YOU CAN'T SEE WHAT I CAN SEE: EXAMINING THE CAMPUS LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF BLACK FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A doctoral thesis presented
by
Tashika O. Griffith

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
August 2014
Abstract

The number of Black female graduate students withdrawing from predominantly White institutions (PWIs) continues to rise each year due to negative campus experiences with race and gender. One of the ways in which some institutions have addressed these issues is by providing more opportunities for graduate student engagement. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at a PWI. Four doctoral student participants were able to provide rich narratives of their individual communities, early and undergraduate years of student leadership, and experiences as graduate student leaders. Participants identified a personal artifact that symbolized who they are as Black female student leaders. Participants also shared that they were greatly influenced by peers to become a part of campus organizations and due to the influence of Black female family and community members. Once engaged in campus clubs and organizations, participants cited negative encounters with peers, faculty, and administrators regarding their race and gender. Alternatively, participants also reported having positive interactions within campus community. The study’s findings revealed that interactions via campus leaderships significantly improved their overall experiences. The findings are relevant for higher education administrators involved in administering services and resources for graduate students. Additional research is needed to discover the campus leadership experiences of master’s degree students as well as the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at other institutional types.

Keywords: Black graduate students, Student leadership, Black female leadership, predominantly White institutions, student engagement, attrition, socialization
Acknowledgements

“Can a mother’s love and tender care cease towards the child she bares? Yes, she may forgetful be, yet I will remember thee.” William Cowper

As an immigrant of the Bahamas, I was encouraged to always look back as I move forward. This lesson was provided at the hands of a woman who showed me that love endures all things. To my dearest “Mummy”, thank you for your strength, instilling a sense of purpose in my existence, and for being the driving force of my success. It is because of your love and leadership - I dedicate this work to you. There truly are no words to express how your strength and resilience inspired me to become the woman I am. To my husband Greg, the peace in my storms and the strength in my weak moments, thank you for supporting me during long days and even longer nights. I could not have made it through this journey without you by my side.

During my academic and professional journey, I have been blessed to have encountered exceptionally strong women who have impacted me in innumerable ways. First, thank you to my best friend Tanya, your love and support is still as strong as it was over 20 years ago. To my aunt Jane, thank you for challenging me, your love strengthened my resolve. To my “oh so sweet” sorors of the dove, Janine, Retha, Alexis, and Michelle - you taught me the true meaning of sisterly love. It has been an honor to share my world in blue with such beautiful women. Every beat of my heart, ladies. I want to thank my Dean of Students dolls Dayle and Claudia, though far in distance, I will never forget what you taught me during our time together. And to the only other man in my life, my Dad, though not spoken in words I feel your pride in me and it has always inspired me to be the greatest I am. Also, I would like to extend a very special thank you to my in-laws who fully embraced me into the Griffith family with open arms. Your care
reminded me daily that family ties are not always associated with blood ties. To my dear NU cohort members, thank you for always being a key stroke away. You all provided a positive framework and immeasurable support when least realized.

Getting to this point in my academic journey would not have been possible without the expertise and care of my thesis advisor – Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson. I am eternally grateful for your guidance and unwavering support. Your swift communication and clear expectations made this process manageable and my dreams attainable. Thank you for believing in the need for my research. I am also deeply appreciative of the breadth of knowledge and perceptive guidance given by Dr. Kelly Conn. Dr. Conn, thank you for sharing your perspectives and for challenging me to be the consummate scholar-practitioner. Dr. Dara Nix-Stevenson, thank you for your willingness to serve as a member of my committee. Your experience and keen understanding of my study’s topic provided a well-rounded balance of thoughts and ideas. I am thankful for the instrumental role you have all played in the completion of my study.

And finally, I am deeply indebted to the four spirited women that agreed to participate in my study. Your stories of strength in the face of constant adversity inspired me to no end. I am blessed to have met you all and humbled to have had the opportunity to share your stories and provide a platform in which your voices can be heard. For each moment of adversity you conquered, you inspired me and others beyond heights. To know your story is to share your story.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION ............................................................... 8
- Statement of the Problem ............................................................................... 8
- Justification for the Research Problem .......................................................... 9
- Deficiencies in the Evidence ......................................................................... 10
- Audience ....................................................................................................... 12
- Significance of Research Problem .................................................................. 13
- Positionality Statement .................................................................................. 15
- Research Questions ........................................................................................ 17
- Theoretical Framework ................................................................................... 17
  - Standpoint Theory ........................................................................................ 18
  - Black Feminist Thought ................................................................................. 19
  - Summary ....................................................................................................... 20
- Table 1 Standpoint Theory .............................................................................. 21

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................. 22
- Introduction and Organization ....................................................................... 22
- Graduate Student Orientation and Socialization ............................................. 22
  - Black Graduate Student Socialization and Attrition .................................... 28
  - Black Graduate Student Experiences ............................................................ 30
- Standpoint Theory ............................................................................................ 33
  - Black Women as Invisible on Predominantly White Campuses .................. 34
- Black Female Graduate Socialization and Experiences ............................... 35
- Graduate Student Involvement ....................................................................... 38
- Black Female Leadership and Student Involvement ........................................ 40
- Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 42

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY ......................................................... 44
- Purpose Statement and Research Questions .................................................. 44
- Research Design ............................................................................................... 44
Narrative Analysis ........................................................................................................... 46
Research Site.................................................................................................................... 47
Participants....................................................................................................................... 47
Recruitment and Access................................................................................................. 48
Data Collection ............................................................................................................... 49
  Interviews...................................................................................................................... 49
  Artifact Collection ...................................................................................................... 50
Data Storage..................................................................................................................... 51
Data Analysis .................................................................................................................. 51
  Thematic Analysis ....................................................................................................... 51
  Open Coding ............................................................................................................... 52
  Provisional Coding ..................................................................................................... 53
  Artifacts ...................................................................................................................... 53
  Analytic Memoing ...................................................................................................... 54
Trustworthiness................................................................................................................ 54
Protection of Human Subjects ....................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS........................................................................................... 57

Olivia’s Story .................................................................................................................... 57
  The Early Years .......................................................................................................... 57
  Community and Female Influence ............................................................................. 60
  Graduate Student Experiences .................................................................................... 64
  Black Graduate Student Leadership ............................................................................ 68

Jane’s Story ....................................................................................................................... 72
  The Early Years .......................................................................................................... 72
  Undergraduate Student Experiences ......................................................................... 75
  Graduate Student Experiences .................................................................................... 78
  Black Graduate Student Leadership ............................................................................ 85

Joyce’s Story .................................................................................................................... 90
  The Early Years .......................................................................................................... 90
  Undergraduate Student Experiences ......................................................................... 92
Chapter One

Statement of the Problem

Black female graduate student enrollment rates in master’s, Ph.D. and Ed.D. degree programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have increased by over 200% from the 1970s to 2000s (Department of Education, 2010). Despite the significant enrollment increase, higher education institutions still report low graduation rates among black female graduate students when compared to other racial groups (Department of Education, 2010). Moreover, Black female students reported having negative on campus experiences such as racial and gender insensitivity, discrimination and verbal insults by majority students at PWIs (Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr, 2000). Consequently, many Black female students cited feeling disengaged and isolated from the institution’s campus community and cited those feelings as reasons why they would opt to not return to their institution (Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, Bowles, 2009; Pemberton, Ray, Said, Easterly, and Belcher, 2010). In an effort to better understand what factors contribute to the low campus involvement and subsequent low retention rates of Black female graduate students at PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Reid & Radhakrishan, 2003), a closer examination of the campus experiences of Black female graduate students who serve as leaders of campus clubs or organizations within the community will be studied.

Cabrera et al. (1999) posited that “exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom and on campus has gained attention as the main factor accounting for differences in withdrawal behavior between minorities and non-minorities” (p. 135). Grier-Reed, Madyun, and Buckley (2008) contended that administrators at PWIs must provide social support systems for Black students. Similarly, Tinto (1993) surmised that students’ social integration
into an institution’s social system played a significant role in their decision to leave an institution. To address these challenges, additional research shows that developing effective ways to engage students into the campus community, such as campus leadership opportunities, would enhance the campus experiences of Black female graduate students and would also improve the retention rates of this rising student subpopulation (Seidman, 2005). Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to understand how Black female graduate students view their campus experiences and to learn whether leadership experiences heighten the experiences of students from this sub population.

**Justification for the research problem.** Studies have noted that Black students at PWIs have reported more negative campus experiences with discrimination when compared to White students (Reid & Radhakrishan, 2003; DeFour, & Barton, 1990; Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr, 2000; Griffin; Muniz & Espinosa, 2012). Specifically, several studies revealed that Black students who reported experiencing racial prejudice, discrimination, and feelings of isolation, were less than likely to become involved within the campus community when compared to White male and female students (Johnson, 2012; Williams et al., 2005). Studies regarding Black graduate women have typically focused on the need to provide stronger institutional support systems and underscored the limited resources and opportunities available for students to become more involved within the campus community (Belk, 2006; Gordon, 2004; Gregory, 2001).

In their study exploring the experiences of African American women in graduate schools at PWIs, Shwartz et al. (2003) maintained that female graduate students expressed feelings of anxiety, “fear of inadequacy” and “being out of place” (p. 254). In a focus group comprised of thirty African American female graduate students, Shwartz et al. (2003) found that participant experienced “different treatment while in graduate school because of their race” (p. 261).
Participants cited one of the most common experiences was receiving different treatment from White students in their program and that because of that, several Black female graduate students isolated themselves and “refused to join organizations” (p. 261). Other participants stated that they were invited to join “campus African American organizations” (p. 261) but were never asked to join student organizations in their field.

When examining the campus experiences of Black graduate students, Bailey et al. (2009) found that Black graduate students reported experiences of overt and covert racial and gender discrimination by White faculty and students, social isolation. Moreover, students reported that White faculty and students undermined their academic capabilities and expected Black graduate students to “speak for the race” (p. 188). Bailey et al. (2009) asserted that these experiences resulted in students feeling isolated from the campus community and their academic programs. Additionally, Black graduate students stated they viewed their experience PWIs as a lonely one and most noted that they would not want their children to attend their alma mater (p. 192). The themes of loneliness, isolation and discrimination as a result of interacting with White faculty and students highlight the need for Black female graduate students who hold leadership positions of campus organizations to recount their experiences and to identify whether these leadership experiences has improved and positively influenced their experiences within the campus community.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** While these studies’ findings have provided more insight into the experiences of male and female Black undergraduate students, the ways in which college and university administrators provide additional opportunities for Black graduate students to become more engaged within the campus community has been minimally addressed. Moreover, studies regarding Black graduate students often do not distinguish the unique challenges female
students face when compared to their Black male counterparts (Maton, Wimms, Grant, Wittig, Rogers, & Vasquez, 2011; DeFour & Barton, 1990; Pemberton, Ray, Said, Easterly & Belcher, 2010). Similarly, research regarding the experiences of Black female graduate students at PWIs has been limited, with most studies fusing the campus experiences of Black, Latino/a, Asian American, Pacific Islander and Native American students of color (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005).

Studies regarding graduate students of color suggest more should be done to examine the effectiveness of current diversity initiatives at PWIs and to seek ways to retain students of color. Rogers and Molina’s (2006) study regarding efforts to retain graduate students of color identified some of the most effective strategies employed by PWIs. The study examined the retention efforts of academic and graduate programs. Strategies included closer interaction and “active engagement” between graduate students of color and faculty and an increase in the population of students of color (p. 149). The strategies were recognized as being effective by students of color and faculty. However, Black graduate students’ accounts specifically pointed out that these efforts were not included in the study and that they would have provided more insight into how campus engagement opportunities influence student retention. Likewise, research explicitly addressing how Black female graduate students perceive their engagement experiences at PWIs has often only provided a partial view of how students made sense of their experiences and how they were able to persist to graduation at a PWI (Johnson, 2012; Brunner & Peyton, 2000). Williams et al., (2005) explored the experiences of Black female graduate students at a research I PWI and argued that Black graduate students must “navigate various characteristics, not only academic ability” (p. 181) in order to have a successful graduate school experience. The qualitative study, which highlighted the experiences of three graduate students through written
accounts of their experiences, found that Black female graduate students experienced a deep sense of doubt with regard to their academic abilities within their program due largely in part by the discrimination they experienced by White male faculty and students (p. 196).

After interacting with students and faculty within the classroom, students noted experiencing feelings of isolation and an increased perception that their White peers assumed they were in graduate programs because of affirmative action practices at PWIs. While Williams et al.’s study provided additional insight into the often unheard stories of Black female graduate students, its goal of examining the academic experiences of this student population, similar to other studies that examine Black female graduate students, does not adequately provide an in-depth understanding of whether out-of-classroom involvement in graduate clubs or organizations improved their campus experiences. In sum, while there are studies that explore Black graduate students, more research is needed to understand Black female graduate students’ perspectives of campus engagement opportunities at PWIs to learn whether these opportunities enhance the overall campus experience of this student subpopulation.

**Audience.** The findings of this study would be beneficial for higher education administrators who are seeking to learn more about ways in which they can engage Black female graduate students to the campus community and improve the graduation rate of this student subpopulation. Through the use of a qualitative approach, in-depth dialogue and themes will be generated from study participants to learn more about why Black female graduate students select particular leadership opportunities. They will also be encouraged to share their experiences. In order to more closely examine this issue, this study will explore how Black female graduate students make sense of their campus leadership experiences through intersecting dimensions of race and gender.
Significance of Research Problem

Understanding the unique needs of Black students has been challenging for faculty and administrators at PWIs (Pontius & Harper, 2006; Tinto, 2004; Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2007; Pascarella & Ternzini, 2005). The question of whether post-secondary institutions serve as inclusive communities has been asked by internal and external constituents in recent years. The need for higher education institutions to enhance opportunities for students to have more positive interactions with peers and faculty is integral to achieving many of the diversity goals listed by colleges and universities within their strategic plans and mission statements (Patton, 2009). Colleges and universities also cite that maintaining strong ties with their alumni base for potential donor contributions as another important goal for the institution’s financial success. Research indicates that Black students who report having positive experiences during their time in college typically participate in a greater number of alumni activities and are more likely to contribute financially to their alma mater (Schofield & Fallon, 2012). Consequently, learning more about the aspects of campus engagement which contribute to more positive campus experiences among Black female graduate students could result in the successful attainment of an institution’s diversity goals and increase retention rates.

Further research regarding Black female graduate student experiences is also significant on the global, federal and local levels for several reasons. Currently, the United States has “fallen to 16th in the world in its share of certificates and degrees awarded to adults ages 25-34 – lagging behind Korea, Canada, Japan and other nations” (Higher Education, 2013). Although more racial and ethnic groups are enrolling in college, the decline in college degree attainment has impacted the United States’ global competitiveness rating due to, as the report indicates an “inadequate educated workforce” when compared to other global countries (Schwab, 2013). Increased
research regarding the experiences of this diverse and emergent graduate student subpopulation will not only serve to improve the workforce pool within the United States, but will better prepare Black female graduate students for leadership opportunities post-graduation. In addition, an increase in graduation rates among Black female graduate students will ensure that more are entering the workforce fully prepared to lead the increasingly diverse work population in the United States.

The importance of graduate student retention and its link to government funding has also been highlighted in various research studies (Zumeta, Breneman, Callan & Finney, 2010; McPherson & Schapiro, 2003; Trow, 1976). Trow’s (1976) seminal article reviewed the government’s decision to reduce graduate student support at Harvard University. Trow (1976) observed that one of the dangers the reduction had on academic departments was the inability of graduate students to teach course sections. He indicated that “without them the program itself is very much in danger” (p. 5). The fear of declining government funding is still prevalent among colleges and universities. This has made it necessary for higher education institutions to seek supplementary ways to secure grants through incentivized funding. Among other things, they must demonstrate their ability to effectively enroll and retain Black students (Abdul-Alim, 2013; Turner, 2012). Through further research, institutions can obtain a first-hand account of what opportunities are most successful for persistence of Black females to graduation and secure funding that will assist with new initiatives for students.

Finally, on a local level, the need to identify the challenges and benefits that Black female graduate students experience at PWIs is integral for those who want to pursue an advanced degree. Johnson and Bailey’s (2004) study examining Black female graduate students
stressed that Black students often turned to their peers for academic and social support more frequently than White students. The study noted that they also relied upon one another to learn more about campus involvement opportunities and the institutional culture. As such, by hearing this study’s first-hand accounts of current Black female graduate student campus and leadership experiences, other black females can specifically identify ways to participate in and navigate through a PWI.

**Positionality Statement**

As noted by Machi and McEvoy (2009) “introspection can bring these views and attachments to the forefront, where they can be identified as what they are” (p. 19). Through careful introspection, I identified my biases in regard to my area of interest. My research topic stems from both my personal and professional experiences in higher education in the United States. One of the major challenges I experienced in college, a challenge which persists for many Black female graduate students, was learning how my campus leadership experiences shaped my perception of the campus community and seeking out ways to become engaged within the community.

Research on Black college students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) mainly focuses on the experiences of undergraduate students (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The emphasis on the Black undergraduate student experience is further demonstrated by the various programs and services currently offered by higher education institutions that are specifically developed for undergraduates. Events such as orientation, summer bridge programs, mentor opportunities, and programs are geared toward improving the experiences of Black students. However, they with little to no attention given to the unique needs of Black graduate students. This became very apparent to me during my first year at my PWI graduate institution located in a rural area. As I
began to look for leadership experiences on campus, I soon realized that the only opportunities I was made aware of by faculty and staff involved becoming a member of the Black graduate student association (BGSA). While I was interested in participating in this club, I wondered whether my racial and gender identity played an integral role in my being made aware of the existence of a Black graduate student organization by White faculty and administrators.

Although I initially had doubts about joining the organization, I decided to join in order to meet students from backgrounds different from my own Caribbean roots and to enhance my interpersonal and leadership skills. After joining BGSA, I soon met other students from various backgrounds; some that were very similar to my own and some that were very different. Being involved in a campus group widely respected by faculty and administrators afforded me the opportunity to network with faculty in various academic programs and senior administrative staff. Subsequently, the interactions with faculty led to invitations to become involved in research and conference presentations all while building professional and personal relationships with graduate students in other disciplines. Moreover, my additional responsibilities provided me with a sense of purpose and value within the campus community and improved my perception of the institution’s commitment to historically underrepresented students.

In my current role as a mid-level administrator at a private PWI, one of my responsibilities involves co-advising the Graduate Student Association (GSA). Most of the students I encounter are highly motivated and participate in GSA in order to advocate for graduate student needs while gaining leadership development skills in the process. The 2013-2014 president of GSA is a Black female graduate student and has been quite candid in sharing her leadership experiences and the challenges she has faced in her attempt to become more fully engaged with the institution. Her experiences of more positive interactions with students and
faculty after assuming a campus leadership position and after experiences with discrimination and isolation at a PWI were both similar and somewhat different from my experiences in graduate school. My belief is that the differences and similarities in our experiences will parallel those of the Black female graduate students participating in the study.

As a Black woman who attended graduate school at a PWI, I can relate to students who have had similar experiences. Additionally, as a Black administrator at a predominantly White university, I am sensitive to the needs of Black students who want to have more positive interactions with members of their campus community. My direct involvement in facilitating and sharing leadership opportunities with graduate students also makes me acutely aware of the importance of providing ample leadership opportunities for Black female graduate students. As a result of my study, I am seeking to fill a void in the literature and to discover whether the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students have changed over the years.

**Research Questions**

The study’s focus was guided by the following research questions:

1) How do Black female graduate students select on-campus leadership opportunities at a PWI?

2) How do Black female graduate students view their campus leadership experiences at a PWI?

3) In what ways does holding a campus leadership position affect the overall campus experience of Black female graduate students at a PWI?

**Theoretical Framework**

Greene et.al (1989) noted that a theoretical framework provides a general representation of existing theories on how a specific phenomenon occurs. Fundamentally, a theoretical
framework guides the research and outlines the elements that will be examined and any relationships between them. Stephens and Phillips (2005) maintained that identifying, interpreting, and exploring African American women’s unique experiences should be grounded in a theory that reflects their “social location” (p. 39), or where Black people generally fit in society. In order to better understand how Black female graduate students perceive their campus leadership experiences at PWIs, it is important to realize the ways in which knowledge varies based upon an individual’s perceived social location of power within their environment.

Although all participants identify as Black females, I highlighted the individual leadership experiences within the campus club or organization and pay special attention to the ways in which their personal accounts as graduate student leaders vary. This recognition, that participants’ shared race and gender status do not guarantee similar viewpoints and may vary based on their roles in leadership positions is why standpoint theory and black feminist thought (BFT) theory were selected as the foundations of this study. As Collins (2004) noted, BFT claims that the standpoints of a women’s race and gender subject her to various forms of oppression. Due to the participants’ identity of being Black, female and in a position of power at a PWI, both theories will guide my analysis by providing a more thorough understanding of the distinct differences of the campus leadership experiences of each Black female graduate student based on which standpoint each participant best identifies.

**Standpoint theory.** Standpoint theory was grounded upon the exploration of epistemology and was later modified to incorporate women’s experiences in the 1970s and 1980s (Harstock, 1983). Standpoint theory contends that marginalized groups view the world from both their position and from the position of dominant groups; with particular emphasis on the power structure within the environment (Hallstein, 1999). The theory states that power guides
the views of marginalized groups and provides an additional vantage point from which to view society’s norms when compared to dominant groups (Rouse, 2009). Standpoint theory, though adapted during the 1970s as a feminist theory, was first introduced by German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the early nineteenth century. Hegel posited that what individuals come to know about themselves, others, and society is predicated upon the group they belong to (Kaufman, 1997, p. 809) and that this way of knowing exists among other truths (Kaag, 2011, p. 561).

Moreover, standpoint theory highlights the notion that power plays an integral role in how individuals view the world. The notion of power informing the viewpoints of marginalized groups is another important contributor to selecting standpoint theory as the theoretical framework for this study of Black female graduate students who hold leadership positions at a PWI. Standpoint theory was later adapted to address the lack of women’s voices and perspectives during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Hekman (1997) contended that standpoint theory, as delineated through the political power structure during the 1970s, incorporated the voices of women’s realities based on their lived experiences (p. 349).

