has helped her embrace being Black and this support helps her take pride in her heritage, making persistence an important goal. Cairo

explains,

I look at the timeline between slavery and the Civil Rights, you know what I'm saying? It took all that time just to get Civil Rights and the Civil Rights movement wasn't all that long ago. I think we're still, people who were like putting fire hoses on and their ancestors, those people are still living today, they're still living. So I'm not like not understanding that. I'm just of the mindset, unfortunately I expect it. And that's just kind of like how I see it. For a minute like, dude I want to lash out but at that point, I've already been chased by someone with a knife. I've already been handcuffed because I was a little Black kid runnin. I've been called a nigger. All of these things I just wanted to lash out because I was so angry. But at the end of the day, if I would have lashed out at tha dude I would have taken the bigger loss. You know? So just understanding those certain things like real victory comes through perseverance and getting yourself in a position so the ones after us don't have to necessarily experience everything we did.

Chris says that the BCC has helped him develop into a Black man and to embrace his Black identity,

[BCC] Pretty much told me what it is like to be a Black man on this campus and be a Black man in general on this campus but also teach me that there are other Black leaders and Black men who surround you, who uplift you...

Given that racial identity development is tied to variables that lead to persistence, commitment to structural change that integrates Black culture in multiple ways throughout campus is critical.

College affords Black students the opportunity to learn more about Black history, culture and the work of others who have helped pave the way for future generations (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). Cairo says knowing more about Black history and culture is,

Definitely something that's helped moving forward [persistence], um, just because well I will speak for me it's starting to like learning the things about my culture, learning things about my ancestors and stuff like that and those that came before me. It was like I had so much more appreciation for them and the things that they did so it was like, how dare I like mess up the opportunity like the one I have. And respect to them I stay motivated but it's also that main drive, that initial drive came from my family. It's just that additional learning about my ancestors. It's like, it just, it just continues to give me more drive, give me more drive – things to fight for.

College provides a venue for students to better understand and internalize their Black heritage, what it means for them as Black people, and the importance of college persistence as a vehicle to affect change in racial understanding (Brown, 2016).

### **Race Critical Incidents**

Little, if any, research examines race critical incidents (RCI) as a motivating factor in Black college student persistence. Resiliency theory helps explain how protective factors mitigate the effects of racism on persistence (Masten, 2011) but RCI or racism itself as a motivating factor has not been studied. All of the students speak to racism and the race critical incidents such as the 2015 campus racial incident as a motivating factor in their college persistence. For example, Lucy says,

It's been very frustrating but it's also been like a motivating factor as well. It was

frustrating .....and at the end of the day it was like we're going to be faced with these racial experiences like, I don't know, that's just how it is. The only way to really handle it is to use it as a motivating factor because we're going to experience it so instead of allowing it to defeat you and allowing it to keep you down and hold you down like us being here is I'm using it as motivation.

Harley says the 2015 campus racial incident, although a frightening experience that affected her health, also fueled her fire to persist. She talks of returning to campus after the incident and says "so I think you know, the most I can do now is come back and finish. That's the greatest victory I personally have right now so that's what I'm trying to do."

Diana shares Cairo's view about defeating stereotypes, resiliency in light of race critical incidents, and moving forward in her education. She says, "Yah I think I just sort of what Cairo said, I think that those types of things are kind of emboldening almost, like to persist. It's almost like a reinforcement, like there's something else to be persistent for. Um, it's something you can look back on and say that's just another thing I was able to overcome. It's like flexing the persistence muscle."

**Role Models.** Not only have the students persisted, in part to resist racism and race critical incidents, they have a strong commitment to persistence as a way to transcend racism. Many of them talk of the sacrifices and leadership of individuals who came before them to help further the rights and opportunities of Black individuals. They also talk of commitment to continuing the legacy of education as college graduates as a way to combat racism and join in solidarity to encourage others to go to college and graduate. Although numerous articles speak to the importance of Black role models and

culturally competent administrators, staff and faculty members (Habley et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, & Tinto, 2012) in student persistence, little attention is given to Black students who persist because they see themselves as role models to others.