**Black feminist thought.** During the 1980s, Patricia Hill Collins stressed the need to advance standpoint theory to incorporate the voices and experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. She emphasized the role of power as the social divider among groups (p. 376). Collins (1997) suggested that Black feminist theory provided individuals from oppressed groups a more clear view of society than individuals from more powerful and privileged groups. In response to Hekman’s (1997) assertions on feminist standpoint theory, Collins (1997) noted that Hekman (1997) failed to recognize the multidimensional aspects of feminist standpoint theory...
and the influence of racial inequality in American society when examining the complex issues, needs and challenges of Black women.

Collins (1990) contends that women of color face “interlocking structures of oppression,” including race, gender, socio-economic status and sexual orientation (p. 225). The voices of women from these groups must be heard in order to learn more about their unique challenges and needs. These all contribute to more broadened viewpoints. The framework’s emphasis is on the varying dimensions of women’s social experiences, the varying viewpoints of an oppressed group and the focus on the lived experiences of Black women in a majority environment. BFT will serve as a guide to identify how Black female graduate students perceive their campus experiences and the influences those experiences have on the perceptions of their campus environment. Table 1 provides an illustration of standpoint theory as it relates to the study.

**Summary.** The use of standpoint theory and Black feminist theory allows for the cultivation of personal accounts of graduate students who identify as being both Black and female. The theories will assist with learning whether campus leadership opportunities are viewed as an instrumental part of enhancing the campus experiences of Black female graduate students. Standpoint and Black feminist thought also work in concert to provide a more acute lens through which to view campus leadership from the perspectives of Black women currently holding leadership positions in clubs and organizations. BFT will set the stage for the various ways in which participants interpret their experiences within a majority-based campus environment. Standpoint theory will afford an opportunity to view the varying points of women who hold leadership positions at a PWI. Finally, and germane to the significance of the study, discovering the personal stories of these women through both frameworks will highlight the
varying nuances of each experience and provide practical solutions to improving retention rates among Black women.

Figure 1

Standpoint Theory
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction and Organization

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to more closely examine the experiences of Black female graduate students who hold campus leadership positions at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Henry (2010) asserts that Black women in colleges and universities contend with multiple layers of marginalization based on race and gender. She also says that research centered on Black women that combine the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students serve to further marginalize the group. Through close examination of the experiences of Black graduate women, the literature will assist in understanding the obstacles Black female students face in an environment in which they are identified as the minority. Lastly, the literature will provide insight into Black graduate student socialization, attrition, campus experiences and involvement.

By evaluating the literature through the analytical lens of both standpoint and Black feminist thought theories, this chapter will illuminate the challenges Black female graduate students face within their campus community. Further, in order to better understand the experiences of graduate students, this literature review will examine the following three main elements within the bodies of literature: graduate student socialization through orientation, the campus experiences of Black female graduate students at PWIs, and student campus leadership involvement.

Graduate Student Orientation and Socialization

Graduate student socialization is an integral part of the graduate student experience because the manner in which graduate students are socialized into the campus community influences the types of experiences students will encounter inside and outside of the classroom
(Guiffrida, 2003). Additionally, the retention of graduate students is also impacted by the socialization experience. Researchers have found that graduate orientation decreases student anxiety and increases student retention (Miller, Miles, & Dyer, 2001; Lopez 1998). Bess (1978) describes socialization as the process in which existing members within an environment share the prevailing customs and traditions with new members. In his quantitative study, he underscores the importance of identifying the various ways in which graduate students are socialized and draws a distinction between the five stages of socialization for graduate students. The socialization process, described as an ongoing “learning process” (Bess, 1978, p. 292) includes observation, imitation, feedback, adjustment and internalization. Bess (1978) stresses the adjustment stage as being particularly important because it can affect an organizational member’s sense of belonging. As such, this stage is also an important aspect in the graduate student’s social experience, as previous research stressed the need for a successful transition into graduate school to minimize retention issues (Gurin & Nagda, 1998).

Similarly, Anderson and Swazey (1998) surveyed over 1,000 doctoral students in a quantitative study and learned that based on being in a majority based environment, students felt that graduate school “was changing them in ways they did not like” (p. 9). The study’s results affirmed the significance of the internalization stage in the socialization process and are consistent with the transitional issues many graduate students experience within their first few weeks on campus. The results also suggest the importance of providing graduate students with effective ways of becoming community members by imparting the university’s traditions, culture, history, and mission upon their arrival.

One of the most common ways colleges and universities socialize students to the campus environment is through orientation programs prior to the first day of classes (Poock, 2004).
Orientation programs assist with the transition of students to their new surroundings and the existing culture of the institution (Poock, 2004). Because institutions mainly focus their orientation programming efforts on undergraduate students, the graduate student orientation experience has been minimally addressed and therefore has often failed to address the comprehensive needs of graduate students (Bess, 1978). Graduate students report having difficulty establishing social connections and assimilating into the campus community due to diverse maturity levels and socialization preferences (Lewis, 2001). The literature suggests that many doctoral students who experience difficulty integrating into the campus community withdraw from their doctoral program prior to obtaining their degrees (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). Consequently, in order to understand the ways in which graduate students navigate through their campus experiences, an examination of the ways in which they are introduced to the campus community via orientation programs will be explored.

Although studies that examine how graduate students perceive socialization to their institution are limited (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001; Poock, 2002), learning more about graduate student orientation socialization experiences is important for several reasons. First, becoming familiar with orientation experiences can assist in understanding why low retention rates of graduate students from diverse backgrounds continue to exist. Second, a better understanding of effective types of orientation programs will improve graduate student campus experiences. Lastly, providing a more detailed account of the types of graduate student orientations would enhance the engagement of graduate students within the overall campus community (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001).
Many higher education institutions provide orientation programs for master’s and doctoral students. However the platform differs from undergraduate orientation due to a greater focus on acclimating graduate students to their perspective academic departments rather than the overall campus environment (Boyle & Boice, 1998). While higher education institutions often utilize academic department based orientation formats as opposed to campus wide formats, the effectiveness of their impact on graduate students’ experiences is still widely unknown (Poock, 2002). Furthermore, the distinction between master’s and doctoral student graduate socialization indicate that doctoral student orientations relies more heavily on academic procedures, faculty advising and department policies with minimal introduction and engagement with the social culture of the institution (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In their phenomenological qualitative study, Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) conducted interviews with 76 doctoral students to learn about doctoral experiences and how they influenced degree persistence. The doctoral students reported that the social aspects of their doctoral journey, specifically positive relationships and interactions with their peers, made their experience more manageable (p. 211). The study’s results also affirmed the need for students, specifically graduate students, to have positive social experiences outside of their academic department.

In his qualitative study regarding the graduate student experiences of master’s and doctoral students, Bess (1978) asserts the “role of nonacademic programs in out-of-class settings” as being key to the “growth and development” of graduate students (p. 290). These studies suggest that additional opportunities for students to become involved in campus clubs and organizations and increased social interaction with peers would provide graduate students with a stronger sense of belonging to the institution.
The studies’ results point to the significance of positive student peer to peer relationships among graduate students. However, those who do not report having high levels of positive interactions with peers such as Black and female graduate students experience greater difficulty in their doctoral journey (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Ali and Kohun (2006) elucidate that social support through effective socialization methods increases African American doctoral students’ academic achievement and increases “interaction among the students and also with faculty” (p. 28). Likewise, Poock’s (2002) quantitative study addressed the perceived effectiveness of departments and campus wide orientation formats between majority and underrepresented master’s and doctoral students. The study, which included 208 responses from both master’s and doctoral students, found that both student populations viewed department-based orientations as very important for learning about faculty expectations. Furthermore, graduate students reported that departments should have “primary responsibility for addressing adjustment issues” and fostering a welcoming environment for new graduate students (p. 240). Although both majority and underrepresented students agreed on the importance of department orientation, underrepresented graduate students reported campus-wide orientation formats as being most effective. More specifically, students of color emphasized the significance that campus-wide programs had on feeling welcomed, connecting with students from similar backgrounds, and learning about opportunities to become involved in the university through participation in campus clubs and organizations. Similarly, women graduate students also expressed greater value in campus wide orientation activities that provided more information regarding campus safety and allowed for more opportunities to informally interact with fellow graduate students. Underrepresented graduate students’ preference of campus wide orientation formats illustrates the need for higher education institutions to closely evaluate and develop more social and
nonacademic based orientation activities. Doing so would enhance the socialization experiences of all graduate student populations which the literature indicates is integral to students’ successful progression through an academic program.

Expanding upon his previous study, Poock (2004) contends that graduate students experience a dual process due to their socialization into their graduate program and the campus culture (p. 472). Poock’s (2004) quantitative study, which surveyed 191 master’s and doctoral students, found that many higher education graduate orientation programs typically last half of the day, and topics range from university policies to academic advisement. Graduate students reported that the majority of the topics covered were academic related, with little to no discussion about social transition and “family issues of graduate students” (p. 481). Graduate students often enter master’s and doctoral programs at an age in which the social needs and demands of students’ partners and children’s are prevalent (Poock, 2004). As the literature revealed, the socialization of graduate students varies greatly based on age, race and gender. As a result of this, higher education institutions should incorporate the social transitional issues of diverse graduate students and their families by increasing campus wide orientation programming opportunities (Boyle & Boice, 1998).

Female graduate students place particular importance on social aspects of their orientation experience, such as spousal and family needs, when transitioning into the campus environment (Ali & Kohun, 2006). For women in graduate school, it is not just about their needs other relationships are important. Accordingly, graduate students, specifically underrepresented graduate students, value opportunities to interact with peers and engage in campus involvement opportunities (Allen, 1988). These results signify the need for higher education institutions to provide more comprehensive socialization experiences that encompasses the different campus
opportunities available to graduate students with an emphasis on helping students build relationships. Similarly, the studies revealed the need for higher education institutions to become more aware of the additional challenges and socialization preferences of underrepresented graduate students. These students place significant importance on outside-of-the-classroom experiences when compared to majority graduate students (Guiffrida, 2003). In addition to improving the socialization of graduate students, understanding the specific experiences underrepresented graduate students encounter once enrolled in an academic program would be beneficial in determining ways to socialize and engage this student population into the campus community more effectively.

**Black Graduate Student Socialization and Attrition**

Feelings of isolation and loneliness within a university setting can be particularly difficult for graduate students who have been removed from academic settings for prolonged periods prior to reentry into a campus environment (Golde, 2000). These feelings can be particularly difficult for students in an environment in which they are the minority (Steele, 2003). Golde’s (2000) qualitative study, which included student descriptions of the doctoral experience, revealed that doctoral graduate students felt isolated, unsupported by faculty and administration, and left alone to navigate a new campus environment (p. 209). Students recounted that as they advanced through their graduate programs, they were strongly encouraged by faculty to become more independent, which led to solitary experiences within their program (Anderson and Swazey, 1998). Golde (1996) found that doctoral students reported feeling isolated and disappointed with the lack of opportunities to become fully integrated within the campus community. Many students reported these as reasons that contributed to their withdrawal from their institution. The study’s results suggest that institutions must invest resources to develop programs that facilitate
meaningful interactions and integration among racial and ethnic groups in order to improve the retention rates of Black students (Locks et al., 2008). Similarly, Tinto (1993) contends that formal interaction with peers through clubs and organizations tend to yield the most positive results with underrepresented students and had a significant impact. Given the link between social integration and attrition among underrepresented graduate students, understanding these experiences and also identifying which nonacademic campus opportunities best support graduate students who have the greatest difficulty persisting to graduation is essential (Nettles & Millet, 2006).

Guiffrida (2003) also emphasized the importance of Black students being provided with opportunities to become socially integrated into the environment of a PWI in order to succeed academically and socially. His qualitative study, which comprised 88 Black students at PWIs, found that students who were involved in student clubs and organizations reported feeling more integrated into the campus community. Likewise, Gardner and Barnes’ (2007) qualitative study, in which they interviewed 10 doctoral students, also explored graduate student involvement. The study found that doctoral students who were involved in clubs, organizations, and associations were more connected with the community and acquired additional skills that affirmed what they were learning inside of the classroom. Because Black students are not represented in the study, although the study’s attention was not primarily focused on Black graduate students, the findings do point to the need for colleges and universities to learn more about what specific types of student involvement would foster a sense of belonging among Black graduate students.

Overall, Black graduate students benefit from more relational exchanges with faculty and peers, and these interactions have a direct impact on the ways in which they perceive their value within the campus community (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). Moreover, Black graduate student
involvement in campus clubs and organizations also provided support and contributed to the enhancement of various skills that graduate students applied within their classroom setting (Tuitt, 2010). These findings demonstrate the need for research that more closely examines the out-of-classroom interactions Black graduate students have with their peers, particularly when they are involved in campus clubs and organizations. Learning more about the experiences of Black graduate students would provide a better understanding of why students remain or choose to withdraw from PWIs.

**Black graduate student experiences.** In addition, Black graduate students indicated that they contend with additional issues and negative experiences such as racial discrimination, insensitivity and bias (Allen, 1988; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). More specifically, the literature indicates that Black graduate students reported being ignored in the classroom, stereotyped by student peers and faculty, and feeling as if they were expected to be the “racial representative” within the campus community (Bailey et al, p. 182). Correspondingly, MacLachlan’s (2006) study examined the experiences of 33 Black master’s and doctoral graduate students at a PWI and found that students felt the campus environment to be “cold” and “totally different” (p. 7). These additional challenges not only made it difficult for Black graduates to remain in academic programs, but also made it hard for students to seek out opportunities for involvement within the campus community. Further, these experiences contributed to the lack of persistence to graduation of Black graduate students and contributed to Black graduate students having less than positive experiences at PWIs when compared to White graduate students (Davis, 2007). Moreover, a significant number of Black students report experiencing differential treatment and poor satisfaction with their institution, which led to students withdrawing (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Tuitt (2010) argued that Black graduate students constantly “negotiate the tension
between being true to themselves and conforming to traditional pedagogical practices which require they become objective, apolitical, and unemotional intellectual beings” (p. 246). Truitt’s (2010) qualitative study focused on the experiences of Black graduate students and noted that a significant amount of students reported encountering racism. The experiences resulted in feelings of insecurity, disrespect, and questioning their place at the institution (p. 247). This suggests that Black graduate students contend with multiple dynamics of racism in both their academic and social campus environment.

In the qualitative study, Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2003) included 30 interviews of students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and across academic disciplines. They found that “African American students experience, on average, more incidents of differential treatment in college-related situations than their Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian classmates” (p. 438).

Research suggests that African Americans tend to experience more discrimination because they stand out more as a minority group at PWIs (Eimers & Pike, 1997; Freeman, 1997). The more distinct one is physically from others, the more likely others may see one as “out of the group” (Keith & Herring, 1991). More specifically, the darker the color of one’s skin, the higher the probability of being treated differently (Wyatt, 1997).

Nettles and Millett (2006) asserted that campus experiences involving racial discrimination and bias significantly impact Black graduate students due to the close mentor and advising relationships students have with peers and faculty. For example, their quantitative study, which consisted of over 9,000 doctoral students, found that Black students are disadvantaged in doctoral studies due to negative campus experiences that ranged from how students were welcomed on campus to their interactions with other students and faculty. In
particular, Bowles et al. (2009) highlighted the negative experiences Black graduates encounter in its mixed methods study of 678 Black master’s and doctoral alumni from various PWIs. The study’s respondents recalled encountering experiences of discrimination by White faculty and students, “avoidance by White students” and an “underestimation of academic ability” (p. 188) while they were enrolled. Moreover, students also reported feeling unwelcomed at extracurricular activities.

Similarly, Henfield, Owens and Witherspoon’s (2010) qualitative study on Black doctoral students’ perception of their graduate experience in counseling programs found that in addition to Black graduate student experiences with discrimination, students reported feeling marginalized and invisible (p. 227). Graduate students remarked that one of the ways they cope with discrimination is through their involvement with campus organizations such as Black Greek sororities and fraternities and Black graduate student associations (p. 238). Students also cited that having individual support from peers and collective support from organization members also assist with the challenges they face at a PWI. Henfield, Owens and Witherspoon (2010) maintain that although some Black graduate students have found alternate systems of support, if the negative experiences continue, higher education institutions will continue to see a decrease in student retention of this student population. While the literature provided themes of discrimination, isolation, and stereotyping as predominant experiences of Black graduate students, studies also showed the impact of peer support and student campus involvement. By closely examining the literature on Black graduate student experiences, it illustrates the various ways in which they can be provided with opportunities to become more involved within the campus community. This means that colleges and universities must develop intentional out-of-
classroom opportunities for Black graduate students to engage with peers from similar and diverse backgrounds in more meaningful ways.

In his qualitative study of Black master’s and doctoral students, Truitt (2010) provides best practices to address the experiences of Black graduate students. Some of these include providing campus opportunities that would foster a sense of belonging, feelings of respect and dignity, and supportive identity growth such as involvement in ethnic and academic based student organizations (p. 247). Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2003) also provide recommendations for improving the treatment of underrepresented students, such as encouraging inclusivity through educational programs and ensuring that student interests are incorporated into the university community.

The challenges surrounding the attrition rates of graduate students have been well documented in the literature (Nerad & Miller, 1996; Lefevre, 1972; Golde, 1996). Drawing on a diverse body of research, the review of the literature revealed some information surrounding Black graduate student experiences with faculty, and peers within the campus community. Specifically, the literature highlighted the ways in which institutions socialize Black graduate students, and what factors influence attrition within this student population. However, there is minimal research on the out-of-classroom experiences of graduate students who face multiple levels of discrimination, such as Black female graduate students. Additionally, more research is warranted from the standpoint of Black graduate students, to recount specific out-of-classroom activities and the particular types of campus organizational involvement that resulted in positive interactions and experiences at their institutions.

Standpoint Theory
Patricia Hill-Collins (1986) provided an overview of Black women’s experiences via the intellectual tradition of Black feminist thought and standpoint theories. Collins (1986) argues that through their relegated status, Black women have historically battled against marginal positions within colleges and universities in the United States (p. 14). Moreover, due to the unique experiences that Black women consistently encounter based on their race and gender, their realities and standpoints often differ significantly when compared to the dominant group. Additionally, Collins (1986) noted that Black women are given fewer opportunities to express their unique perspectives occurs less frequently in an environment where the dominant group has the most power. Despite the lack of recognition regarding the nuances of Black women’s unique standpoints, Collins (1986) stressed that Black women should not suppress their standpoints to that of the majority, but creating and sharing an “independent consciousness” (p. 751) with other groups. Given the most common ways in which universities engage students, such as leadership opportunities via participation in student clubs and organizations, providing more opportunities for Black women to share their views while interacting with the campus community would assist with institutional missions of truly value all of its campus community members.

**Black women as invisible on predominantly white campuses.** Black female graduate students who have been successful in their graduate work moved through various social experiences while navigating through graduate school (Ewing et al., 1996). Sesko and Biernat (2009) argue that due to Black women’s belonging to multiple minority groups, they experience even more marginalization than Black males and White women. They maintain that this dual marginalization results in Black women being invisible within a majority-based environment. In part one of their two part quantitative study, Sesko and Biernat (2009) found that 131 White undergraduate students at a PWI who viewed photos of various women had significantly lower
recognition counts for Black women when compared to any other group, and “participants were worst at distinguishing old from new faces in the cases of Black women” (p. 358). The second part of the study involved participants listening to a conversation between Black and White male and female college students and identifying which statements were made by each person. Overall, statements made by Black women were incorrectly identified more than any other group (p. 359). The study’s results offer examples of the ways in which Black women are invisible among White students on a predominantly White campus (Sesko & Biernat, 2009, p. 359). Moreover, the study also points to the complex ways in which race and gender impact Black women’s campus experiences at PWIs. Although the study’s participants were undergraduate students, the findings also provide an indication of Black female graduate student experiences of isolation as a consequence of being invisible at PWIs.

**Black Female Graduate Socialization and Experiences**

Although Black female graduate enrollment at PWIs has increased, Black women still experience significant challenges in graduate school, which influences whether they persist to graduation as compared to their male counterparts (Sesko & Niernat, 2010). In addition to academic stressors, Black graduate female students report struggling with feelings of isolation and grappling with the ways in which they are treated by faculty and their peers based on their race and gender (Williams et al., 2005; Steele, 2003; Hughes, 2002). For example, Ulku-Steiner et al. (2000) maintain that women in male dominated programs report receiving little consideration for family issues in contrast to other students in their departments, and that often this lack of support leads to withdrawal from their program. Given the level of importance many Black female graduate students (Ali & Kohun, 2006) place on family and connecting with others, an environment that does not support those views will more than likely alienate students who do.
These findings suggest that in addition to experiences of isolation and discrimination based on their race, Black female graduate students also undergo discrimination based on their gender and a lack of empathy from faculty and peers regarding family obligations and responsibilities (Williams, et al., 2005). Further, the gap in the literature regarding the campus experiences of Black female graduate students illustrates the need for an examination of the Black female graduate student experience from their own perspective in order to learn which social factors affect this population.

Many Black female master’s and doctoral graduate students attribute withdrawal from their institution to isolation, limited campus role models, and the feeling of being “uninvited guests in a strange land” (Parker & Scott, 1986, p. 82). These feelings can be particularly difficult for graduate students who spend most of their time in the classroom and engaged in research. Based on their classroom experiences of Black female graduate students, students indicated that faculty gender makeup not only influences student experiences but also the ways in which female students view themselves and their work capabilities (Ulku-Steiner et al., 2000). In their narrative qualitative study of the experiences of three Black female graduate students at a PWI, Williams et al. (2005), posit that race and gender play a major role in Black female graduate students’ interactions with students, faculty and administrators. Because students encountered experiences with racism and questions from their White peers about whether affirmative action played a part in their admission to the, Black female graduate students expressed that these experiences led them to take on additional responsibilities and leadership roles within their academic department.

Conversely, Schwartz et al. (2003) conducted a mixed methods study with 50 Black graduate women to learn about their experiences at a PWI in the Southern United States. Fifty
participants completed surveys and 30 respondents participated in focus groups in order to further expand upon survey responses (p. 258). When asked about their campus experiences, a significant number of participants cited that racial discrimination was a more common experience than gender discrimination, and this led to students isolating themselves from their White peers. Participants reported feeling angry by these experiences and they subsequently refused to become involved in campus activities and clubs. During the focus group interviews, participants stated that they were also ostracized and not invited to attend social functions or participate in student organizations by White peers but were invited to participate in African American based student organizations by Black peers (p. 262). The studies evidenced how negative encounters can either motivate or dissuade Black female graduate students from becoming involved in organizations in which they would interact with White peers. Consequently, limited interaction between majority and underrepresented students will continue to have a negative impact on student experiences (Hurtado, 2007).

Black female graduates at PWIs experience a much more impersonal environment when compared to Black female graduate students at other types of institutions (Johnson, 2012). For instance, Johnson’s (2012) qualitative case study of graduate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and PWIs found that graduate students perceived the social environment as being one in which students were expected to work in seclusion, and as a result they felt isolated and alone within the campus environment. One participant remarked that during her first year at a PWI the institution paid little attention to the needs of Black female graduate students who noted, “They did not do anything to make me want to stay here” (p. 131). These findings affirm the need for institutions to assume a more active role in connecting Black female graduate students to their campus environments. Alternatively, Johnson (2012) found
that Black female graduate students at HBCUs reported experiencing more communal support and inclusion, which resulted in their active involvement within the campus community. Specifically, participants noted the familial atmosphere and shared things such as, “I felt like I had an impact and say in how the school was run” (p. 129). The studies suggest that Black female graduate students want to play a more active role within their institution through campus involvement but often find it difficult to engage in positive interactions with faculty and peers inside and outside of the classroom.

Although literature regarding Black female graduate students is limited, studies demonstrate the need to foster an environment in which their needs, voices, and beliefs are respected and supported. The literature indicates that providing these systems of support is essential to the social and academic well-being of this student population. As higher education institutions continue to experience an influx of Black female students in graduate and professional degree programs, administrators must be intentional with establishing services and opportunities for Black female graduate students to persist to graduation. Faced with feelings of isolation and a perception of lack of support, Black female graduate students need to receive support both inside and outside of the classroom. Studies elucidated that some Black female graduate students sought out campus involvement opportunities as ways to cope with their negative experiences, and that more should be done to increase the likelihood of Black female graduate students becoming more involved within the campus community.

**Graduate Student Involvement**

The literature regarding undergraduate student involvement in campus clubs and organizations is substantial (Astin, 1977; Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although it calls attention to the significant influence student involvement has on student
retention, there have been few studies that specifically address graduate student experiences with campus involvement (Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Gardner and Barnes (2007) suggest the gap in the literature is due to a focus on graduate students and their relationships within their respective academic departments as opposed to undergraduate students and their overall relationships with the institutions. In a qualitative study comprising four Caucasian and six African American male and female doctoral students, Gardner and Barnes (2007) found several important themes regarding graduate student involvement. First, the study found that their experiences varied greatly from the experiences of undergraduates. For instance, one participant remarked that student involvement became more important to him as a graduate student when compared to his time as an undergraduate student. He stated that this was due to his involvement being more closely aligned with the fulfillment of a more well thought out and intentional purpose (p. 375). Second, out of the ten participants, nine were also involved in campus clubs and organizations as undergraduate students. Many of them cited the distinction between graduate student involvement, which they saw as professional development and undergraduate student involvement, which they felt held more of a social aspect. However, students did emphasize the importance of participating in graduate organizations due to a sense of connection with peers and the university. Finally, graduate students reported that their level of involvement varied based on what stage they were in their doctoral programs. For example, participants indicated that they were highly involved in campus clubs and organizations during their first two years, after which involvement became less consistent and shifted to national organizations (p. 377).

The study also examined the outcomes and benefits of graduate student involvement. The findings suggest they gained a great amount of networking opportunities and connected with
the campus community in a more meaningful way. A student noted, “It really helped me contextualize the study of leadership and organizations in higher education in a better way than if I wasn’t involved in them” (p. 382). The study’s findings demonstrate the value of graduate student involvement and its relationship to building a sense of belonging to the university and its community members. Further, the study suggests that involvement in clubs and organizations fosters a sense of engagement with the campus community, provides practical value to graduate students, and assists with preventing graduate student attrition. Finally, although the study’s focus was not about one particular student subpopulation, more research is needed to identify whether graduate student populations with high attrition rates, such as Black female graduate students, are involved in campus clubs and organizations and what their experiences are.

Black Female Leadership and Student Involvement

Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) surmise that the “concept of student involvement is key to understanding student leadership” (p. 96). Even though there is paucity of research that addresses the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students, there are studies that address Black female leadership (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Carton & Rosette, 2001; Livingstone et al., 2012). For example, in Rosette and Livingstone’s (2012) quantitative study, which explored the dual subordinate identities of Black women leaders, they found that they experience more negative leadership perceptions when compared to students with single identities such as Black males and White women. Specifically, results suggested that due to their double subordinate identities, Black women leaders must be constantly aware of their performance due to harsher criticism by peers and subordinates. Conversely, Livingston et al., (2012) conducted a study that examined whether Black female leaders experienced backlash based on demonstrations of dominant behavior. The study found that a significant number of
participants did not have a negative opinion of Black female leaders who exhibited dominant behavior when compared to White female leaders. Livingston et al. (2012) suggested that this was due in part to the expectation that Black females have more internal dominant qualities (p. 357). Though the studies do not specifically address graduate students, their results have implications on the types of leadership experiences Black female graduate students encounter at PWIs and whether these experiences influence their engagement with the campus community.

Research suggests that student campus organization leadership opportunities play an instrumental part in addressing student retention challenges and enhancing the student experience (Astin, 2000). Haber (2011) emphasized that campus leadership contributes to positive engagement with peers and leads to an enhanced sense of belonging to the institution, factors which research has shown foster a positive environment for Black female graduate students (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Armanio et al. (2000) conducted a phenomenological longitudinal study at a large research PWI to learn about the campus leadership experiences of students of color. The study, which spanned three years, included interviews of 106 participants from diverse backgrounds such as Black/African American, Asian/Asian American, and Latina/o undergraduate students. The study’s results showed that students did not like the term leader but rather preferred being viewed as “involved” students. The study also revealed the goals of Black female students who serve as leaders. In particular, two Black female student leaders shared that their goal was to “instill confidence” and make other student members of the organization more “active and responsible” (p. 501). This suggests that Black female student leaders are mindful about engaging their peers and adding value through student involvement to the campus community.
Conversely, Black student leaders also indicated they felt high levels of expectations from their roles and were very concerned about appearing either too radical or not radical enough by peers and administrators. In addition to concerns about perception due to race, Black student leaders encountered different leadership experiences based on gender. Female leaders of color expressed experiencing “double oppression” (p. 504), which many considered to be a disadvantage. The study’s results have several implications for Black graduate female leaders at PWIs. First, the results illustrated the need for research on Black female graduate student leadership experiences and the ways in which students engage with peers in campus organizations. Second, the results underscore the need for Black female graduate student perspectives on the types of organizations they select to participate in and what factors influence their involvement. Finally, learning more about these experiences and perceptions from students directly, presents an opportunity for future research to better understanding the multiple layers of challenges this student subpopulation encounters.

**Conclusion**

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to serve as “change agents” (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). As higher education institutions become more aware of the challenges of Black female graduate students, such as racial and gender discrimination and social isolation, they must work to improve the environment in which these students navigate. These efforts would alleviate some of the negative experiences Black female graduate students encounter at PWIs (Ali & Kohun, 2006). There is a need for graduate students to be supported both socially and professionally (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Research affirms that Black female graduate students navigate multiple roles in addition to academic stressors (Hughes, 2002; Steele, 2003; Sisko & Niernat, 2010). Creating campus support systems to educate graduate students allows
for the attainment of practical resources and provides a more positive experience from the beginning to the end of their academic journey (Schwartz et al., 2003). In addition, it is necessary to devote specific attention to the purpose of this study. Even though there is an awareness of the unique needs of Black graduate students, there is a paucity of research that addresses campus experiences such as discrimination and social isolation among Black female graduate students. In order to improve their retention rates, additional research is needed to better understand their experiences (Polson, 2003). Involvement in student leadership opportunities offer Black female graduate students the chance for growth and development and, particularly for students of color, student leadership opportunities allow students to engage within the campus community (Golde, 2005; Komives et al., 2005).
Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Qualitative research provides the ability to incorporate participants’ own words to communicate their experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, a qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study, as its overall objective is to learn through the direct personal accounts of Black female graduate students whether the campus graduate student leadership experiences have shaped their perception of the predominantly White institution. According to Bogdan and Biklen, (2003) understanding lived experience is multifaceted and based on meaning making relative to unique perceptions which sets qualitative approaches from quantitative approaches. Similarly, Shank (2002) asserts that qualitative research is grounded within the framework of experience, highlighting participants’ individual stories, beliefs, and standpoints. As such, the individual perspectives of Black female graduate students who serve as campus leaders on PWIs were explored. Based on the study’s purpose and qualitative approach of this study, three research questions served as the basis for this research:

1) How do Black female graduate students select campus leadership opportunities at PWIs?
2) How do Black female graduate students view their campus leadership experiences at PWIs?
3) In what ways does holding a campus leadership position affect the overall campus experience of Black female graduate students at PWIs?

Research Design
The narrative inquiry approach for this study was appropriate for several reasons. First, narrative approaches are best suited for exploring women’s lived stories, the primary goal of this study. Narrative research retells the personal accounts of participants and describes their lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, the narrative approach assisted with learning about how Black female graduate students who serve as campus leaders at PWIs construct and make meaning of their leadership experiences. Because each participant’s individual story is centralized in the narrative approach, participants were afforded an opportunity to voice their perspectives from a vantage point not often heard within a predominantly White environment. Because of the unique black female standpoint (Collins, 2000), it is imperative for participants to provide their individual stories when sharing their social and personal experiences (Riesmann, 2008). This is of particular importance for participants who share similar racial and gender identities. As they shared personal accounts, the social context of the ways campus leadership experiences influenced the participants’ standpoint (Collins, 2000). Moreover, due to the participants’ ability to share their standpoints, any distinctions in their campus leadership experiences were recognized. Lastly, the study featured a small participant size, no more than three to four participants, which is another significant element to narrative research designs (Maxwell, 2004). Due to the objective of revealing the nuances in participants’ experiences, the small participant size of this qualitative narrative study allowed the researcher to provide thick and in-depth data for restorying their narratives (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher is the principal component in narrative inquiry studies (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the study’s narrative approach necessitated collaboration between the researcher and participants in order to accurately retell their stories. Consequently, both participants and researcher should walk away with a more clear understanding of how participants’ made sense of
their leadership experiences. Similarly, a narrative approach allows for the researcher to employ multiple methods of collecting data (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry also permits researchers the ability to organize the multiple sources of data to generate themes. Further, the dynamic aspect of narrative inquiry allows the researcher to make adjustments and be flexible during the research process if necessary in order to convey the participants’ narratives more accurately (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Accordingly, in addition to conducting face-to-face, open-ended interviews, the researcher worked with participants to collect journals or other items germane to the participants’ experiences in order to provide additional contextual meaning to their campus leadership experiences. Having multiple data sources not only added depth to participant stories but also provided an additional way in which to better understand individual experiences (Riessman, 2008).

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative inquiry’s design approach became more prominent in the 1980s, and again during the 1990s by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1990). Clandinin and Connelly (1990) have written numerous articles regarding narrative research designs within the field of education. In their seminal article, *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry*, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) suggested that individuals’ lives are filled with stories, and the narrative inquiry best addressed the study of how “humans experience the world” (p. 2). The authors noted that narrative inquiry can be found in various fields such as literature, anthropology, sociology, and history. Riessman (2000) also noted that the narrative form developed out of a multidisciplinary approach and has been illustrated in many forms such as in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and John Dewey’s (1916) seminal work, *Democracy and Education*.

In their seminal article, Clandinin and Connelly suggested that individuals’ lives are filled with stories and the narrative analysis best addressed how “humans experience the world”
Dewey (1938) expressed that narrative analysis was instrumental in understanding an individual’s experience, and in order to do so effectively, one must engage in the storytelling of individuals and their social worlds. Given the importance of engaging people to share their stories in narrative approaches, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is very important (Hogan, 1988). Researchers suggest that there should be feelings of caring and “connectedness” (p. 12) between the researcher and the participant. Ensuring that these components exist fosters collaboration and result in participants’ ability to retell their experiences in a more engaging and active voice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Likewise, the researcher must also engage in the narrative inquiry process by retelling the participants’ story in the most authentic way (Hogan, 1988).

**Research Site**

Given the study’s focus on Black female graduate students at PWIs, the environment in which graduate students serve as student leaders plays an integral role in their meaning-making. Therefore the research site selected for this study is a large, private, top research university located in the Southern United States. As of the 2012-2013 academic year, the student body consisted of approximately 16,000 students: more than 10,000 undergraduates and 5,582 graduate students. The student body racial/ethnic distribution included 8% African American and Black undergraduate and graduate students. The enrollment rate for both graduate and undergraduate students by gender was 49% male and 51% female.

**Participants**

This qualitative study consists of Black female graduate (currently enrolled master’s and doctoral degree seeking) students at PWIs, who currently hold leadership positions in campus clubs, organizations, or associations. Research indicates that there is a paucity of research
regarding Black female graduate students who are involved in campus clubs and organizations at PWIs (Armanio et al., 2000). For this reason, this study consisted of four participants.

According to Riessman, (2008) purposeful sampling is beneficial to studies with small sample sizes because it enhances opportunities to yield rich data that highlights each individual’s unique standpoint. Small sample sizes are most often utilized in qualitative studies when compared to quantitative studies (Creswell, 2012). Due to the narrative approach of the study, the small participant size also permitted specific themes and detailed points to be captured (Riessman, 2008) and afforded opportunities to hear detailed accounts of experiences from voices that have rarely been examined in research literature (Collins, 2000). For example, participants described their family backgrounds, support networks, and the relationships they built that assisted them in environments in which they were the minority. Lastly, purposive sampling’s feature of participants having mutual characteristics is demonstrated by participants sharing similar graduate student status, race and gender identities, and campus leadership student positions.

**Recruitment and Access**

Due to my role as advisor of the Graduate Student Association (GSA), I interact with GSA members on a weekly basis. Participants were selected based on their self-identification as Black or African American, female, currently enrolled as doctoral students, and currently or recently holding executive positions (i.e. president, vice president or secretary) of a student registered club or organization. As such, I spoke with the current president of the GSA, a Black female doctoral student, and shared the purpose of the study to determine her interest in participating in the study. Next, I contacted the current president of the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), also a Black female doctoral student, and provided her with information about my study. I determined her interest in participating in the study as well. I followed the same procedure with the outgoing BGSA president, and the incoming vice president of BGSA,
both of whom are Black female doctoral student. Once all four participants were recruited, I sent individual emails containing the purpose of the study, participant campus leadership criteria, the institution’s IRB approval, and interview protocol and confidentiality guidelines. I then worked with each participant to arrange a location and time for the initial and subsequent meetings to answer any questions and/or concerns they had. Participants were given options for interview locations which included the graduate school conference room, or a private location where they felt comfortable. Three participants requested to meet in their office buildings while one participant agreed to meet in a reserved classroom on campus.

Data Collection

**Interviews.** Narrative inquiry was selected as the design for this study due to its goal of highlighting and giving voice to participants’ individual stories. As such, I conducted three semi-structured, one-on-one interviews on campus with each participant to explore their stories, both past and present, regarding campus leadership experiences at PWIs. I used an interview protocol guide (Appendix B) in order to ask key questions that solicited rich responses from participants (Turner, 2010), and each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The overall focus of the first interview allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants’ background prior to her enrollment at a PWI. Seidman (1998) contended that the first interview should center on the participant’s life history and should afford them every opportunity to share any stories pertinent to their past experiences. As such, the first interview focused on each participant’s background and what led up to her to selecting a graduate program at a PWI. This was done in order to develop a rich narrative of their personal, academic and leadership journey prior to graduate school. Given the study’s narrative inquiry approach, which allows for emergent themes and restorying of previous events, participants were able to determine how far back in their academic and leadership journey they shared.
In preparation for the second interview, I asked participants to bring an artifact (Creswell, 2012) that best represented who she is as a Black female graduate student leader. The second interview sought to learn about specific details of participants’ campus leadership and overall campus experiences (Seidman, 1998), and questions were developed based on the literature review, theoretical framework, and research questions of my study. Subsequently, the second interview focused upon the participants’ campus leadership and involvement experiences, as well as interactions with peers and faculty. More specifically, I asked participants to share stories regarding her role and duties as graduate student leader and her leadership experiences to better understand her perspective and experiences.

Narrative inquiry research often involves a collaborative relationship between the researcher and participant (Saldaña, 2009). Accordingly, the third interview’s focus was dedicated to reflecting upon the experiences shared in the previous interviews, and member checking. Doing this allowed me to gather any additional information not covered in previous interviews and member checking afforded participants the opportunity to validate my findings (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, my field notes from the interviews built upon the experiences of the participants and I discussed my notes with participants to ensure that their stories were being accurately represented (Saldaña, 2009). Lastly, all interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device, with all twelve interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes.

**Artifact collection.** In addition to sharing her stories, each participant brought an artifact to her second interview; one that she feels best reflects who she is as a Black female graduate student leader. In order to remain true to their standpoints as student leaders, I did not place any restrictions on the types of artifacts participants wanted to bring. The artifacts that the four participants brought included a triathlon medal, a gavel, a scientific data entry book, and a
multicolored scarf. The purpose of participants providing artifacts germane to their student leadership experiences was to offer an added layer of insight into their experiences. Creswell (2012) argued that narrative researchers “collect stories from several data sources.” Therefore, providing diverse methods in which to represent the stories of Black women was very appropriate given the study’s purpose. Additionally, having multiple data sources not only added depth to participant stories but also provided contextual meaning to their campus experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Data Storage

All interviews were audio digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcribing service. A backup of the data and a photograph copy of each participant’s artifacts were stored on a flash drive and secured in a locked file cabinet. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and confidentiality throughout the study and transcriptions were stored in my password protected computer. All recorded materials (i.e. audio recordings, transcripts and notes) were destroyed upon the completion of the study. All data was stored in a locked storage file at all times and I am the only individual with key access. Furthermore, all digital audio recording devices used for the study were also kept locked in a storage file. All digital audio tapes were destroyed after transcription and verification. Participants’ email addresses were safely stored in the researcher’s password protected laptop and were not shared. Additionally, all participants received individual emails throughout the recruiting and interview process to further protect their confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. Riessman (2008) contends that thematic analysis focuses on the content of a text as opposed to the ways in which participants share their stories. This analysis’ focus is on generating themes from the data and relies on a thick and rich description of the
narrative (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, Riessman (2008) posited that when using thematic analysis, stories are compared for similar themes and concepts. Accordingly, thematic analysis served as the analysis approach of this narrative study and focused on the content of each participant’s student leadership experiences to determine individual and holistic themes.

**Open coding.** Narrative research design includes several elements of data analysis (Creswell, 2012). The initial stage began with reviewing the audio recording of the verbal data of the interviews and reviewing the verbatim transcriptions. The initial stage of my narrative analysis comprised open coding. Open coding is often used to break down data into segments in order to interpret them (Saldaña, 2009). Accordingly, I went through the data line by line and extracted key words and phrases. Next, I highlighted and color coded specific texts that addressed the study’s research questions. This stage afforded me the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the data for subsequent analysis and ensure the accuracy of both recordings and transcriptions (Maxwell, 2004). Once this was completed, I developed single and multiple codes in order to fully develop the main themes and concepts of participants’ narratives. Parts of the data were synthesized and condensed from their original raw narrative and my field notes during the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasized the importance of generating codes in order to analyze and interpret data (p. 58). Similarly, coding is an ongoing and cyclical process which involves the summarization and organization of key components of narrative data in order to generate themes and concepts (Creswell, 2012).

Subsequently, I paid close attention to the themes that emerged from the raw data and grouped them into conceptual categories and subcategories using descriptive coding. Descriptive coding allowed for each participant’s words to be highlighted within the initial stages of analyzing the data (Saldaña, 2009). Once the initial coding stages were completed, I sorted and
collated codes in order to identify themes. Saldaña (2009) cited DeSantis and Ugarriza’s (2000) study defining a theme as being “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent [patterned] experience” (p. 139). From these themes, I developed a thematic map, contextualized individual participant themes and compared themes between all four participants (Maxwell, 2004). Next, I returned to the original data to ensure that all themes were accurate and best reflected the study’s research questions. After the formation of the thematic maps, I generated concepts gleaned from the combined themes. These concepts were reviewed in conjunction with the major codes and themes, a process described as code weaving, in order to expand upon the study’s findings (Saldaña, 2009).

**Provisional coding.** During the second cycle of coding, provisional coding was used to explore the data built upon projected themes (Saldaña, 2009). These projections were gleaned from the literature review and theoretical framework of this study. Saldaña (2009) describes provisional coding as a “start list” group of codes that is established in anticipation of what may be unearthed before data is collected (p. 120). Following the guidelines of provisional coding, terms such as “family,” “isolation,” “connection,” and “invisibility” (Collins, 2000, p. 751) were extracted from the literature review and theoretical framework, and were compared with emergent codes. Then the codes were revised for the development of other appropriate themes. Finally, based on my study’s purpose, I also coded explicit and implicit instances of race, class, and gender in order to accurately showcase the participants’ standpoints (Collins, 2000).