Some of the students say that having younger family members look up to them motivates them to persist as a way to demonstrate that college is attainable. They say,

- I was put into a position where I had to be an adult like rather quickly. I was the oldest of 16. And then like experiencing some of the things for instance like being homeless and foster care and things like having to grown up quick. So it put me into a position where I was like had to figure out a way to help them, my siblings. So that was a huge motivator for me (Cairo)
- I think it's because I never had a choice. Like I literally never had a choice....I was put in a circumstance that, you know, the way my dominos fell, enabled me to do so, like even though they're like my cousins I do have eyes watching me like just yesterday my cousin called me and she said my GPAs not high enough what's going on, we have to do this, we have to do that. I am the reason my cousin, even after he took a semester off he came back to school so there are so many people watching me. I have older sisters who got their degrees but we're the only ones who went to a physical university and got them....so, everybody else has like community college and technical degrees, stuff like that. So we are their motivation so when...they call me and say 'I'm so proud of you' or I get an award my cousin is like I want to be just like Tiffany I don't have a

choice because if I don't finish then that means they don't. What does that look like for them, you know? But we are very much in a position where we have to take care of each other so I very much take on that mother/sister, older cousin role (Tiffany).

- I want to be that motivation for the little people in my life just because they look up to me so much (Tiffany).
- Ummm and so for me this [college] is just something that I have to do for me for my family for...my children like it's kinda like it's not an option (Lucy).
- And because I'm the oldest of so many sisters, um, I had to be an example because, just do it (Mike).

The students are motivated to persist despite racism and race critical incidents because they value their role as trailblazer and role model to others.

Therefore, based on the narratives in this study, factors that motivate student persistence in light of racism and critical race incidents can be understood as the combination of **family support** (encouragement) plus **Black Identity Development** (awareness, knowledge, appreciation of racial histories and identity) plus **Race Critical Incidents** (resistance to racism and call to action).

### **Implications**

Readers of this study should not imply that racism and critical race incidents are good for Black students or that they should be leveraged to increase college persistence. Persistence as a reaction to racism and race critical incidents comes at a great personal cost to student health and well-being. And, just because the students in this study (and

others) persist does not absolve the PWI of responsibility in eradicating racism and race critical incidents on campus. In fact, PWI should exercise an *increased* responsibility in insuring the well-being of Black students. Racial battle fatigue (RBF) is an effect of racism and can compromise health and well-being, thus jeopardizing college success. The RBF concept helps explain the phenomenon that physical and mental health conditions (i.e., anxiety, depression) of people of color can be caused by their experiences with racism (Mitchell, Fasching-Varner, Albert, & Allen, 2015).

Different from typical stressors, RBF is a response to stressful experiences involving racism and racial hostilities under challenging, threatening or dangerous situations (Smith, 2004; Vincent, Sanders, & Smith, 2015). In the struggle to maintain self-respect and high quality work, many individuals experience an exhaustion that leads to poor health, isolation, and marginalization from the same institution where a focus on diversity is said to be valued (Jackson, 2015; Vincent et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2015).

RBF should be treated like any other health condition – it should be named, addressed, treated and eradicated. And, the eradication of RBF must start with institutional leaders actively addressing racism and race critical incidents on campus. When racism and race critical incidents are not tolerated, the problem that results in RBF is eliminated, therefore eliminating RBF. Davis (2002) suggests that the most important strategy for success may be the recruitment of administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are truly committed to racial diversity citing further that the college president and other high-level administrators should be closely involved in racial diversity efforts.

Most college presidents are White individuals (Cook, 2012). Further, the racial and ethnic composition of college and university presidents has changed very little in the past 25 years, from 8% in 1986 to 13% in 2011 (Cook, 2012). This trend indicates that overall, the majority of individuals that lead higher education institutions may have little experience with the concepts addressed in this study, such as structural and institutional racism, RBF, micro-aggressions, bias, and racial oppression. Similarly, these individuals may also lack understanding of the power and impact of concepts pertaining to a White Racial Frame, White privilege, Whiteness, and White supremacy in perpetuating racism and race critical incidents on college campuses. Fowler (2009) identifies power as a major variable in promoting change in educational systems. Perhaps, when higher education leaders have extensive knowledge about racism and its many forms, the systemic ways in which it is perpetuated, experienced and infused throughout the system, and the impact that it has on students of color they are more likely to act upon their knowledge and use their power to institute change to eradicate racism.

Much like students on college campuses are required to take a diversity course, perhaps campus leaders should require something like this of themselves. I suggest that higher education leaders explore opportunities to learn more about racism and its many forms, such as attending a White Racial Frame Summit for college leaders or a conference on institutional racism. The idea is that when college leaders across institutions come together to learn and act collectively, a synergy may occur that promotes change in eradicating racism on campuses across the nation.