**Artifacts.** During the second interview, participants brought artifacts that symbolized Black female graduate student leadership at a PWI. The artifacts became data and I assigned meanings to each artifact based on participants’ descriptions and their summation of what each artifact meant to them. Participants’ descriptions of the artifacts were captured within the
interview transcriptions. Similarly to the narrative data, the artifact represented a story or experience that provided an additional layer of understanding of the participants’ experience. Lastly, the responses regarding the representation of all artifacts were coded in order to develop themes. These themes were compared with existing themes and patterns from the narrative data in order to identify relationships among existing themes and generate concepts.

**Analytic memoing.** In order to more thoughtfully reflect upon the narratives, I engaged in analytic memoing throughout the coding process. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) identified memoing as writing reflectively about the process of what is being discovered and seen in the data. The memos noted from the data included observations about candidates’ support networks, interactions with faculty, and overall varied experiences based on academic discipline. Memoing served as a summary of reflections of the data and was utilized throughout the coding process and thematic mapping process.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness and validity in qualitative studies can be demonstrated in several different ways (Creswell, 2012). First, through what Creswell (2012b) noted as prolonged engagement, or more specifically, “building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation” (p. 251). In order to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study, I engaged all participants in meaningful conversation to demonstrate my genuine interest in learning more about their stories and experiences. Additionally, I shared the commonality in my previous experiences as a female graduate student to build a sense of trust and mutual understanding with each participant. Furthermore, after each face to face one-on-one interview, I involved all of participants of the study in member checking, a process in which participants review accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2012).
Specifically, I requested that all participants review my initial analysis of one-on-one interviews to ensure that I captured accurate interpretations of their responses and lived experiences. I used the process of triangulation to check facts and perceptions. These methods included clarifying my bias of having previous campus leadership experiences, attending a PWI, and my identity as a Black female graduate student. Creswell (2012) also posited that triangulation provides evidence using multiple approaches to validate qualitative data (p. 251). In addition to conducting one-on-one interviews with participants, I took observational notes during each interview, which provided thick descriptions of interview and observational data. Thick description presents rich details that can be conveyed to other areas by the reader (Creswell, 2012, p. 252).

To counter the threat to the internal validity of my study, I ensured that interviews and participant data were conducted and collected within an appropriate time frame. The process of conducting all twelve participant interviews lasted approximately one month. The timeliness of the study validated participants’ campus leadership terms, which typically last an academic year at most higher education institutions. Similarly, I ensured that participants who currently hold campus leadership positions have at least a month’s experience in their role to provide more in-depth accounts of their experiences. Finally, I protected against my own bias by including my personal narrative in the study as a Black female student who served as a leader of a student organization at a PWI. Doing so ensured against any projection of my own experiences onto my participants.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

In my study, I safeguarded the rights and welfare of my subjects and made sure the knowledge gained from the study would be used to enhance the knowledge of a historically underserved student population. The Belmont Report’s main principles, which include respect
for persons, beneficence, and justice were all strictly adhered to during my study. Respect for persons and beneficence were exhibited via informed consent and the continual process of ensuring participants’ consent to their involvement in the study. Moreover, participants were notified verbally and via written documentation of the purpose, benefits, minimal risks and any compensation information involved with the study. Additionally, given my professional role as advisor to the Graduate Student Association (GSA), I made certain that participants were made of aware that their involvement in the study will neither positively or negatively impact their membership in GSA or BGSA.

Moreover, confidentiality measures were employed via coding, anonymous reporting and secured filing systems to protect the identity of participants. The small percentage of Black female graduate students that hold campus leadership positions can be readily identifiable and compromise the social and emotional risks of participants. As such, the selection and treatment of participants will be equitable with fair recruitment practices being engaged by the researcher. Finally, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained by submitting all required consent forms, purpose and benefits of the study as well as an emphasis of the minimal risks involved in the study by the participants’ and researcher’s institutions.
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the student leadership and overall experiences of Black female graduate students at a PWI. In order to gain a better understanding of the various ways in which Black female graduate students make meaning of leadership experiences, this chapter comprises rich narratives gleaned through a series of interviews with the four participants of this study. The narratives presented in this section will showcase the commonalities and contrasts in experiences that contributed to each participant’s viewpoint of her role as a Black female graduate student leader. The main and sub themes generated from these interviews included a synthesis of student leadership and campus experiences that ranged from high school, undergraduate, and their current graduate institution. Lastly, each participant shared her interpretation of artifacts she felt best represented who she is as a Black female student leader.

Olivia’s Story

The Early Years

*Being a feminist is being actively involved in the community and being role models for young Black women and for women.* - Olivia

Olivia identified herself as a Black American activist who is acutely aware and culturally proud of her ethnic and racial background. Olivia stated that during a visit to Africa, she became more conscious of the fact that African culture is vastly different from her upbringing in America. The influence of the differences between both cultures fortified her preference to be referred to as Black rather than an African American.
Olivia is a 33 year old first-generation doctoral student in the field of special education. She described herself as a Black American woman raised in a very modest single family household in the Southeastern United States. Her mother served as the primary caretaker of her younger brother. Although she and her brother have different fathers, she stressed that they are very close and were raised as a close-knit family unit. Because she grew up in the projects of her neighborhood, she remarked that she felt a sense of pride in experiencing an environment different from that of her own as a first-generation college student. This pride in her identity as a Black feminist would continue to follow Olivia throughout her secondary and post-secondary academic and social experiences at predominantly White schools (Collins, 1990).

Olivia described herself as an introverted, pragmatic doer who prefers to take an active role in helping others. She recalled that her friends described her as the “mom” of the group because of her ability to be a level-headed, calm and practical thinker. Olivia attributed these characteristics to her early role as caretaker for her brother and cousins during her childhood years. She stated, “My aunt had to work, my mom had to work. I was the older cousin so I was taking care of them.” Olivia grew up in a close-knit, predominantly African American community in which everyone looked out for one another. She reminisced, “There were a lot of elders in the community…they would always tell my mom if we did something wrong. People knew everything.” The importance of helping others in the community became more evident throughout her earliest academic experiences when she often found herself supported by mostly White elementary and middle school teachers.

Olivia experienced some difficulty in elementary school when her mom moved her family into a new neighborhood. The neighborhood was predominantly White and so was her elementary school. Due to the move, she was retained in first grade and had reading difficulties
which resulted in remediation classes. Olivia remembered how caring and supportive her mom and teachers were. “The teachers were really kind and nice. My mom actually came and helped out in the classroom. They gave me encouragement to do better academically. Ever since elementary, I’ve always done pretty well academically.” It was at this point that she recalled realizing the significance of getting good grades and how education could be used as a tool for advancement out of the projects.

Subsequently, during high school, she chose to focus a great amount of her efforts on academics and while enrolled in AP honor classes, she dedicated any extra time to her 4-H band leader position. She mentioned “I was a section leader of the band. I wasn’t really involved… I was really focused on academics.” As a band member, she played the flute, saxophone and piccolo but could not devote a lot of time to extracurricular activities due to the need to maintain a part time job while in high school. She labeled her time in high school as a good experience, one in which she got along with both White and Black students.

“…coming [I’m coming] from a place where being Black wasn’t that big of a deal because I grew up in the projects. Everybody was Black there. My high school was half Black, half White, so I had a lot of Black friends, a lot of White friends because I was in AP classes.

Olivia’s experience with minority and majority environments made her more confident in her ability to effectively navigate within both worlds.

Although she engaged in limited social and extracurricular time while in high school, she worked and continued to excel in her classes. Moreover, she became more cognizant of the opportunities being presented and she expressed that, “From where I grew up it’s like you go to
college in order to be better and move out and show that you progressed in some sort of way.” Olivia noted that her family’s insistence coupled with her desire to move out of her environment greatly influenced her decision to obtain an undergraduate degree. She also mentioned that her decision to attend an undergraduate institution was centered on advancing her education to provide her with the resources necessary to help her family and her community.

Undergraduate Student Experiences

**Community and female influence.** Olivia attended a small, predominantly White, Quaker undergraduate institution with population of approximately 1,200 students in the Midwestern United States. Due to the small student population, the college had a familial feel. She felt supported by and connected with students, faculty, and administration. She asserted, “I love my undergraduate institution. It was where I really learned to embrace being a Black woman because we had so few and we’re all pretty good friends.” The intimate class size magnified her racial identity and enhanced a strong sense of pride for Olivia as she navigated through her academic experiences. She said:

I was always one of two Black people in most of my classes. The undergraduate institution where I learned to understand the strength of being a Black woman, how to use that, and view that as something that other Black women needed to see.

The awareness of her differences when compared to her peers made Olivia more sensitive to the needs and issues of other Black female students within the campus community. Furthermore, comments from professors who commended her for being “so smart” reminded her of the stereotypes associated with being a Black student at a PWI. Olivia remarked, “I can’t speak in incomplete sentences. That would sound like I’m from the ghetto even though I am from the
ghetto, whatever that means.” The stereotypical comments from professors were very painful at times as she grappled with feelings of guilt about “growing up in a community that made me a smart Black person.” However, overall, Olivia indicated that she felt fairly comfortable about being a smart Black women at a PWI in which there were other smart Black people. She recounted being able to commiserate with other Black students about growing up in Black communities in which being smart and being different were not embraced by some community members.

The role of community was very important to Olivia as she traversed through the institution. After befriending other students, she became more involved in campus groups and found a space in which she could be her authentic self. Olivia shared that several Black students would gather to discuss important women’s issues and topics such as being a Black woman on campus, and organize events and activities.

We actually had like a Black house. On the campus we really didn’t have fraternities; it was not a Greek type of establishment. But we had like a house … and that was a Black house. That’s where a lot of Black people hung out, and that’s where we had events and potlucks, and all that stuff. We had a Black women’s hair day and all that.

Olivia emphasized that having a physical space on campus in which students were able to socialize, build camaraderie, and network helped foster a stronger sense of community and enhanced her overall campus experiences at her undergraduate institution.

In addition, there was also a faculty member who played an instrumental role in shaping Olivia’s undergraduate experience. Patricia, a Black female faculty member in the history department who served as a mentor and role model to Olivia, was cited as a major influence for
Olivia to not only graduate but to increase her involvement in campus clubs and organizations. She recalled that Patricia always recounting her involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960’s and her travels to Africa. Olivia said, “I just remember her being more of a mentor about remembering your history. She was a historian, so she was one of the few Black faculty at the campus.” Olivia said that Patricia’s academic expertise and personal experience influenced her opinion about the responsibilities of the current generation to continue to fight against social injustice; this translated to being actively involved within their campus and local communities. Olivia recalled how Patricia would make comments about “…how lucky we are now to have certain things, but there’s still many things to fight for; and always remember where it is you’re coming from when you’re making big decisions in your life.” These conversations with Patricia left an indelible mark on Olivia’s undergraduate experience; she commented that her mentor’s remarks set the foundation for Olivia’s decision to become more active on campus.

Activism. Olivia described her undergraduate institution as “pretty liberal and progressive,” and it was during her time there that she engaged in political activism. She said, “I just found out that it was okay to just do it. Nobody was going to stop me … being willing to work in a group of like-minded people.” She highlighted that her student involvement and leadership experiences assisted with her coming out of her shell and being more open and social with other students. On one occasion in her junior year she joined a group of students in protesting the construction of a local area power plant and another time she rode with other club members to protest a presidential inauguration. She looked back at these moments as very eye-opening and liberating experiences, “I learned to be more of an activist and take more of that leadership role.” She underscored that throughout these experiences she bonded with other Black
women and established connections that heightened her overall connection with the campus community.

Additionally, during her time at the PWI, Olivia’s peers encouraged her to become involved in social justice and political groups. She found comfort in participating in causes that served a greater purpose. Her practical approach to activism influenced her decision to seek out student leadership opportunities fairly early on. Specifically, Olivia noticed the autonomy that students were allowed by faculty and administration to develop and participate in programs as one of the main reasons she decided to become a student leader within the campus community. She recalled that during the protest of George Bush’s inauguration, she and several other club members had to organize the trip to Washington, DC on their own:

We had to get a van together to go to D.C. January was freezing, so we had to figure out who was going to drive it and organize the whole thing. I’ve never been a part of something like that before. It was just interesting to see the process of students running.

That experience resonated with Olivia because of the bonding that occurred during the trip and the activism that allowed her to serve and be a part of a greater purpose.

Race and dialogue. Olivia also discussed the ways in which the campus community helped her shape her identity as a Black female. For example, she stressed how dialogue played an integral role within the community. She articulated that being surrounded by individuals who did not share your racial identity served as a catalyst for conversations regarding race and colorism among other Black students. Growing up in a predominantly African American community, racial identity was shared among community members and was not discussed. She said that during her time as an undergraduate, she was able to discuss complex issues regarding a variety
of topics. “This is where we had discourse.” she cited. However, as liberating as the dialogue was, she disclosed that some conversations were personal, ranging from being Black at a PWI to the shade of her skin. She shared, “Just for having that type of conversation about not being Black and not for being too Black, like, ‘What does that mean?’ It was just a lot of nice space to hash out those types of issues and figure out what to do with it.” The dialogue also included interracial dating. Olivia said that her Black male peers were only interested in dating White women. She shared that this experience encouraged her to embrace her racial identity and influenced her decision to become more active and run for and become president of a women’s organization on campus. Her involvement in the women’s organization also affirmed her standpoint as a feminist and solidified the need to contribute to the campus community.

**Graduate Student Experiences**

**Support networks.** After graduating from her undergraduate institution, Olivia realized that her job options were limited and there was little she could do with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. She moved back home and took a job waiting tables and volunteering at a foster care home. It was during this time that her boyfriend, whom she had met during a spring break trip during her senior year, convinced her to move in with him while he attended his graduate institution. She applied to, and was accepted into, a special education doctoral program that offered a substantial financial package. Olivia named her husband and her mother as her biggest supporters. Specifically, she discussed her husband’s suggestion that she attend graduate school and how he inspired her by enrolling in a doctoral program himself. Olivia offered, “He was just like, ‘I’ll support you through it if you need some help for editing and that type of stuff.’” Olivia shared that because her husband is a White male and is the complete opposite of her, she has been able to share her ideas and he provides different perspectives regarding societal and
personal issues. She said that her husband’s perspectives have assisted in helping her understand who she is as a Black woman and that their relationship has increased her awareness of where her marriage fits into a “bigger picture of race and class and education…it’s shaped a lot of kind of how I view the world.” In addition to her husband, Olivia shared that her mother also moved in with her and her husband to assist with household chores and that her help has been a huge benefit.

She’s just really supportive. She’s always been that way. Now that she’s at home and cooking, which means I don’t have to cook; that makes a huge difference. She keeps the house clean. I don’t have to worry about any of that. That’s a huge support. She loves doing this so it’s not even an issue. That’s nice.

In addition to the substantial financial support she receives through scholarships, Olivia attributed the support she receives from her family as an important factor in her success as a graduate student. The theme of support was prevalent throughout Olivia’s graduate experience and further demonstrated the significance of family support to graduate students.

Campus community. Olivia gave little thought to the fact that she would be attending another PWI for her graduate work. She recollected, “I wasn’t necessarily looking for it. [It] was just what was available in the area.” Her research I graduate institution is located in a large metropolitan area with a large international population. Upon enrolling, Olivia noticed some of the differences of between her graduate and undergraduate institutions. For example, she discovered that, in comparison to her undergraduate institution, her graduate campus community was very small and fragmented. She also realized that there were more ethnically diverse groups
such as Asian, Latino/a, and a large international student population, which varied greatly from her undergraduate PWI’s largely Black and White student population.

It’s like night and day. My undergraduate community was much wider. There’s no Hispanic and Caribbean and all that… the mentality was just very different. It’s just so much more community based because it’s a Quaker affiliation. Here it’s just not that way. People are very much more conservative. It’s not as open as my undergraduate experience.

Moreover, once she began to socialize with other Black graduate students, she discovered that the Black student community was very disconnected. “It was just pretty hard to find a Black community. It’s pretty hard to find each other.” The lack of connection with other Black graduate students triggered Olivia’s desire to create a cohesive group in which other Black graduate students could network, build a sense of community, and learn about resources and opportunities available to them. She stated the following:

You don’t realize how much more free time you have as an undergrad. I have no time to go protest right now. I feel like the doctoral program, especially now since I’m doing a dissertation, it’s just more lonely. There’s not really that community of women that I had as an undergraduate.

As Olivia began to establish the foundation of the organization, she realized how much work was involved and how isolated the process was in comparison to her time as a student leader at her undergraduate institution.

**Faculty experience.** Olivia indicated that her graduate institution did a good job preparing her academically for classroom experiences but presented minimal opportunities for
students to socialize. For example, she pointed out, “It was a cohort of four and I was the only Black person. I am the only Black person in that cohort. We hang out and help each other through classes and figuring out the doctoral experience.” Similarly, Olivia described her experiences within the classroom as being pretty good. She explained that she was able to speak her mind in class and that she felt most of her classmates appreciated her comments during discussions. She attributed the open classroom dialogue to her field of social science, which encourages discussions about a wide range of topics.

Although she observed that several of her faculty members were overworked, she stated that some were friendlier than others. Their overworked status provided minimal opportunities for mentoring. Moreover, the overworked status of faculty took toll on her as she traversed through the third year in the program. For example, Olivia discovered that her dissertation chair obtained a visiting professorship in another state. This severely limited her ability to receive the necessary guidance and feedback from her chair, which left her feeling confused and uncertain about the doctoral process. She said, “Unfortunately, when it got to dissertation time, that support disappeared. At this point, a dissertation is just a feeling of insecurity. I know how to be a student. I’m not necessarily sure how to write a dissertation.” Though frustrated and disappointed with the dissertation process, she asserted that she never thought about quitting the program but rather increased her resolve to graduate. The determination Olivia exhibited by remaining in her program matched her previous accounts of persevering through difficult circumstances.

Overall, Olivia’s interactions with faculty have been cordial but she expressed her awareness that as a Black woman in academia, she has had to follow certain explicit and implicit rules. More specifically, she cited that because of her race, she frames her discussions and her
words carefully so she would not offend White faculty members. Furthermore, she is very careful about ensuring that she speaks "standard English," and that her style of dress is always professional and not "too culturally different." Olivia stated:

I have the tendency to be conforming to what the status quo is concerning behavior, making sure that if you do say something that is a little bit different, you say it in a respectful way that is not sounding angry or too belligerent.

Similarly, Olivia shared that her interactions with faculty based on her gender have also resulted in conforming her behavior in order to avoid issues. She remarked, "I get a lot of, like, 'sweetheart,' 'sugar,' and that type of stuff … they don’t see me as someone who is going to be a colleague of theirs, like, they still see me as a child." Being aware of the perceptions of some faculty members made her question whether she looked young for her age or whether she would need to dress in a particular way to be taken seriously. Despite this, Olivia admitted that she is very good at "mimicking," and that by conforming to the expectations of faculty she had a fairly good academic experience. While Olivia recognized that she was conforming to the expectations of the majority culture, she was proud of her ability to navigate within her PWI and establish an organization that focused on the needs of Black graduate students.

**Black Graduate Student Leadership**

Olivia described her primary responsibilities as president of the recently established Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) as being the spokesperson and recruitment chairperson for the organization. Consequently, one of her first tasks was to assemble Black graduate students who were interested in formalizing a group similar to the graduate student association (GSA). Next, she wrote the constitution and worked to gain club recognition status
from the university. As BGSA’s first president, Olivia worked very closely with her peers to determine what the vision and purpose of the organization would be. She stated that they planned to “get consensus of that the group...what it is we want to stand for as far as...are we going to be more social? More networking? Do we want to be more community based, or activists?” Once they decided that BGSA would serve as more of a social and community conscious organization, Olivia felt comfortable stepping away for other executive board members to lead the organization.

Olivia’s passion for BGSA was further illustrated by the way in which she engaged and encouraged other Black graduate students to join the organization. Olivia, the self-proclaimed introvert, explained how she challenged herself to overcome her fears and approach random Black students to introduce herself and talk about the benefits of joining BGSA. She stated,

It’s just really nice to have a reason to go up to Black students, and be like, “Hey are you a graduate student?” for recruitment purposes. I’m still an awkward person but at least I have a reason for being awkward.

In addition to overcoming her shyness, becoming a graduate student leader has provided Olivia with other great experiences such as interacting with administrators that she normally would not talk to. She learned more about the diversity of Black students from different backgrounds who held different perspectives from what she had been exposed to at previous institutions. Olivia noted that she appreciated “hearing the diversity of the Black students on campus … as opposed to being this monolithic like Black kid.” She also enjoyed working with her executive board members and revealed that in addition to planning events, the executive board was also used for sharing experiences. For example, Olivia pointed out that members discussed things that their
White peers said in their respective departments about their appearance. She said, “Colleagues that aren’t Black, they say stuff like ‘Oh, your hair is different this week or your hair grew so fast’ … That kind of debriefing conversation about people that don’t understand the hair thing.” As a result of being able to share experiences and realize that other students incurred similar occurrences strengthened the bond of the group and confirmed the need for an organization for Black graduate students.

**Leadership artifact.** Olivia admitted to having some difficulty in finding an artifact that best represents who she is as a Black female graduate student. After some thought, she brought a triathlon finishing medal. It was the first triathlon that she ever participated in and it was particularly meaningful because she had learned how to swim during the previous year. Olivia described how uncomfortable she was when she being taught how to swim. At 31, she felt scared, uncomfortable, and overcome with fears. She described taking swimming lessons as one of the most challenging periods in her life. Six months later, she signed up for the triathlon and recounted the open water swim in which she was enveloped in murky, dirty water. Through all of the obstacles, her determination to overcome her fears triumphed and she completed the triathlon.

Olivia felt that her swimming lessons and triathlon paralleled her experience as a Black female graduate student leader at a PWI. She noted that as a leader she was very uncomfortable at times, and as in her triathlon experience, there was a very small percentage of Black female graduate student leaders. Although the experiences were not always pleasant, Olivia indicated that she was proud of the fact that she was able to move past the bad moments. She said the following:
It was a huge change, like a switch that went off where it’s okay to be uncomfortable, but don’t make that a deterrent to why you’re not getting involved. Uncomfortableness is okay. You can embody that and move on and do what needs to be done and not think that the world is going to end just because you’re uncomfortable.

Although Olivia encountered challenges throughout her journey as a Black graduate student leader, she insisted that her overall campus experience improved significantly due to her role as a student leader. She appreciated the way her leadership position took her outside of her comfort zone and exposed her to various departments and administrators. She also appreciated the opportunity to forge connections with other student members of BGSA that blossomed into lifelong friendships.

**Summary**

Olivia’s narrative regarding her experiences highlighted the challenges she faced. These challenges ranged from having to seek out and create a Black graduate student community within a PWI, encountering comments regarding her gender, and being on the receiving end of remarks questioning the shade of her complexion and the diverse ways in which she chose to wear her hair. These experiences heightened her awareness of stereotypes that accompany race and gender and she reflected that they became more prevalent as she navigated from her secondary, undergraduate and graduate institutions.

The ways in which Olivia used her activism beliefs to manage challenges was demonstrated by how she channeled her involvement in various student groups to assist other Black students with their transition into a White majority environment. Additionally, the support she received from her husband and mother sustained her during the trials of having a
nonresponsive committee chair fueled her resolve to graduate. Moreover, her role as a Black female graduate student leader provided her with a solid foundation of what it meant to promote change through activism. As Olivia worked to ensure that other Black students in both her undergraduate and graduate PWIs had a more positive campus experience, she grew as a leader and became more secure in her identity as a Black female graduate student leader.

**Jane’s Story**

**The Early Years**

_Even Black people hold down each other and it changed my perspective on the role I want to play in the community, and really how I want to be perceived by others._ - Jane

I met Jane, who hails from the Southeastern United States, in a small meeting space on campus and I was instantly drawn into her engaging personality. A 26 year old doctoral student in the biomedical program, Jane described herself as an extrovert with lots of friends who has a crazy side but who can be quiet at times. She comes from a very close-knit family comprising two younger brothers and divorced parents. Although her parents divorced when she was in high school, she emphasized that she is still very close to both of her parents, her maternal and paternal grandmothers. She is the eldest grandchild. She explained, “I have really influential grandmothers. They’re very influential in my life.” Jane cited her family as being very conservative, with traditional values. She noted that her friends label her as goal driven, smart, and great to be around. She said, “My life feels more fulfilled when I’m interacting with people.” Jane also noted that one of the best ways to describe her is “clatchet,” a term she conceived the words “classy” and “ratchet.” She feels this term best personifies who she is because, “I’m a chameleon.” Her chameleon reference comes from the fact that she grew up maneuvering
through predominantly White and Black communities since she was a child. She described her predominantly African American community as being very “nurturing” and “enriching.” She stressed that everyone knew everyone and that the community was very tight-knit. She also stated, “The teachers knew everyone,” and that she moved through elementary to high school with most of her family and friends. Jane was very involved in several extracurricular activities in high school. She served as the president of a business club for two years, she was a member of the republican club, and she was an English and Spanish tutor. Moreover, she was very active socially, participating in and coordinating fashion shows and dance groups.

**Racial verbal and physical aggressions.** Jane attended a competitive public school comprising students from diverse backgrounds. She recalled encountering racism from Black and White peers, teachers, and administration throughout high school. Consequently, Jane concluded that these experiences were “just things that you will have to deal with.” Jane recalled several encounters which helped to shape her views on race within her high school. Particularly, she remembered an incident in which she went to her White classmate’s home in order to work on a group project. While she was there, a film starring a predominantly Black cast was playing. Her classmate commented that her brother said the cast “looked like a bunch of monkeys.” Jane was too upset to respond during the incident but did send her classmate an email about the offensive comment. She noted her classmate’s response of “but my uncle is Black” as an example of how embedded racism was within her high school. In addition to her peers, Jane shared that her teachers would also single her out in class and make comments about her being “so well-spoken” and “so smart.” The insincere comments were confusing to her and she said “But everyone in the… it was AP English. That’s how everyone was.” These incidents from her
White teachers and peers soon became the norm for her as she navigated her way through her honor classes.

Throughout high school, Jane was also faced with backlash from her Black peers. She insisted that she was never fully embraced by the Black community because she was accused of “acting white.” As a result of this, Jane pointed out that it was difficult to for her to forge meaningful friendships. During her junior year, the verbal teasing soon escalated to physical assault when she was attacked after school by her Black schoolmates. The assault occurred after administrators rejected her attempt to establish a dance group with her school mates. She stated the following:

I had to go back and tell them [the classmates] that. I guess for them I was the symbol of rejection and they just hated my guts. One day I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and they jumped me.

After the assault, her family pressed charges and Jane noted that the incident damaged her psyche and served as a catalyst for change in the way she viewed some members within the Black community. She shared,

I was really, for a long time, I was very angry and combative after I walked away. I guess before, I was so Black power. I always looked at [it] being the larger, holding down the few … it really changed my perspective on that. I stopped seeing us as 100% victimized. I started seeing us more as sharing at least some of the responsibility.

The experience also made her more guarded, and she recalled becoming less open to engaging with her classmates and teachers.
During her senior year, Jane discovered that she was not receiving the same information regarding potential colleges and scholarship opportunities from her guidance counselor as her White classmates. She remembered, “I’m in class and I see students going out for things … and I hadn’t heard of this. I started seeing at that point in time that information is being filtered. I’m not getting the same information.” As a result, Jane did her own research and applied for scholarships on her own. Her counselor advised her not to apply for several scholarships, and he or she told Jane, “Don’t go out for these … you probably won’t get them. You should consider a HBCU [Historically Black College and University].” Despite the lack of support from her counselor, Jane applied for a prestigious science scholarship and was one of only a handful of students in her high school to be awarded the scholarship. The scholarship would cover the full cost of college tuition and the award recipients were honored at a private reception. She remembered that the first person she contacted was her guidance counselor. She told her, “You told me I probably wouldn’t get a scholarship but I got a full ride. Go ahead and add my name … I’ll be there.” Instead of diminishing Jane’s academic goals, her encounters with her peers, teachers, and administration strengthened her resolve and solidified her belief in herself and her ability to succeed in the face of the obstacles.

Undergraduate Student Experiences

Student involvement. Obtaining an undergraduate degree was the only option for Jane. Her mother insisted very early on that she would obtain a scholarship and attend college. As she pointed out, “It was never really a question.” Accordingly, Jane attended a PWI in the Northeastern United States. She noted that her decision to attend the college was based on the institution’s ranking in science. Upon her arrival on campus, she was pleased to discover that the campus comprised a largely diverse student body. Jane remarked, “We had so many different
cultures. It was just amazing.” Jane also met her best friend, who is Filipino, while attending the college’s summer bridge program and was proud to share that she was able to forge a lifelong friendship.

Because her campus community had a small student population and was mostly science based, there was some division among students based on academic majors. However, regardless of major, she indicated that the majority of the student body was collegial and amenable. “They had their scholarships and their people and then they did their thing, but we always came together.” Jane also noted that, because there were few sports teams, there was minimal attention given to athletics and more emphasis was placed on academics. She joked that the chess club was the most prestigious club on campus.

Academic excellence was what was cool there, so you didn’t have to worry about being cool. We didn’t have a football team. We had a chess team. That’s what our president always says. He’s like, “Yeah, well, we’re number one in chess, so…”

Due to the emphasis on academic achievement, Jane felt very comfortable on campus. Particularly among the Black student population which she noted was very small and supported academic excellence. She remarked, “We were cliquish in the beginning and we dwindled off to find ourselves. I would call that finding myself.” Because she felt so at ease within the campus community she cited that she soon began to seek out ways to become involved on campus and was recommended for leadership positions. She said, “Because I’m loud, people often say, ‘Oh, she’ll do it’ … so I end up doing it.” Jane also cited her strong personality as another reason why she naturally gravitated to student leadership positions.
Jane soon became involved in the African Student Association and a dance group, and worked with some of her friends to establish a community service organization. Her scholarship also required that she maintain office hours and she served as a mentor to incoming first year science students. She reminisced, “That was one of the best leadership experiences because you get so much from the students.” Upon reflection, Jane attributed her success as an undergraduate student to her involvement in campus clubs. She also noted that engaging with students, faculty, and administrators made the campus community feel like family. She expressed the following:

We were really taught how to utilize a university system, which a lot of people don’t know … It was definitely a community, like a family. The scholarship office and staff were like family. You know, your mother and father and aunts tell you to pull your skirt down? Are you having a problem in class? Why? Are you having a problem with this professor? What are you doing for the situation? How can you get more organized? All that kind of stuff.

Being able to navigate throughout campus afforded Jane possibilities including applying for scholarships that would allow her to travel across the country during the summer semester. Jane was awarded with two scholarships and subsequently interned at prestigious science universities and conducted lab research with highly regarded faculty in the science field.

In contrast, Jane reminisced on her biggest regret of her undergraduate experience. One of Jane’s biggest dreams was to join a Black Greek lettered organization. She said, “It was always something I wanted to do. Growing up, I was in the debutante ball. I just always wanted to do it.” She expressed that although she decided to attend her PWI, she considered attending a HBCU in order to participate in a membership intake process at an institution linked historically
to the sorority she wanted to join. Unfortunately, although she expressed interest and began the membership intake process during her junior year, the process was stopped abruptly due to accusations of misconduct by the chapter’s membership intake chair. The incident was very disappointing for her and she never pursued her efforts to join the sorority. She said,

I was upset because this was something I felt like I wanted to do for basically my entire life and I knew that I wanted to do this, but my friends and I, that’s why we made our community service organization just so we could feel like it wasn’t in vain and we left our mark … I was able to make amends that way.

The incident was an important learning experience for her, one in which she learned that she had the power to create her own legacy of service without having to join an existing club to foster change. This notion of fostering change and building a community of service is something that Jane firmly believes in, and she continued to develop it during the next phase of her academic career.

**Graduate Student Experiences**

**Science faculty challenges.** After graduating from her undergraduate institution, Jane decided to pursue a graduate degree. She stressed that she was once again provided with a full scholarship. She was very candid about the ways in which her efforts to pursue a graduate degree added an additional layer of pressure due to the competitive nature of the science field. She explained how hard it was:

It’s very competitive. It’s an underlying pressure that you need to go and do it. I feel like I owed it to the school, to everyone that helped and pushed me, to go and get this done…
Every time that I got another scholarship was a great thing, but it was like another person I owed.

She also emphasized that there was additional pressure to select the right institution. In the science field, the right institution is one with abundant resources and the ability to partner with faculty to conduct research. Jane mentioned that she considered attending a HBCU but decided that she would be provided with more opportunities at a PWI.

Although graduate school provided opportunities, Jane explained that she initially encountered major issues inside the classroom. She said, “I wasn’t doing well in the courses.” She recalled that she would never forget one of her first experiences in class with a White British faculty member in her program in which she failed the first exam. The professor said, “One third of you are performing well. The other third, average. The other third, below average. Two of you don’t deserve to be here. You should be delivering pizza.” Jane expressed how hurt and embarrassed she was, particularly since she felt the professor singled her out. She decided to take action and she approached the professor.

I went up and I told him, “Hi I’m the pizza person.” … then you could just see the shame in his face … I don’t know if it’s like this in other fields, but I feel like sometimes scientists think that if you can’t think in scientific terms then you are incompetent … and it’s not true.

Jane could not explicitly determine whether the professor’s comments were race based. However, she felt as if his comments were completely inaccurate and inappropriate. The experience reignited her resolve to excel in the program and she became more determined to prove her professor wrong. She stated,
He was surprised because I was the one always emailing, I was the one always in his face, and he felt bad that he said that and he had to come back and apologize … Needless to say, I ended up passing the class by the grace of God.

This incident demonstrated Jane’s fortitude with regard to pushing her way past obstacles. Though facing the possibility of failing the course, she decided to face the situation to prove that she deserved to be in the classroom.

In addition to her difficulty with the course, Jane also worked in too many labs in an effort to conduct research with faculty. She stated, “You’re supposed to do three rotations; I did five. After you do your fourth, you have a stigma.” She became labeled as a problem student, one who needs special attention. Given their busy schedules this stigma was particularly problematic because few faculty members had time to dedicate to students who needed further attention. Jane explained that despite the setback, “I didn’t give up, but I just stopped stressing over it. I just let go and let God handle it.” Eventually, she was able to secure a faculty member to conduct research, but her doctoral academic experiences soon made her insecure about her abilities. She explained it this way:

I felt terrible. I felt like an idiot … I really had a bad inferiority complex. I thought if I was saying something then … it was automatically wrong. I didn’t speak up and it just made me feel like I was an idiot. That’s how I felt walking around campus.

**Support networks.** Jane completed several of her courses and a strong network that included a professor who advocated for her. She asserted, “He was amazing…he helped me through so much. Without him, I probably wouldn’t even still be here. He let me go in and cry and do whatever.” Furthermore, her department chair was also very supportive. “She gives you
the best advice because it’s unbiased.” The support she received from faculty and her committee members helped her to move beyond her self-doubts and she began to feel as if she truly belonged in the program. As she enters her fourth year in the program, she also credits her cohort’s role in her perseverance through the program. She noted, “We have a big cohort of about 40 … I have a very close friend; She pushed me through my qualifying exam, like, you can do this … Don’t stop.” Having the support of her peers inside of the classroom kept Jane focused on obtaining a degree, but she also noted that maintaining these relationships can sometimes be challenging. She explained, “It’s hard to stay close with everyone because you may not even see them, because they’re in their lab.” Alternatively, Jane shared that because she’s older, some students see her as a mentor. So she also has tried to offer support to students who need it.

Overall, Jane stressed that her time at the PWI has been a learning experience that was similar to those she had in high school. This was largely due to her difficulty in finding and connecting with other students in the Black community. She remarked, “It feels like just an extension of what I’ve already experienced … but this is only for a time.” Jane’s resilience was demonstrated by her ability to push through a series of challenges in and out of the classroom. Her resolve was tested as she battled with self-doubt and academic challenges, but after searching around campus she was able to become more fully engaged within the campus community.

Building community. As she progressed through her program, Jane began to seek out other Black students within the campus community. This proved difficult, though. Her campus community was fragmented. She said, “I went in and noticed that we have Black people, but none of them knew anyone.” Because the medical campus is located on a branch campus, Jane
explained that many medical students felt ostracized. Consequently, she and several other graduate students met with the dean of the graduate school to voice their concerns and find ways to “feel more like a community of the larger whole.” Soon after, Jane worked with other Black graduate students to establish a graduate science organization. She pointed out, “They’ve really been working hard with the initiatives … to start up our government and get things together.”

Furthermore, Jane learned that the university system was also imperfect. She explained, “The University really needs a lot of work in terms of just the things that are readily available for students. They aren’t there. There needs to be more of a sense of community with African Americans and with students at large.” She stressed that for things to improve; the graduate student body must step up and execute the necessary work to make a change. She remarked, “We can’t wait for the faculty to do it because they’re too busy doing other things … they need our help … They want to know students’ ideas so that they can make this university better for the students.” Her comments reflected her passion for enhancing the experiences of Black graduate students. It also illustrated her belief in taking an active role in fostering change and the value of being involved within the overall campus community.

**Spiritual journey.** Participating in extracurricular activities also provided Jane with a greater sense of purpose. It also made her aware of how insignificant her issues were when compared to others and that she was not the only one going through trials. She stated, “The extra-curricular activities that I’ve done have been a lot of service. It really opens up your eyes to the bigger picture of the world and where you fit in.” She also shared that religion was an important factor in continuing through graduate school. Jane discussed a breaking point in which she reconsidered whether she should leave the institution. She determined that through
prayer and faith, not only could she withstand her obstacles but that she would be able to add value to science through service.

Some may not believe in the power of prayer, but I definitely do … Being spiritual, and believing in God, and having a faith that, no matter what, he is going to see me through this … I went to a really nice church and the preacher there was very supportive of … our graduate degree. It’s definitely played a role in sustaining me and keeping me sane.

She has never felt the need to prove a spiritual and emotional connection scientifically, but it really plays a role in just getting her through her daily activities. These perspectives helped Jane overcome challenges and understand that if others can achieve success in the face of larger scale obstacles then she could as well.

**Graduate student leadership.** When she reflected upon the differences between undergraduate student leadership and graduate student leadership, Jane remarked that as a graduate student leader she is much more serious and refined. This is largely due to the fact that there was more of an expectation of professionalism and Jane viewed graduate student leadership as a job. She regarded her graduate student leadership as more holistic and that having experiences in various areas will help as she pursues her career post-graduation. She shared, “Everything that I do now is more career minded. Still following my passion but more what I want to do in the future.” Currently, Jane serves on the executive boards of four graduate student organizations. Her roles include serving as a liaison for a science doctoral student organization, senator for the graduate student association, and president of the Black graduate student association (BGSA). Her responsibilities as liaison include networking, recruiting members for participation in community service projects, and providing updates to medical and graduate
students. As senator, Jane is responsible for “being the voice of our program and participating in events that graduate students do.” Serving as an advocate for Black graduate students is a primary goal for this position due to the lack of formal advocacy the organization has had in previous years. Jane insisted that that due to her multiple extra-curricular activities she rarely has time for a social life. Through it all, she highlighted that, “My priority is research ... I have a meeting with my boss every Friday. If I don’t have any data to show him he doesn’t care about my extra-curricular activities.” Jane’s role as president of BGSA takes up the majority of her time and she described her duties as multilayered.

As president, Jane reached out to various members of the campus community to build awareness of the needs of Black graduate students. She continues to work closely with her executive board to develop programs, increase recruitment efforts, and participate in community service. Participating in community service has always been a priority for Jane, and she recalled one of BGSA’s most challenging community service projects that challenged her leadership style. BGSA members visited an inner city high school in the area to discuss strategies for college preparation. She remembered the less than enthusiastic reception BGSA received from the high school students and how little the teachers did to encourage students to be attentive to their presentation. She remarked, “I understand that type of behavior from the kids but from the people that were facilitating the event for us it was just like we were inconveniencing them.” That experience made Jane reevaluate BGSA’s role within the community. She stated,

That interaction has been different as a leader but I realize that maybe we need to take a step back and make some of our things more useful to them because we don’t want it to just be self-serving community service.
The experience revealed Jane’s presumption that by simply showing up, students would respond to traditional approaches of presenting information about college. Jane learned that as a leader she needed to be flexible and open to trying new ideas. After BGSA’s visit, she realized that students needed to engage with the presenters in more interactive ways and she worked with the executive board to find ways to better engage community members.

Although time consuming and demanding at times, Jane’s overall leadership experiences have been eye opening and worthwhile. Prior to becoming a graduate student leader, Jane assumed that faculty and senior administrators within the campus community were “perfect” and never made a mistake. After assuming leadership positions herself, she realized that her initial assumptions were inaccurate. Some of the highlights of her leadership positions included learning how to navigate the campus community and engaging with students, faculty, and staff from across campus. She said, “It’s all been very, very rewarding. I wouldn’t change anything that I’ve done.” Jane also cherished the camaraderie that she gained with other graduate students. These connections also served to enhance her overall campus experience.

**Black graduate student leadership.** The role of race in Jane’s leadership experiences become more evident every time she and other Black students were the only ones asked to speak with incoming Black students. In addition, she became more aware that she was constantly the only Black student leader in attendance when meeting with senior leadership. In order to cope with it, Jane said she channeled memories from her earlier days, and responded, “You get used to it.” She added that she also was one of few by utilizing resources outside of the Black student community and recognizing that there was an opportunity to build community there. She explained, “Come here because you want to do science in somebody’s lab and you want to get your PhD. Don’t come here because you’re looking for the Black experience because that’s not
what you’re going to get here.” Although she faced challenges as a Black student leader, she maintained that her race with regard to her leadership was “everything and nothing at the same time.” She went on to explain that for every challenge there was an accomplishment that made overcoming the challenges worth it. Jane began to cry as she expanded on her response:

Every single step that I make or every single thing that I overcome and I do is such a big deal to me … because it’s not common to see an African American female doing her Ph.D. in science. That’s how I feel like I identify as African American. To me it’s everything and it’s nothing at the same time because for me every single thing that I make is a personal goal. I’m intertwined in this … it’s not something I just put away when I go home.

Jane’s words illustrated the deep sense of pride she has as a student leader and role model for other Black graduate students. Her perspective on how her race is embedded in her role as leader is demonstrated by her passion for enhancing the experiences of Black graduate students at her PWI. Jane also discussed how race was a factor in the types of interaction she had with members of the campus community. In one instance she was told that she needed to “Do your job so that you’re not judged.” In spite of the difficulties, Jane asserted that she views her race as an asset rather than a deterrent in the field of science and that she views herself as a scientist who is African American and not necessarily an African American scientist. She stated, “In science…they don’t care what color you are. All they care about is the data…One of the good things about science is that it tends to be very liberal.” Additionally, Jane stressed that her time in the science world has afforded her the opportunity to work with people from diverse cultural and international backgrounds rather than just Black and White individuals.
Race, Gender and the Imposter Syndrome. One of the major themes gleaned from Jane’s interview was her battle with feeling like an imposter in the science field because she is Black. She indicated that her feelings were largely due in part to some of the treatment she received in-the-classroom. She explained, “You internalize it and it becomes a part of who you are.” Jane credited her male professor from the Middle East with helping her overcome her insecurities. She stated, “He really sat me down and told me how I’m needed in this field and how it’s an asset.” She also spoke with other professors who shared that they also battled with feeling like imposters in the field.

When referring to her awareness of the stereotypes associated with being a woman in the science field, she recalled being told a set of rules:

If you are a woman in science… you should act different. You should be very serious. Don’t really laugh a lot. Don’t really show emotion. Don’t cry because you’ll be perceived as weak … If I have a meeting with my boss that doesn’t go well, I’ll cry outside because I don’t want him to get the perception that 1) I can’t handle it and 2) It’s because I’m a woman.