I also suggest that institutional leaders consider aligning themselves with ‘race

coaches' as they unpack racism concepts and implement campus change. Much like corporate executives employ life coaches, a practice that helps people identify and achieve personal goals using a variety of tools and techniques (Bozer & Joo, 2015), higher education leaders should employ race coaches to help them identify and achieve goals that eliminate racism on college campuses.

While “emboldening,” as Diana says, racist experiences cause racial battle fatigue and cost students greatly in terms of their physical and mental well-being. And, while the application of support systems and protective factors to achieve persistence may be a way to overcome challenges and oppression (Zolkowski & Bullock, 2012), research shows that the college experience necessitates that Black students exercise *more* perseverance than their White peers if they want to achieve academically, given racial biases, threats and racism in academia. Leonardo (2013) says that it is ultimately the responsibility of institutions to actively promote a positive racial climate rather than asking students to persist in light of unaddressed racism and oppression.

### **Conclusion: The Question**

The purpose of this study is to explore race critical incidents and Black student college persistence as indicated by the research question, ‘How does racism and race critical incidents influence Black student undergraduate college persistence at Predominantly White Institutions?’ The response to this question, as indicated above, is that persistence can be understood as the combination of three motivating factors - **family support** (encouragement) plus **Black Identity Development** (awareness, knowledge, appreciation of racial histories and identity) plus **Race Critical Incidents** (resistance to racism and call to action). In essence, the very construct (racism and race critical

incidents) explored in this study is also one of the major findings as an influence in persistence. The effect of RBF among students who persist cannot be ignored and the construct that elicits it – racism and race critical incidents - must be addressed and eradicated. Green (2016) asks whether it is appropriate for colleges to ask historically marginalized students to exercise more grit and persistence efforts or whether efforts should focus instead on institutional changes that promote greater racial justice so that Black students do not have to compromise their well-being by being resilient. Higher education institutions must step up.

### **Study Limitations**

This study asked participants to examine persistence and their college experiences through the lens of race critical incidents, thus foregrounding RCI and potentially over-emphasizing its importance. Perhaps had the study not focused specifically on RCI but rather asked students alternative way about their experiences with racism, other themes and findings may have emerged.

The construct of persistence is also potentially problematic. Given that the term persistence in this study designates success in the form of persevering in college with the ultimate goal of graduation, this research does not address the act of daily life persistence in light of overt and covert racism and experiences with race critical incidents.

Although this study focuses on the experiences of Black college students at PWIs, the generalizability is limited to the participants included. While the findings are specific to the participants, readers can make their own interpretations about transferring these findings to other settings.

Another limitation is the researcher herself. I am a White woman who asked Black students to share highly personal information and painful stories. Given my White privilege and that I have benefitted from a society cloaked in the policies and practices of a White Racial Frame, I can only assume that the participants of this study reacted to me as a representative of the very group that marginalizes them. This dynamic likely influenced their responses to questions and perhaps caused the students to hold back or filter their responses.

### **Future Research**

Future research should focus on the role of higher education leaders and their responsibility as stewards of the institution. These studies should focus on how leaders understand and implement policies and practices pertaining to racism and race critical incidents outside of creating the usual task forces, offices, departments and other strategies. Leaders must turn the lens inward to understand what they, as leaders, should do personally and specifically to implement change on college campuses. Such studies can help provide insight into ways to help leaders better support and increase persistence rates among Black students enrolled in PWIs.

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## Appendix A

### Study Protocol

#### Briefing

- Thank participants for being in the study
- Identify purpose of the study
- Get acquainted activities

#### Preliminary Questions

- Please answer the following demographic questions, before we begin.
  - What is your age?
  - What is your year in college?
  - What is your major?

#### Research Questions

- What is it like to attend this university?
- What do you think about race critical incidents that happened in Ferguson, MO?
- What do you think about the race critical incidents that have occurred on this campus in the fall of 2015 (i.e., Black student protests, Tent City, homecoming parade)
- In what way/s have you been affected by state and local racism incidents?
- In what way/s have your friends and other students been affected?
- Describe racial experiences in a) classes, b) housing, c) dining halls, d) campus activities,
- Describe your racial interactions on campus with a) professors, b) students of color, c) White students, d) staff
- What does college persistence mean to you?
  - Please describe your artifact.
- How do you describe your persistence efforts?
- How challenging is persistence for you? On a scale of 1 – 10 with 10 being the highest, how would you rate your experience? 1 = persistence is easy and 10 = persistence is quite challenging.
- What influences your ability to persist?
- How do racist events and communications on campus or elsewhere impact you?
- How do racist experiences influence your persistence?

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