Moreover, due to the international and cultural diversity of her peers, Jane stated, “Gender roles are often played out differently in graduate school.” As an example, she cited that there were several married couples in labs in which the wives were leading the research and in all cases both couples had full academic credentials. Jane asserted that even in those labs, gender roles were influenced by nationality. Based on her experience, she also observed that men were “much easier” to work with than their female counterparts.
Overall, Jane confirmed that while race played more of a role in her position as a student leader, gender was more of an issue within her science program. As a result, she is more cognizant of the stereotypes associated with female scientists and has changed how she presents herself in the lab. She attributed the lack of emphasis on race in her labs to the presence of a large international group of scientists and the fact that the number of women in the field is also growing. This should have a positive influence on some of the dated “rules” for female scientists.

**Leadership artifact.** When asked to bring in an artifact that best described who she is as a student leader, Jane mentioned that she instantly knew the item. The artifact she brought in was the scientific notebook that she had had since her very first experiment in graduate school. The notebook, a large white binder, was filled with data from experiments, both failed and successful and it represented her growth as a graduate student. She initially did not know much about the University, but with time she began to learn how to navigate throughout the campus community. She also observed that her organization skills had become better with time as she determined what worked best for her. She had become stronger and more resilient since enrolling in graduate school and becoming a student leader.

This is everything that I have to show since I’ve been here … This is really what I feel exemplifies my role as a Black graduate student. This is something that no one can take away from me; this is my work. You have to have endurance. You have to have perseverance. You have to have resilience … You have to give your all for your experiment, have it not work, and come in the next day and do it over and over again … it shows completion. It shows growth.
Accordingly, her growth as a leader was also evident from her first few weeks of being intimidated due to her consistently being the only woman of color in the room to designing and implementing programs for graduate students.

Summary

Jane’s narrative revealed a series of challenges that began at a very early age. Unfortunately, incidents such as being singled out in her AP classes by her White teachers and not being provided with information about colleges and scholarships by her White guidance counselor were so constant that they became acceptable to Jane. She commented on several occasions that the occurrences did not move her to the point of action but rather desensitized her frustration. In contrast, the incidents that served as a catalyst for change all involved her Black counterparts. The assault at the hands of her schoolmates, her inability to join a sorority based on the actions of others, and the fragmented Black community at her graduate institution all influenced Jane to become a student leader and develop organizations that foster a sense of purpose and service within her college environment.

Similarly, Jane’s success as an African American scientist also strongly influenced her desire to assist Black graduate students within the field of science. Her goal to empower other Black graduate students stemmed from an encounter with a professor after failing an exam and her experiences with gender stereotypes within her lab. Jane indicated that issues with race were more prominent during interactions with campus constituents as a student leader. And in contrast, challenges such as self-doubt and feeling like an imposter were more of an issue for her because of her gender. In all instances, Jane’s faith and spirit of resilience allowed her to push through difficult circumstances and evaluate how she could improve the Black community.
Joyce’s Story

*We don’t live in a Black world; we live in a White world. I’m not going to be around people that look like me all the time, I’m not going to be around people that think like me all the time, but my challenge is to be successful and to be productive, even in those diverse environments.* – Joyce

The Early Years

**Black female influence.** Joyce is a 22 year old doctoral student from the West Coast who defined herself as outspoken and opinionated. She remarked, “I have a strong personality, which is a good and a bad thing, as a Black woman because we’re already looked at as being a little more aggressive.” She indicated that her friends referred to her as being very goal-oriented, determined, caring, and intelligent. Joyce pointed out that because she skipped a grade, she has always been the youngest person among her peers. Despite her age difference, she mentioned that she never allowed her age to serve as a deterrent when setting out to achieve her goals.

This talent was something that Joyce observed very early on in her mother. While she does not remember much about her father, she did comment that her stepfather served as a father figure for most of her life. Joyce stressed that her mother set a strong example early on in her childhood and established herself as the most significant role model in her life. Her mom is a K-12 superintendent who instilled a deep sense of pride in her and taught her to be a leader and to be the best in whatever she chose to do. She recalled the following:

*When I was young she was the principal in my school. She was a teacher. She was the principal. Then she went to assistant superintendent to superintendent. As long as I can remember I’ve always seen my mother as that example.*
Having such a formidable matriarchal role model fueled Joyce’s desire to succeed and to serve as a role model to other Black women.

**Childhood community.** She described her neighborhood as predominantly White with a robust community of African American middle class families. She spent a great amount of her childhood at her grandmother’s mostly African American and low-income neighborhood before being moved to another city that she described as being more culturally diverse. Joyce explained, “I’ve always been launched from setting to setting, which is good because it’s taught me how to adapt to a lot of different situations.” Being able to navigate through both community types made her appreciative of the fact that she was exposed to various lifestyles, and she believed she became less selfish because of that.

Similarly, Joyce’s school was filled with African American students from middle class homes which made her overall school experiences “pretty positive” from elementary to high school. She stated that one of the things she found most interesting about being from the West Coast was the fact that the Black culture was fully embraced by the majority and other minority students. For instance, she noticed throughout high school her schoolmates “acted Black.” She stated,

They were listening to the same music, they wore the same clothes, they hung out where we hung out and they knew they were not of this race, but they embraced our culture.

Being immersed within a community that celebrated her racial identity resulted in her feeling more comfortable and open to being engaged in the environment. Joyce asserted that after graduating from high school, she never doubted that she would attend college due to her interest in biology and due to her mother’s insistence.
There was no choice. I came from a family where you went to college or you went to college … When I was nine, outside of my grandma’s house, my mother made me choose pretty much a career path. It was very general. All I knew was that I wanted to go to medicine. It really helped me. It was my motivation from nine all the way to 16 when I went to college. Yeah, there was no choice.

Joyce’s narrative illustrated how her mother influenced her belief that enrolling in college would assist her in achieving her goals.

**Undergraduate Student Experiences**

**The HBCU effect.** Joyce enrolled in a HBCU in the Northeastern United States where she recalled having some of the most amazing experiences of her life. She indicated that being surrounded by people who looked and had similar beliefs as she did made her time at a HBCU a great one. She stated, “The person who looks like you is commanding the classroom. The person who looks like you is mentoring you to where you want to be. It was great.” She was involved in a research program for minorities that paid for her to conduct external research. The program afforded her with an opportunity to network with other Black scientists in the science field. She explained, “People knew you were part of minority research.” The summer experience inspired her to dedicate her efforts to giving back to the community after, and she remarked, “We are the privileged; We need to work to make everyone the privileged.” As a result of her research experience, Joyce felt better prepared to become involved within the campus community.

Due to the small student population, Joyce was easily able to capitalize on the networking skills she acquired. The small student population also allowed her to navigate across campus more effectively. She stated, “We didn’t have two different campuses.” As she developed
connections within her campus community, she began to become more involved in extra-
curricular activities clubs and organizations outside of her academic area. During her sophomore
year she joined a Black Greek lettered organization, the biology club, and the student
government association (SGA). She remarked,

> Every connection I made, it became fruitful. It was always what we could do for each
> other. A lot of relationships were productive … there was a conscious effort to uplift
> everyone. It was really nice.

She indicated that as a result of her joining various organizations she gained a better
understanding of what each organization represented.

Because of her increased interactions with other students, Joyce discovered the wide
array of diversity among Black students. This was something she had rarely encountered
previously. She commented, “I got to see the way that different people dress and talk different.
I got to hear different accents and some people were from the Bahamas.” It was during this time
that Joyce began to more fully appreciate the diversity within her HBCU. As she became more
exposed to different cultural groups, she felt even more connected to her peers and the campus
community.

**HBCU student leadership.** During her time at her undergraduate institution, Joyce
served in several leadership roles in several different student organizations. For example, as
parliamentarian of her undergraduate sorority chapter, she was charged with ensuring that
meetings were conducted in an effective manner using Robert’s Rules of Order. She admitted, “I
didn’t like that meetings were disorganized … I actually started as parliamentarian in my chapter
and then switched over to parliamentarian of the Pan-Hellenic council because I liked it so
much.” She then became vice president of her chapter and was in charge of programming activities which was similar in responsibilities to her position as junior class president. In addition to those positions, Joyce was also vice president of the biology club and served as the co-health director for SGA. For every organization that she joined, she stressed that she wanted to see change:

I didn’t see a lot of activity sometimes, or I didn’t like the way that things were being run, so I hopped into a position where I would have a little bit more say and be able to coordinate.

Joyce’s narrative substantiated her mother’s influence as a role model. Moreover, being in an environment with individuals who embraced and shared similar backgrounds gave her a strong sense of purpose. She was then able to network effectively to harness her talents into better serving her campus community.

**Graduate Student Experiences**

Joyce knew that in order to conduct research professionally she would have to obtain her doctoral degree. Even though there are a lot of things one can do with a bachelor’s degree in biology, she remarked,

I wanted to effect change … Medical doctors are limited by what the Ph.Ds. discover in the lab … We do the research. We come up with the drugs. We come up with the treatments that they describe to patients. Let me be the Ph.D., get the basic understanding of what’s going on, do my part to improve what’s going on in the clinic … as long as I’m effecting change in their disease.
Armed with the goal of playing a major role in change, Joyce then turned her attention to the type of graduate institution she would attend. Ultimately, she chose to attend a PWI for her graduate degree:

As much as I love my Black colleges and universities, they don’t have the same resources as PWIs, especially when it comes to STEM, when it comes to science. These PWIs are machines. They get all of this money. They push out all of these papers. They recruit the best and the brightest and they spend so much money doing that … seeing the difference and seeing the facilities, and I needed something. I could get it, and I could make progress. I just have to [go] where I feel I can learn the most … That is really all it was.

Joyce’s decision to attend a PWI for graduate school fulfilled some of the requirements to accomplish her future professional goals, but she encountered a series of challenges upon her arrival to campus.

**PWI Community.** During her initial months at her PWI, Joyce shared that she experienced culture shock and adjustment issues due to the low Black student enrollment. She described the campus as being very disconnected and one in which people are cold and prefer to keep to themselves. She stressed, “It doesn’t feel homey. People don’t want to share. It’s not communal at all. It’s more like a group of people who just happen to work on the same campus.” Joyce went on to discuss how employees within the program were also disconnected from other programs event they all shared the same building. The disconnection has impacted her interactions with faculty and administrators because, as she stressed, “It seems like some people don’t want to be here.”
Although she maintained that the majority of the campus is unwelcoming, she revealed that there are “some diamonds in the rough that really care, that really work hard for the students, but they are in the overwhelming minority.” Unfortunately, Joyce’s experiences within the classroom mirrored Joyce’s negative experiences. During her first year, no one forged relationships, and in her second and third year, she and her classmates barely interacted with each other unless they worked on a group project, which she said was rarely assigned by her professors. She recalled, “It was a shock and it affected my academic performance…I hated it here.” She remembered being mistaken for a different person by her White male classmate every time she changed her hairstyle. She said, “It’s not even that there’s not Black people, it’s that the city doesn’t cater to the African American culture. She described the community as being superficial and only interested in people who look a certain way. She asserted, “People don’t want to see an afro, they want to see a 24-inch weave.” Consequently, Joyce found it difficult to relate to her community and to her classmates based on what she perceived as glaring differences. She cited that she began having difficulty in her classes and she felt all alone. She shared the following:

I didn’t feel the same compassion from anyone…I didn’t feel like anyone was understanding where I was coming from. I literally felt like a black dot on a white piece of paper.

As a result, Joyce revealed that she became very antisocial for a period of time. But then she decided to broaden her experiences inside and outside of her classes. She soon began to meet more people and established a network of support. She said, “Once you have a network it’s not so bad. You don’t feel all alone.” Joyce also started interacting more with other students and befriended one of her classmates from Turkey but was still cognizant of their differences. She
said, “There’s always a barrier…we really can’t relate. I’m not used to it. I’m probably never going to get used to it.” From that point, things began to improve. She moved on to pass her qualifying exam. Joyce’s experiences tested her resolve and reminded her that she could persist to graduation with a solid support network.

**Support network.** Joyce credited her support network with playing a huge role in helping her to remain at her institution. She joined the graduate chapter of her sorority and became very close friends with the president of the chapter. She maintained, “She’s a coworker and she basically adopted me…she invites me to her house very often.” Joyce also shared that she became really close friends with a gentleman in her building, and that friends from her HBCU moved to the area. She recalled the support she received when her car was broken into and they came to the scene to make sure she was safe. She said, “I would say it’s strong. I definitely appreciate it because when school gets hard at least I have people outside of there who understand what’s kind of going on.” Having a support network within close proximity provided Joyce with a sense of comfort. Accordingly, she was able to more fully adjust to her PWI.

**Graduate student leadership.** As Joyce began to feel better, she recalled her first attempt at becoming involved in a graduate organization. She and another student wanted to establish a biology student government organization. They began to develop the constitution and then her friend left the university. Joyce then began having conflicts with her peer and soon realized they had competing visions for the organization. She said “another student tried to take over, and she did, and the organization went in an entirely different direction than we had initially intended.” She asserted that the experience was not a positive one, particularly because all of her contributions prior to departing were never acknowledged. When asked about the competing visions, Joyce revealed that the priorities of the new president included securing bike
racks on campus versus Joyce’s goal of lobbying for more affordable housing for research and medical students near campus. Regarding the conflict, she stated, “That’s not an issue for me because I do this on my own, but for some of the more affluent students, who are usually not of color, they’re like ‘but why?’” Eventually when she realized that the concerns and priorities of Black graduate students were not being addressed, she distanced herself from the organization to work with “more like-minded people” in BGSA.

This like-mindedness is what Joyce feels sets HBCU and PWI student leadership experiences apart. She stressed that at HBCUs, everyone’s perspectives are considered because the organization is working toward the same goal: advancing Black students. Joyce also offered the following:

I would say at a HBCU you’re getting involved with these organizations, but the organization’s established, there are such strong legacies. You’re learning about the history of the National Council of Negro Women or the 100 Black Men or Collegiate 100 and things like that. You have accountability to continue the legacy and uphold what other people have done, and I think that really motivates people to work hard.

The philosophy of many of the HBCU student organizations paralleled those of her own, so Joyce decided to dedicate her efforts to BGSA in order to return to that standpoint.

Conversely, she noted that her leadership experiences at a predominantly white institution (PWI) did not include those aspects because “Everyone is just concerned with doing their own thing, reinventing the wheel.” Joyce asserted that the organizations lacked the historical element, which she felt made members more accountable and motivated them to help the greater community. For instance, she noted the biology graduate organization she initially worked in
used to be active on campus and then became less active. She asserted, “It came back and no one cared; no one that’s currently in charge of the organization cares about what they did or tries to build off of that or continue.” Joyce contended that she was not accustomed to that because her previous experiences called for upholding “the legacy of those who came before you.” Because members of the organization did not share her beliefs for the direction of the organization, she realized it was not the best fit for her.

Based on her experiences as a graduate student leader, Joyce said that she matured. She expressed, “You can be a more calm, peaceful person and still get some things done.” She also noted that her leadership role taught her how to motivate board members to achieve the organization’s goals. Additionally, Joyce said another important leadership lesson was learning how to cope with stressful situations. She cited, “You learn how to be an effective role model … just leading by example.” Joyce learned that this meant persisting through obstacles and establishing trust with her peers.

Some of Joyce’s favorite aspects of student leadership included meeting with administrators and faculty that she typically would not have come into contact with outside of her program. Specifically, she enjoyed taking time to listen to how administrators came to be in their positions. She attributed her interest to her mother’s position as an administrator and seeing her passion for her work. When reflecting upon her least favorite aspect of leadership, Joyce admitted that she is not fond of delegating tasks. She mentioned, “I get nervous delegating tasks because I just feel something is going to happen.” She indicated that she is working on trying to trust her board more. She remarked,
Part of maturing as a leader is realizing not everyone does everything the way that you want them to do it. Everyone has their own style; everyone works in a different way, so learning to accept that has helped a little bit with the negativity around that aspect of leadership for me.

Joyce realized that her maturation as a leader necessitated trust and confidence in more than just her own ability to lead. Her most constant interaction with her peers has also heightened her sense of confidence in the executive board’s abilities. She said, “We talk a lot about our visions and our future goals, and it’s been helpful.” Being able to communicate and interact consistently has enabled the organization to achieve its goals a lot faster.

Overall, Joyce experiences have “significantly improved my feelings about the university.” She stressed that when she arrived she could not relate to anyone and as she participated in the campus community more through student leadership, her involvement has had a great impact on how she views the campus community. Her leadership experiences have been as diverse as the individuals she has encountered. Because of this, she learned that leadership is not composed of a perfect system but the challenges she encountered strengthened her commitment to serve the Black student community.

**Minority layers.** Joyce’s transition as a graduate student leader at a PWI has been a challenging one. As she noted, her challenges were often multilayered due to her race. Specifically, Joyce revealed that in many instances she has felt like a spectacle due to her race.

It’s the rarity. Talk about being a minority, being a woman on this campus is being a minority already. Then being a Black woman on top of that puts you in one percent, if that, of graduate students … It’s being a part of an overwhelming minority.
Similarly, some of her interactions with faculty and administration also made her feel uncomfortable. One of the issues she recalled constantly facing are the comments she faced about her hair. She stressed, “So let’s talk about being a Black woman with natural hair at a PWI, and you’re even further into a minority.” Joyce made the choice to wear her hair naturally quite some time ago and explained that her hair became the topic of conversation among the administrators. She said, “I’ve sat in meetings with multiple principal investigators, my boss included, and had conversations about whatever is going on with my hair that day, if I have braids, if I have an afro.” As a result, Joyce decided to significantly reduce her interactions with them because she does not want to deal with the negative attention.

Joyce told about a specific incident in which a staff member played a song that she had never heard before. She soon discovered that the song used to be played at Klu Klux Klan cross burnings. She could not understand why the staff members would play the song and not understand why she would be offended. Joyce also noted that on another occasion, a staff member assumed she was Muslim because of her last name. The staff member indicated that they were having a discussion about another individual who is Muslim and wanted to make sure that she would not be offended.

I was like, ‘I’m Christian’ … but to assume that I might be offended, you probably shouldn’t have said it in the first place. You knew that there was a possibility of offending me before you said it.

Having to deal with different racial and religious aggressions heightened her awareness of how different she was in comparison with staff members. Accordingly, she distanced herself from those members of the campus community.
In addition to her awareness of differences among her White peers, Joyce also noticed that her Black peers were separating themselves from the African American students based on their cultural identity. She commented,

I’ve never seen such disconnect between people who look like me and Black culture. I have met so many Black people who don’t identify as with being Black or African American. No, I’m Jamaican, I’m Haitian. You’re Black. You have different cultural roots, but when it comes down to be a brown-skinned person … we are all the same. I’ve had to break that down to so many people because I don’t understand these disconnects.

Due to her race, Joyce expected challenges with staff members, when she enrolled at a PWI. However, encountering the ways in which other Black graduate students separated themselves was very unfamiliar. She soon realized that she acquired another minority layer category based on her nationality.

Joyce’s gender also served as an additional layer of her identity and became the topic of discussion within her lab. She recounted that one week she decided to wear a brightly colored outfit and was instantly questioned about her plans for the day by a male colleague. She expressed disappointment at the sexist remark as well as the double standards that still exists for female scientists. She explained,

In science there are a lot of women who don’t necessarily embrace being a woman in that they don’t want to put on makeup in the morning, and that’s not necessarily a part of being a woman, but it’s something specific to our gender or people who identify with our gender. They don’t wake up and put on makeup in the morning; they wear pants. We are
allowed to wear skirts, but most people don’t wear skirts here; we’re not going out for
mani/pedis.

Joyce indicated that after working in her lab, she is acutely aware that more needs to be done to
gain equity among male and female scientists.

**Leadership artifact.** Joyce admitted that she had a difficult time selecting an artifact
that she felt best represented who she is as a graduate student leader. The artifact that she
brought was a multicolored scarf that she noted she wears when she needs a pop of color with
her outfits. She described her scarf as having a “myriad of different colors” and that there’s a lot
going on with the patterns in her scarf. Joyce explained,

> I feel like that little dot right here … I just feel lost in a sea of events, of colors,
happenings that may or may not have to do with me, but it’s overwhelming, really.
There’s so many layers of being a Black female in America … specifically a Black
female surrounded by non-Black females and males. Then, being a leader on top of
that… I felt because of all the patterns and prints and twists and turns in the fabric of this
scarf, it was pretty representative of the way I always feel here.

The encounters that challenged Joyce the most also strengthened her and provided her with the
skills she needed to become a better leader and person.

**Summary**

Joyce’s narrative was filled with both positive and negative encounters. Her mother
provided her with the earliest example of a strong Black female leader. With her mother’s
guidance, she was exposed to diverse cultures within her childhood community and then moved
to a predominantly Black undergraduate institution. Her experiences at her HBCU solidified her appreciation of the diversity within Black culture and inspired her to give back to the community through involvement and service. That desire to give back continued once she arrived at her graduate PWI. It was there that she encountered some of her toughest challenges as a student leader and Black female scientist.

Moreover, Joyce discovered the impact of cultural identity within the Black community and how it also separated her from a community she had always labeled as her own. Through her hardships, Joyce began to feel comfortable in her skin and decided to focus on how to more fully embrace her brand of uniqueness. Focusing on her goal to contribute to the Black community, Joyce continued her role as a graduate student leader and reconfirmed her commitment to improving the experience of Black graduate students.

**Sylvia’s Story**

*I represent a community of people before I represent myself.* – Sylvia

**The Early Years**

**Black female influence.** Sylvia is a 29 year old Psychology doctoral student from the Deep South who described herself as a laid-back and open-minded person. She said her friends would describe her as being very compassionate and caring. She stated, “I’m a psychologist so I’m always noticing personalities … I’m pretty calm. That’s how I approach situations.” She explained that her family would also say she is the “optimist of the family” because she is always concerned with the general well-being of others.
Sylvia grew up in a two parent home but noted that it felt more like a single parent one because her father was always on the road due to work. Her mother is a registered nurse who worked the night shift and her aunt took care of her and her older sister while her mother was at work. She added that her younger sister was born a few years later. Sylvia stressed that her mother “pretty much did everything” and did her best to provide the family with a better living environment. She also indicated that she spent most of her childhood growing up in her grandmother’s predominantly Black neighborhood. She explained, “We weren’t in the dangerous part but you could drive down the street a little bit and there it was … that’s where I spent my nights.” She was grateful for her time in her grandmother’s neighborhood. She felt fortunate to grow up in two different worlds and see and understand the differences between them. As a result, she said she became much more appreciative of her upbringing. She said, “I just want others to experience what I’ve had.”

Sylvia credited her desire to help others to the strong relationship she has with her mother. Her mother is the youngest of 11 children and grew up very poor. Sylvia shared,

Her oldest sister, I think, is 17 years older than her. It wasn’t until her oldest sister went through school, got a nursing degree and got a job that she was able to buy my mother her first toothbrush at the age of 10 or 11.

Sylvia indicated that her mother always stressed the importance of obtaining a solid education. Her mother thought that an education would provide her the resources necessary to improve her quality of life. Her mother encouraged her to become a doctor, and she commented, “That’s the only thing she really knew. That’s what she saw as being the most lucrative. I was always encouraged to make money.” Rather than pursue a field she had limited interest in, she decided
to contribute her talents to a field she was passionate about. She asserted, “I just really work to give back to my family and society.” Giving back to the community is an integral part of Sylvia’s goal of assisting and empowering others.

School community. Sylvia attended a private Catholic school from preschool to sixth grade. She stated,

My mother did not want me to go to the public school that I was zoned to because it was not a good school. She put me in private school. I don’t know how … I wasn’t Catholic so it was even more expensive.

Sylvia was the only Black person in most of her classes until she went to public school starting in the seventh grade. During that year, she decided to run for chaplain. She recalled not being sure what a chaplain was but she was eager to become involved. Sylvia described her school community as predominantly White. She explained, “It was literally White and a sprinkle of Black children.” It was during this period that she realized that in the Deep South, Black and White people were divided with “no other diversity.” She remembered being the only kid in many of her student clubs and sports teams. She recalled, “There were probably five or six percent Black students in my high school. I graduated in a class of 330; there were 10 or 11 of us.” Sylvia stated that, during that time, she rarely focused on the fact that there were so few Black students around.

Sylvia was “super involved” in various clubs as well as sports. She said, “I was an athlete growing up. I played varsity volleyball and ran track.” She was a member of the volleyball team as a freshman and sophomore in high school before suffering an ACL injury. During high school, she held several leadership positions and was enrolled in numerous AP
classes. She served as class representative during her freshman and sophomore year and was class vice president in her junior year. During her senior year, Sylvia was a part of the National Honor Society and Spanish Honor Society in addition to serving as senior class president. Although she was very active, she expressed that all of the Black students were friends and spent most of their time together. She remembered,

> We all clicked together and grouped together. We had our Black table at lunch. I never thought it was something where we segregated ourselves. It was just… We flocked to each other, of course, for community support but it doesn’t mean that we didn’t interact with any others.

She noted that, due to being class president, she was able to interact with her White peers.

> From Sylvia’s experience as a student leader, she had to stop being as open and trusting when she worked through challenges she faced. For instance, she recalled an incident in which she hired a friend to be the videographer for the senior videos. She explained,

> She was going through something, apparently. I don’t know. She just didn’t do it. It was two or three days before I had to show this video because I kept calling her. Our advisor was in the classroom, I was crying … and my advisor said, “You have to explain to the school why we don’t have a video.

She was able to scramble at the last minute and find a replacement, but not before she learned how to work through a seemingly impossible situation.

**Undergraduate Student Experiences**
After graduating from high school, Sylvia stated that going to college was the only option. She commented, “It wasn’t a choice of ‘to get a degree or not to get a degree,’ it was a choice of where you’re going to get a degree from.” She indicated that her mother was adamant about her attending college so Sylvia selected a large public research PWI in the Deep South. The university was 45 minutes away from where she was raised and she loved being so close to home because she was able to come home at least once a week. She lived on campus during her first two years of college but then moved off campus with her best friend. Academically, Sylvia did not feel challenged:

College was easy because my high school very much prepared me for it. All the classes that were taken were the same things I did in high school … I was definitely ahead of the game.

As a result, she was done with her coursework in three and a half years, and she spent most of her spare time hanging out with friends and developing her social networks.

**Racism in the deep south.** Racism sometimes proved difficult based on some unpleasant experiences. She recalled an incident in which she attended a party with her boyfriend and some of her friends who were in a sorority. At that time, the campus was notorious for having fraternities and sororities that did not accept Black students. She explained, “Some guy came over…we told him that we were invited.” She said they insisted that she and her friends leave and that although she was calm, her boyfriend was very upset. During another instance, she was out with her sister and they were both called the “n” word. She tried to convince her sister to ignore it. “I hate that it ruined everybody else’s night.” As an undergraduate student, these were her first experiences with racism and they influenced her decision to not participate in
campus clubs and organizations. Sylvia explained, “I just created my own social network.” Her PWI comprised over 20,000 students. However, because she did not feel a connection with the campus community, she chose to limit her interactions to mostly Black students. She stated, “I just stayed away from all that … I came there, did my thing, got my education … had my friends, and that’s about all.” Her friends helped her to maintain a sense of belonging. As she noted, “We had our little local hangouts … we had a HBCU nearby, which was nice because we could hang out with some other people.” Sylvia did not feel as if she missed out on anything by not being involved on campus. Rather, she was proud that she achieved her goal of obtaining her bachelor’s degree.

Graduate Student Experiences

After she obtained her bachelor’s degree, Sylvia contemplated becoming a medical doctor, but decided against it because she would have too little contact with patients. She was approached by her former professor who asked her to consider obtaining a graduate degree in psychology because she knew Sylvia wanted to be more directly involved with patients. Consequently, she took a job in a psychology lab with the clinical director of a psychology program. The director was a Black female. Sylvia recalled, “It was nice. I think she was one out of two Black faculty members in the psychology department. It was nice that she was over an entire clinical program.” Sylvia reached out to her to learn more about her background and how she had become interested in the field. The director suggested she enroll in a public health program and encouraged her to look outside of her home state. Sylvia listened and decided to study outside of the state and in a more progressive environment.
She selected a graduate program with a solid psychology emphasis and decided she would attend a PWI because of the resources so she could focus all of her efforts on obtaining her graduate degree. When asked to describe her PWI, Sylvia noted that although the institution portrayed itself as being diverse, aside from a large international and Latino community, there were few Black graduate students. She indicated that the surrounding areas near the city had lots of activities but there were few options for graduates in campus social opportunities. She missed the University’s formal orientation and found out about various social activities that catered to the African American community by word of mouth. She recalled attending a mixer at a Black faculty member’s residence in which she was introduced to other Black students, but noted that there was no centralized group that assisted Black graduate students with their transition to the University.

Accordingly, Sylvia spent her first year within her department and rarely ventured out into the campus community. She said, “You stay in there, you stay stuck in that little bubble.” Sylvia noted that her graduate experiences were very lonely at times and filled with moments where she felt “sad” and “stressed out.” It was during those times that she turned to her pastime of dance and decided that she would work to seek out and meet new people outside of her academic program.

**Race and the academic experience.** Sylvia loved that her department was filled with solid resources and noted that the program “takes care of their students” in that area. Unfortunately, her interactions with faculty were less than positive ones. Sylvia commented that her department faculty are not supportive and that, “I’m always aware of being a minority wherever I go.” She noted that her mentor is the only Black faculty mentor in her program and that she receives the least amount of support from her. This lack of support has been one of her
biggest disappointments because she hoped for and assumed that their similarities would foster a positive relationship. She stated,

It’s just really frustrating because we do health disparities research, we do minority health research. We have open discussions about race, ethnicity, and things like that. We’ve talked about, in the beginning, how things are going to be much harder for me because I am a minority student and all that stuff. I have to work extra hard … I’m not just a psychology student, but I’m a Black female psychology student. I represent all Black females … Then I feel like I should be receiving a little bit more support from her because of that reason.

What was particularly disturbing to Sylvia was that she was the only Black graduate student in her entire program. She received minimal support from other faculty members as well. She recalled an incident in which a faculty member told her advisor that she was the weakest student in her class. She said, “I would have loved to have gotten that feedback if I had the worst paper, for you to tell me and help me correct whatever is going on.” This incident left her doubting faculty intentions. She remarked, “I have no idea what their end game is. It definitely isn’t to support their students … You would think they would want to do everything to get us out there.” Moreover, given the fact that she was awarded a fellowship to attend the institution, she felt that it may have contributed to her negative experiences with faculty. She went on to say that her fellowship equates to being “cheaper for a faculty member.” This means, she explained, that she works in their labs for no pay and is subsequently brushed aside and treated unfairly by faculty. Alternatively, her experiences with her peers have been mostly positive. She emphasized that her peers have been very supportive and help each other with notes and books. She
remarked that the classroom is a “very, very non-competitive environment.” One in which she socializes and collaborates with her peers outside of the classroom. She appreciates this because, “I have a group of people to go through this with.” Besides her friends and family, having her peers as a support network has been very important because she is far away from home. She stressed, “I love my cohort. I am so grateful that I have them because it would be so much worse if I didn’t have classmates that knew what I was going through in the program.” importance of having strong support networks was why she decided to become involved. Sylvia felt that graduate students needed an organization so that they could “feel like they have a community and feel like they do belong and are supported.” At the end of her first year, she befriended the secretary of the Graduate Student Association (GSA). She commented, “I was itching to do it because I haven’t done anything in my whole year.”

From there, she became the organization’s web master, vice president, and then president. After joining GSA she became passionate about creating a sense of community for graduate students.

**Graduate student leadership.** As president of GSA, Sylvia’s responsibilities included management of the executive board, programming, and meeting with various campus constituents. She noted, “I felt like it was my job to take the zoomed out point of view of everything … I definitely had to do a lot of just management of people.” She was in constant communication with her seven-member executive board and that she loved those interactions because she truly cared about GSA.

Everybody has their different agenda. Everybody can join because they really want to see more bike racks, or they join because they want to have a study lounge … In the end,
it’s always to enhance the experience of graduate students and to promote our community awareness on campus.

She pointed out that having an agenda for being involved in an organization is important, however. When you become the leader of an organization, you should also be passionate about the organization members’ success.

Sylvia described her leadership style as non-combative, direct, and proactive. She works to establish a connection with organization members. She noted that, “It’s not just about me and my department or what I do.” Sylvia commented that she thinks about all graduate students and “not just a subgroup of people” in order to more effectively serves the entire graduates student body. One of the aspects of leadership that she most enjoyed included her interaction with administrators outside of her academic department. Specifically, she gained mentoring opportunities and obtained the support that she did not receive from faculty in her department. She noted that her GSA advisors are very responsive and supportive, and the Black administrators with whom she has interacted for GSA have also assisted her as a student leader. She remarked, “It’s really nice that most of the graduate school is Black. It’s really nice to see.” Sylvia also gained a better understanding of how the university works. She felt that learning this was extremely beneficial to her, as she hopes to work in academia post-graduation.

Sylvia’s least favorite aspects of leadership is are the time commitment that go into serving as president and the lack of appreciation she receives in the position. She shared that her department does not value her extra-curricular duties and see it as a “waste of time… and taking away your focus from your dissertation.” She noted that having to argue against that belief has also been unpleasant. Overall, though it has been challenging, Sylvia learned a lot of lessons and
acquired transferable skills through leadership. She learned how to effectively communicate with others and how to manage individual and collective responsibilities as well as being intentional in achieving the organization’s goal. The experiences and lessons have made her a stronger leader and a stronger person.

**Race, gender, and student leadership.** Sylvia stated that there are very few Black student graduate leaders on campus and the number decreased as she got higher in her academic career. She stated, “You see fewer and fewer of yourself.” Sylvia noted that as a Black graduate student leader she is even more aware that she represents women and Black women in particular. This awareness placed additional pressure on her. She asserted, “I am the one that they’re going to develop their opinion about like my sub-group … and that was actually even mentioned to me outright. It used to bother me.” Now that she has served as a leader for a few years, she has channeled her efforts to turn her role into “teachable moments” for people who have not worked closely with Black female graduate students. This added sense of responsibility still surprises her. She remarked that she’s still one of only four Black student leaders in the campus community. She acknowledged that others have paved the way before her. She shared:

The president before was a Black female, and I feel like she did a lot of groundbreaking and kind of getting people used to the idea that we’re in these leadership positions.

Sylvia believed that she never encountered any direct experiences with racism. She also stated that having Black administrators as leaders within the graduate school influenced her limited experiences with racism. She commented:
It’s so nice, and it’s comfortable and normal. That’s what we want to eventually get to, where the world is comfortable and normal. You see people who look like you everywhere in these positions … in these successful positions.

When asked about whether gender has ever been a factor in her leadership position, Sylvia remarked that her racial identity has always been more of an issue than her gender. She cited, “I feel like I’m always Black before I’m a female.” She commented that she has never really had experiences with sexism because her field is dominated by females. “Where I am, women run,” and the dialogue typically focused on women’s issues.

**Spirituality.** Sylvia contended that her spirituality has helped her through challenges. She identified herself as being spiritual rather than religious and stressed that her faith has provided her with a sense of security in her decision to attend her graduate PWI and to become involved on campus. She also shared that initially she had a difficult time finding a predominantly Black church, but she “ventured out” and found solace in a non-denominational church. She also acknowledged that prayer has played an integral role in getting her through the loneliness because “when you have nobody else to turn to, nobody else to really understand you, God will always be there.”

**Leadership artifact.** During our final interview, Sylvia noted that her artifact not only represented her as a Black female graduate student leader but also as a Black woman. She explained:

This is a gavel and it has the inscription, ‘GSA president’ and the institution’s name. I chose this because it doesn’t have my name on it. It just has my position … that’s how I
feel. I represent a community of people before I represent myself … before you even get to know who I am.

Sylvia believes she has a responsibility to break stereotypes and empower people by advancing the organization. As a result, she has accepted her role as leader and as a representative of her community of Black graduate students, if that means student experiences will improve. She also believed that the gavel represented power. She emphasized, “It’s a gavel, so it represents the power I have to change.” The power to change provided Sylvia with great purpose, one in which she is willing to face and overcome challenges.

**Conclusion.** The purpose of this study was to examine the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at a predominantly White institution. After exploring the stories of four Black female doctoral student leaders, their narratives revealed that all of the participants sought out a community in which their racial and gender identities were acknowledged and celebrated. Additionally, each participant had matriarchal figures that influenced them greatly, encouraged them to obtain their college degrees, and give back to the community. These matriarchal figures included their mother, grandmother, or faculty mentor and, along with their friends and peers, provided a strong support network for each participant.

Giving back and building a sense of community was also something that each participant felt was important to improving her campus experience. In order to achieve this, participants sought opportunities in which they worked with other graduate students to ensure that members of the graduate student community had a more fulfilling overall campus experience. After experiencing encounters with racism, sexism, and academic issues with faculty, participants perceived their campus encounters as unfavorable. These encounters motivated them to become
student leaders in order to have the power to foster change. Participants described their student leadership experiences as lonely, difficult, and challenging due to the interactions with faculty, peers, and administration. Despite these interactions, participants used these experiences as tools for learning, and they noted that their leadership experiences were very rewarding and improved their perception of the campus community.
Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Research Questions and Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at PWIs. Their stories provided insight into what influenced their selection of leadership opportunities and what they experienced in these leadership roles. Moreover, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do Black female graduate students select campus leadership opportunities at a PWI?
2. How do Black female graduate students view their campus leadership experiences at a PWI?
3. In what ways does holding a campus leadership position affect the influence the overall campus experience of Black female graduate students at a PWI?

In this chapter, I will present the major themes generated from the participants’ narratives and link the study’s findings to the themes presented in the literature. Additionally, I will explore narrative themes that closely align with the concepts of the theoretical framework. Doing so will provide a comprehensive understanding of participants’ collective key points and experience. I will then discuss the implications of this study in relation to the literature and this study’s research questions. Finally, I will present recommendations for future research and implications for higher education professionals.

Student leadership and engagement. Participants in this study noted the importance of becoming socialized into the campus community. Specifically, they described their initial experiences at their graduate PWI as fragmented and lonely. The idea of providing opportunities for student engagement to help students feel less isolated and disengaged is documented
throughout the literature (Ali & Kouhn, 2006; Golde, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003). Some participants considered withdrawing from the University, but after actively searching for having to actively their peers, they began to establish support networks. Their peers encouraged them to become more involved in campus clubs and upon interacting with other students, participants discovered that many other Black doctoral students had similar experiences of being stereotyped and feeling isolated.

The significance of graduate student involvement as a tool to connect them to the campus community (Astin, 2000) was affirmed by this study. Olivia commented that her leadership role gave her an opportunity to influence decisions and enhance the campus community. She credited her peers as being the ones who encouraged her to become involved and who influenced her decision to select the appropriate leadership opportunity. Jane also noted that her peers heavily influenced her decision to join a campus club. She expressed that, once she began to meet more people, she realized that she wanted to become more involved on campus. Joyce and Sylvia recalled being influenced to become involved as student leaders due to seeing their strong mothers who were leaders at home. Ultimately, their decision to participate on campus and serve as student leaders was an extension of the leadership skills and involvement they witnessed from their mothers and their peers.

**Overall campus experience.** This study’s findings highlighted the ways in which participants positively interacted with a wide array of internal campus community members due to their student leadership roles. Similarly, several studies cited the positive impact student involvement and leadership has on the overall campus experience (Astin, 2000; Haber, 2011; Suarez-Balcazar, 2003). Sylvia and Jane asserted that, had they not served as graduate student leaders at their PWI, they would have never had the opportunities to engage with faculty and
administrators outside of their respective departments. These interactions were invaluable experiences that boosted their confidence level and provided a sense of belonging to the greater campus community. Likewise, Olivia and Joyce maintained that the connections they made with other members of their organizations also made their campus experience a more memorable one. Although their initial experience with the overall campus community was not positive, most participants attributed their change in perspective about the campus experience to their engagement with members of the community outside of their academic program.

This study’s findings suggest similar results to Gardener and Barnes’ (2007) study, which posited that graduate students’ undergraduate experiences differ greatly from their overall graduate campus experience. Jane, Olivia, and Joyce all shared that their undergraduate experiences were overwhelmingly positive. They indicated that because of the positive interactions they made with peers, faculty, and administration they were able to form tight bonds which made the campus community feeling like family. Furthermore, these participants were all involved in extracurricular activities as undergraduate students, and shared that this was largely due in part to the connection they had with their undergraduate community members. This study’s results also align with Gardener and Barnes’ (2007) findings that many graduate students who become involved in campus clubs have had previous involvement in clubs at their undergraduate institutions. In contrast, Sylvia had mostly negative experiences within her undergraduate campus community, and she elected not to participate in any extracurricular activities due to her negative overall campus experience. However, once she became a graduate student leader at her graduate institution, she noted that her overall campus experiences significantly improved.
Black female graduate student leadership experiences at PWIs. Three participants recalled experiences in which they encountered racial and gender stereotypes and differential treatment. This is similar to the majority of the literature. Several studies highlight challenges faced by Black graduate students at PWIs, which included racial and gender bias (Truitt, 2010; Davis, 2007; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Specifically, Joyce and Sylvia cited occurrences in which faculty and administrators made racially offensive comments. Joyce recalled how staff members played a song used during Klu Klux Klan meetings and laughed about its origins. And Sylvia shared her experience of being told by her advisor that she would have to work twice as hard as other students due to her race. Olivia and Jane shared their experiences with sexism and noted that faculty members often overlooked their needs when compared to their white female counterparts. Olivia mentioned that her faculty advisor rarely assisted her, and that she would often be referred to as “sweetheart” and “sugar” by faculty and administrators. Similarly, Jane and Joyce shared that within the field of science they were often made aware of the different expectations for Black female scientists.

Participants in this study also felt high levels of expectations comparable to Armanio et al.’s (2000) findings, in which Black leaders were concerned about how they were being perceived as student leaders. For instance, Olivia shared that she was very self-conscious about her tone when she spoke and what she said as a student leader. She stated that, due to this, she was more likely to “play by the rules” and follow to the majority’s cultural norms. Jane viewed her campus leadership experiences as a series of ups and downs which were widely influenced by her interactions with peers and faculty. She stated that faculty members in her academic department often discouraged her involvement in extracurricular activities and were not supportive of her responsibilities as a graduate student leader.
Joyce noted that her graduate student leadership experiences gave her a deeper understanding of some of the socioeconomic differences between some majority and Black students. One of her first experiences as a graduate student leader involved a disagreement with another graduate student who wanted support from administration about securing more bike locks on campus, as opposed to Joyce’s desire to obtain housing discounts for graduate students. This was one of many incidents in which Joyce felt that the organization was moving in a different direction than she had envisioned. As a result, she left that particular organization and became involved in the Black graduate student association (BGSA).

Sylvia recalled her graduate student leadership experience as one in which she overcame several obstacles. One of her biggest challenges as president of GSA was the fact there were so few Black females in student leadership positions. She always felt like the sole representative of the entire Black graduate student community. Sylvia struggled with the pressure of being looked at as a racial representative for her community, but soon she realized that to effectively promote change she would have to do her best to rise above the challenges that come with being a minority at a PWI. All participants noted that their leadership experiences were very challenging but ultimately very rewarding. Also, several participants became more aware of how their racial and gender identities influenced their leadership perceptions.

Despite the challenges faced by the participant, they all noted that they would not change any part of their campus leadership experience. All participants stated that they appreciated their experience because it helped to increase their communication skills and confidence level. Additionally, their experiences with faculty, administrators, and peers gave them an additional perspective on University-wide issues and provided them with an opportunity to work together to improve the Black graduate student experience. This study’s findings closely matched the
literature and revealed that the goal of enhancing the campus experiences of Black graduate students at a PWI often compensated for some of the negative encounters Black female student leaders faced.

The notion of sacrifice for the greater good of the Black community is a concept which is referenced throughout Black feminist theory. This study’s findings are important because they underscore the various challenges each participant faced as a Black female graduate student leader at a PWI. Moreover, the participants’ experiences demonstrated some of the ways in which they managed particular challenges. Regardless of the negative encounters they experienced, the participants indicated that they would serve as student leaders again. This revealed their strong commitment to enhancing their PWI. The findings provide insight into the sacrifices made by participants to withstand negative experiences for a larger purpose: to serve current and future Black graduate students.

**Discussion of Findings**

Through the lens of a Black feminist standpoint theory, this section will explore the holistic experiences of the study’s four participants. Black feminist thought and standpoint theory posit that women of color offer a distinct vantage point, from which they are able to view their environment in multiple ways (Hopson, 2009). Accordingly, the standpoint theory recognizes that race and gender play significant roles within a majority environment in which Black women are often the outsider within a majority environment (Harris, 2007). Furthermore, Collins (1990) surmised that Black women encounter challenges within their environments based on their race and gender within their environments, and as a result, are faced with shared “recurring patterns of experiences” (p.27).
Although each story was distinct at its central core, the collective narratives of the four participants elucidated three major themes: Black female guidance and support, connections through community building, and leadership that fosters change. Moreover, using the study’s lens of Black feminist thought and standpoint theory, the narratives revealed the ways in which race, class, and gender were intertwined in the combined narratives of Black female graduate students at a PWI.

**Nurturing leaders.** Women have often served as an integral center in Black families (Burton & Hardaway, 2012). Similarly, there were several elements of Black maternal leadership throughout each participant’s story. The theme of a nurturing maternal leadership and influence was highlighted across every participant’s narrative. Participants recalled how they were encouraged to support their families similarly to the ways in which they were supported by their female family members. All participants emphasized the ways in which their mothers, grandmothers, and female faculty members played significant roles in their decisions to become student leaders. Participants often relied upon and sought out support from other Black women within their respective communities (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Accordingly, the support they gave and received had a major impact on their decision to improve their campus community and serve as student leaders.

For instance, Olivia said that as a teenager she was responsible for taking care of her brother and cousins while her mother worked. She shared that, based on her caretaker responsibilities, she would not have as many opportunities to play and interact with children her own age. Supporting her mother and aunts were Olivia’s priority and, in turn, while she was in graduate school her mother was able to offer her invaluable support. Her mother did most of the cooking and took care of the house, which allowed Olivia to dedicate more time to her studies.
She stressed that her mother’s support was integral to her academic success because it provided her with more time to dedicate to her studies and her role as a graduate student leader.

Moreover, Olivia discussed how the advice she received from Patricia, a Black female faculty member at her undergraduate institution, heavily influenced her path to student leadership. She highlighted that Patricia played an important role in her decision to become more involved in campus clubs. Patricia’s retelling of her involvement in the civil rights movement and how there was still work to be done and causes to fight for moved her to action. Having a Black woman share powerful stories about being an active participant during a monumental part of history served as a powerful influence and compelled Olivia to serve as a student leader. Through the narratives, the support shared between Black women had great impact on extending leadership and support in the campus community.

**Spiritual leaders.** Both of Jane’s grandmothers served as influential leaders within her family and subsequently played an integral role in her core values. The cultural heritage of spirituality within Black communities is often passed down from mothers (Taylor, 1998). Citing herself as being very spiritual, Jane recognized that the religious teachings she acquired from her grandmothers sustained her during some of the most difficult challenges that presented themselves through her academic career. Jane shared that although her mother and father divorced while she was in high school, she remained close to both parents, especially her mother. She emphasized that her mother and grandmothers heavily influenced her decision to attend college and noted that her mother never really gave her a choice. Due to her spiritual beliefs and the strong presence of female family members in her life, Jane realized the *ways* in which her student leader role could possibly influence other Black women in her science field and within
the campus community. Having a strong influential presence of Black female family leaders at home, Jane felt secure taking on student leadership responsibilities in college.

**Influential and supportive leaders.** When recalling her campus leadership experiences throughout college, Joyce affirmed the ways in which her mother was the most influential person in her life. She stated that her mother served as both parents and set a high standard for her from a very early age. Joyce asserted that her mother instilled confidence in her and encouraged her to release inhibitions on her potential for success. Her mother also imparted a deep sense of pride in her identity as a Black woman. Collins (1990) emphasized the strong bonds that exist between Black women and their daughters. These bonds are often demonstrated when Black mothers have a resounding influence in their children’s lives (Burton & Hardaway, 2012).

Joyce’s mother directly influenced her decision to attend college and her career path in the field of science. Her mother was also influential in her decisions once she enrolled in college. She became a member of her mother’s Black Greek lettered organization during her undergraduate years and learned more about how she could contribute to the campus community as a student leader. She referred to her involvement in her sorority as one of her most rewarding experiences due to the support she received from her other Black sorority members. Joyce’s mother, who worked as a K-12 superintendent, inspired her student leadership goals. Joyce recalled seeing her mother advance from being a school teacher to an administrator, and she felt a sense of pride. Her mother’s leadership role also provided insight into the challenges Black women face. Rather than allowing that to deter her, Joyce committed herself to overcoming as her mother did. Joyce’s undergraduate experience was fulfilling because of her campus involvement, and being in a predominantly Black campus environment instilled in her an even deeper sense of pride.
In contrast, her graduate school experiences at a PWI in graduate school found her in unfamiliar territory and feeling isolated from the campus community. One of the ways in which Joyce tried to combat feelings of loneliness was by reaching out to her sorority’s graduate chapter. Once she did this, she formed close bonds with her graduate chapter president, an older Black woman, and stated that she would spend most of her time at her house. Joyce explained that she “practically adopted her” and made her feel like part of the family. The support that she received from her graduate chapter president influenced her decision to remain at her PWI and continue in her academic program.

Sylvia also shared the great influence her mother and sister had on her decision to attend college. She shared that her mother “did everything” and she spent the greater part of her childhood watching her mother, a registered nurse, support the family. Due to her mother’s long hours at work, Sylvia spent a considerable amount of time at her grandmother’s house. She credited growing up in her grandmother’s predominantly Black neighborhood as providing her with the awareness that she needed to navigate both White and Black environments. With both her mother and grandmother playing such huge roles in her life, Sylvia said that she became very appreciative of the strength and confidence both women instilled in her. She noted that because her mother grew up in a very poor environment, she was taught the importance of hard work and wanted to give to others. Sylvia discussed how her mother stressed the value of education. Her mother asserted that obtaining a college education would increase her ability to become financially stable, a value on which her mother placed particular emphasis. Not attending college was not an option for Sylvia. Additionally, her mother strongly encouraged her to pursue a medical degree due to it being a high-paying profession. Ultimately, Sylvia opted against a pre-med major and because she was greatly inspired by her surroundings, she decided to pursue a
degree in psychology. She elected to go to a PWI near home and not to participate in campus clubs for the majority of her undergraduate career due to her experiences with racism. Instead, Sylvia visited home every weekend and depended on her family a lot to persevere in spite the racist experiences.

**Connections and community building.** In contrast to their childhoods and undergraduate communities, participants noted that their respective PWI graduate school communities were mostly decentralized. This greatly reduced their ability to make strong connections. Participants all described their graduate experiences at PWIs as being fragmented and lonely. Participants noted that they all had great difficulty locating other Black graduate students within the campus community during their initial arrival at the institution.

Additionally, all of the participants expressed their frustration and disappointment that, upon their arrival at the campus, there were no clubs or organizations that specifically addressed the unique needs of Black graduate students. As a result, they all felt little to no connection to the overall campus community during their first year. Consequently, their desire to foster a sense of connection between Black graduate students and the rest of the campus community served as one of the main factors that influenced their decisions to become graduate student leaders.

Historically, the leadership contributions of Black women evolved from serving as church members, teachers, and family caretakers in their communities. Being a part of these networks resulted in Black women gaining a heightened awareness of the need to address and improve the campus community.

Given their unique racial and gender standpoints, Black female leaders often incorporate ways to support and improve their respective communities (Harris, 2007). For instance, Olivia
commented that she shared a strong connection with members of her undergraduate community due to its intimate class sizes. She was able to build relationships with her peers, which led her to becoming aware of more campus activities and becoming involved. Olivia also communicated that, because she was a part of such a small racial group on campus, the needs of the Black community became crucial. In order to support one another in meaningful ways, Black students established their own physical space, the Black house. This was an area on campus in which they could socialize, support one another, and engage in dialogue about their specific needs. This effort to connect and build community enhanced Olivia’s desire to become more active on campus to foster a greater sense of community between Black students and the overall campus community.

Jane also pointed out that the positive connections she made during her time as an undergraduate student was due largely in part to the campus community. She felt more connected to the overall community when her intellect and academic curiosity were celebrated. Her undergraduate campus community felt like family. Likewise, Joyce shared that she felt a strong connection with her undergraduate community. She suggested that there was a sense of purpose and pride instilled in students at a historically Black college. She recalled feeling inspired and empowered to be a part of a community that encouraged student involvement in campus clubs and organizations. In addition to this, her academic community also challenged her to seek ways in which she could contribute to the community. During her time as an undergraduate student, Joyce developed numerous campus connections. She became a student leader after she joined a national sorority, the biology club, and the student government association.
**Leadership and institutional change.** Black women community leaders work with the goal of institutional change in mind (Collins, 1990). Moreover, Black female leaders also seek to lead and empower others to succeed. This closely aligns with the concept of Black women as “centerpersons” (p. 220) and requires a connection with group members to improve current conditions for future community members.

Sylvia established a connection with her graduate PWI community after having negative experiences within her academic program. Once she reached out to other graduate students, she discovered that there were few Black graduate students visible on campus. This realization prompted her to become active, and she committed to enhancing the Black graduate student experience and joined the graduate student association. Sylvia felt that being engaged in an organization that influenced change and interacted with faculty and administrators would assist in improving the Black graduate experience. She also wanted to serve as a role model for the Black graduate community to empower them to become more involved on campus.

**Leadership that fosters change.** Certain social environments have significant influences on the Black women’s standpoint. Collins (1990) argued that “rearticulating a Black woman’s standpoint refashions the particular and reveals the more universal human dimensions of Black women’s everyday lives” (p. 268). All the participants mentioned the positive influence that being in an enriching environment had on them. They also cited how their connections with peers, faculty, and administrators made them feel more a part of the campus community and resulted in their decisions to become more involved in campus clubs. Alternatively, participants mentioned that as graduate students, there were overwhelming examples within the PWI environment of being minimally supported, stereotyped, and singled out based on their race or gender. However, instead of withdrawing from the institution, these experiences fortified their
resolve to become student leaders and improve the experiences of other Black students at their PWI.

Sylvia realized her power to foster change after she became a member of the graduate student association (GSA). She noted that in her role, she interacted with faculty and administration and used her voice to build awareness to the special needs of majority and minority graduate students. Sylvia shared that while serving as a student leader she assisted with bringing graduate students together in a central location to collaborate and network. Additionally, in her role as GSA president, she was able to encourage other Black graduate students to participate in events and provide opportunities for them to engage with the greater campus community. Her leadership artifact, a gavel, signified her standpoint of representing her race before herself as a Black female student leader. Although leadership provided her with an array of challenges, she elected to embrace her experiences and use her role to break stereotypes and serve the campus community.

Joyce articulated that her role as vice president of the black graduate student association (BGSA) meant she was responsible for ensuring that the most pressing needs of Black graduate students were being met. Influenced by her attendance at a historically Black college, Joyce indicated that her leadership standpoint was equated with privilege. To her, it was a privilege to serve as a student leader and that meant that she was responsible for upholding the duties of the position, ensuring that goals for the BGSA were met, and improving the overall experience of Black graduate students. Accordingly, Joyce focused her efforts on providing structure and order to BGSA. One of the ways she did this was by refashioning BGSA’s constitution and lobbying for specific issues to be addressed by the administration. Joyce recognized that the needs of Black graduate students were quite different than those of majority graduate students.
and felt that establishing structure would better streamline the organization’s goals. Her multicolored scarf artifact represented her feelings of being overwhelmingly in the minority, but she added that ultimately she was able look beyond her obstacles to ensure that her legacy as a leader would have positive implications for the Black graduate student community.

Utilizing the perspectives of underrepresented groups can serve as a catalyst for new ideas that can assist Black women to better adjust to their organizational homes (Grier-Reed, Madyun & Buckley, 2008). Jane emphasized the need to enhance the experiences of other Black female graduate students in the field of science at her PWI environment by serving as a student leader. She noted that having experienced various forms of racism from faculty members in her science program, she recognized the need for other Black graduate students to engage with individuals within and outside of the program to influence change. Jane’s experiences concerning her gender also shaped her desire to serve as a leader. She shared that her leadership role in BGSA was a reminder of her role model status not only to Black students but to female students as well. Jane also recognized that she was able to contribute to making the campus community better by sharing her unique perspectives with faculty, peers, and administrators.

While she served her community as a graduate student leader, Jane discovered that she had to adjust the ways in which she interacted with others to accomplish BGSA’s goals. She gained a better perspective and a camaraderie she had not had prior to becoming involved on campus. She cited that these readjustments gave her a greater appreciation for the ways leaders directly impact people in the community. Jane indicated that her data book leadership artifact represented the tremendous growth she experienced as a graduate student leader and as an individual. Moreover, she began to see her role of student leader as not only a privilege and but also a responsibility to ensure that Black graduate students’ needs were being recognized and
addressed. She stressed that leadership provided her with the power to change her perspective and growth, which then allowed her to foster change for the Black graduate student community.

Olivia viewed her leadership role as a very active participant for change. Her experiences at a PWI made her aware of the growing needs among Black graduate students that were not being addressed by the institution. As a graduate leader, Olivia felt a deep responsibility not only to set goals but to turn those goals into action items. Having been in an environment as an undergraduate student in which her views and activism were celebrated, she was comfortable with taking on student leadership roles in graduate school. As the first president of BGSA, Olivia’s first goal was to go into the campus community and recruit other Black graduate students. Her purpose was to generate interest in BGSA and to make other students aware that there was work to be done to improve the campus environment. Olivia noted that, while there had been some attempts to establish an organization geared toward the unique needs of Black graduate students, no particular work was being done to finalize the organization.

As a result of the organization’s first president, Olivia became the spokesperson the organization. She assembled a group of students and worked on drafting a constitution and deciding upon the philosophy of GSA. Olivia also became aware of her responsibility as a role model and increased her efforts to work with community members to foster change. Her belief that activism is an integral component in feminism also made her very sensitive to the needs of Black female graduate students. Having experienced many of the issues impacting Black graduate students, she heightened her resolve to make positive changes within the campus community. In addition, she stated that her leadership artifact, her triathlon medal, represented triumph over adversity. Being one of a minority at a PWI comes with its own series of
challenges that made her role scary and difficult at times. Much like her participation in a triathlon, she learned to navigate under very difficult circumstances.

**Summary.** By exploring the participants’ narratives through the lens of Black feminist and standpoint theory, this study’s findings affirmed several elements of both theories. For example, the findings supported the notion of Black women in leadership roles serving as agents of change to improve the condition of their communities. Furthermore, the findings illustrated the multiple levels of obstacles faced by Black female leaders due to their race and gender in a majority environment. Finally, this study showcased that although participants shared the same racial and gender status, the ways in which they made meaning of their experiences varied. Based upon whether participants acknowledged their race and gender as affecting their experiences, the standpoints of participants varied.

**Findings and the Research Questions**

As they relate to how Black female graduate students select campus leadership opportunities at a PWI, the study’s findings indicate that Black female graduate students selected their campus leadership opportunities at their PWI based upon advice from peers. Additionally, the findings also suggest that the early influences of strong Black women in their families and within their communities heavily influenced Black female graduate students to become active leaders within their campus communities. With regard to how Black female graduate students view their campus leadership experiences at a PWI, participants viewed their campus leadership experiences as overwhelming at times and very challenging. This was due largely in part to differential treatment and the lack of an established and centralized organization geared toward addressing the needs of Black graduate students. In conclusion, this study’s results revealed that
holding campus leadership positions at a PWI significantly improved the overall campus experience of all participants. The benefits associated with the experiences of serving as Black female graduate student leaders greatly increased participants’ skills and engagement with the campus community. This study’s results also demonstrated the need for higher education administrators to provide more opportunities for Black female graduate students to engage with internal and external campus constituents in leadership roles.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Narrative inquiry relies on the rich details provided by its participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, Maxwell (2004) posited that “validity, meaningfulness, and insights of narrative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases” (p. 9). Although the study’s goal of capturing the detailed accounts of participants’ lived experiences were met, given the small sample size of the study, claims of generalization cannot be made. Another limitation of the study is the lack of range among graduate students in the study. The study included narratives from four doctoral students but the researcher was unable to secure master’s students to participate in the study. Having both master’s and doctoral students would allow for a wider range of experiences of both master’s and doctoral Black female students.

This study contributes to the literature on Black female graduate students at a PWI. Several recommendations are included to better inform the literature on Black graduate students. Future research should include additional studies regarding the campus leadership experiences of Black male graduate students at PWIs (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Avery & Barker, 2012). Future studies would provide a fully comprehensive body of research on the campus leadership experiences of male and female Black graduate students at PWIs. Additionally, the comparisons
between Black graduate female and male leadership experiences at PWIs would provide a better understanding and build awareness of the needs of this subpopulation.

Also, given the study’s focus on PWIs, exploring the experiences of Black graduate female student leaders at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) would provide insight into that institutional type as well. Studies can focus on the campus leadership experiences of Black graduate students in specific academic disciplines such as science and engineering. These would provide a better understanding of ways to improve the retention of Black graduate students in those disciplines. Finally, given the theme of female faculty, peers, and maternal influences in each participant’s narrative, future studies can examine those who directly influence Black female graduate students to seek out leadership opportunities.

**Implications for Higher Education**

Rhoades (2006) asserted that scholar-practitioners are charged with effectively navigating between both roles to directly impact policy and changes within higher education. Accordingly, this study aimed to provide a detailed narrative of the specific challenges and needs that Black female graduate students experience during their time at a PWI. This insight may influence current practices within higher education institutions. Specific areas within higher education institutions that can benefit from the findings include student life, academic divisions, and faculty.

The participants identified their first year in graduate school as being the most challenging. They noted that during that time, they were given little information about ways in which to fully engage with the campus community. Although the academic expectations were clearly delineated, the overall campus experience was not. Participants remarked that it was
difficult to find a support network of Black graduate students who they felt could understand and assist them with managing their unique needs. As time progressed, participants began to search for their peers, who then encouraged their participation in campus organizations as a way to build a stronger support network. To facilitate a more positive graduate student experience, higher education academic administrators should partner with the student life community to make graduate students aware of the available campus organizations.

In addition to providing graduate students with general information about student involvement, administrators should provide listings of specialized services and resources that may be of particular interest to Black graduate students. With the knowledge that the needs of graduate students vary, administrators should conduct a needs assessment survey of current graduate student members from diverse backgrounds. Doing so would provide more opportunities for the recommendations of appropriate resources and services for Black students. Moreover, conducting a need based assessment survey will allow students to provide specific feedback to improve their experiences within the campus community.

The findings of the current study also suggest that faculty and administrators should engage doctoral students inside and outside of the classroom. Participants highlighted that their relationships and interactions with faculty were directly linked to their student experience at their PWI. Participants who interacted regularly with faculty and administrators expressed that this made their campus experiences more manageable.

Furthermore, as student leaders working with faculty and administrators, participants cited that they learned more about the large scale issues and how decisions that impact the campus community are made. Accordingly, faculty and administrators should collaborate to
develop more opportunities to engage doctoral students to provide them with a greater understanding of issues that may affect the campus community.

**Problem of Practice Revisited**

The study’s findings indicate that Black female graduate students at a PWI encounter a series of negative experiences based on their race, gender, that create disengagement from their campus community inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, the findings revealed that several participants gave serious thought to withdrawing from their institution. However, participants shared that after actively seeking out peers, administrators, and faculty support, they were able to learn about campus leadership opportunities. Given this study’s findings, I plan on working with members of student life and academic affairs divisions to develop ways in which to better engage Black graduate students to the university within their first year of attendance. Furthermore, I will work with the graduate school and the graduate student association to create a needs assessment survey for currently enrolled graduate students to learn more about their experiences and how to enhance these experiences. In addition, graduate students will be provided with a current list of programming and campus engagement opportunities. Also, I will work with the academic division to develop ways in which faculty can encourage their graduate students to participate in extra-curricular activities to fully maximize their campus experience. Finally, I will partner with faculty, administrators, and alumni to create a listing of individuals who can serve as mentors for incoming and current Black graduate students.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black female graduate students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Through detailed exploration of the rich
narratives of four participants, findings indicated that the perceptions of the overall campus experiences of Black female graduate students were greatly enhanced after they became student leaders. The findings noted that within the first year of their respective doctoral programs, participants felt alone and disconnected from the greater campus community. These findings demonstrate the need for more meaningful engagement with Black female graduate students outside of the classroom.

In addition, participants’ narratives called attention to their experiences with racism, sexism, and other differential treatment from peers, administrators, and faculty. These experiences led them to seek support from peers and individuals outside of their academic disciplines and campus community. Consequently, they began to forge relationships with a wide array of peers and opted to become involved as student leaders to ensure that incoming Black graduate students would have a better experience. Furthermore, their engagement with faculty and administrators grew and they began to feel fully connected to the campus community. As their support network grew through their positions as student leaders, participants’ perceptions improved in conjunction with their experiences.

The study’s most significant contribution is the provision of a platform for Black female graduate students to share their perspectives on the ways in which specific encounters shaped their overall campus and leadership experiences. It informs the literature of a subpopulation that is minimally highlighted and researched in the literature. Being able to share their unique standpoints in their own voices also allows for participants to make meaning of their experiences and recognize their resilience. Finally, this study contributes to the literature by illustrating the need for more engagement opportunities for Black graduate students. Increasing research that
specifically addresses this need would greatly enhance the campus experiences of students from this subpopulation.
References


DOI:10.1207/s15326993es3801_4


Gardner, S. & Barnes, B. (2007). Graduate student involvement: Socialization for the


DOI: 10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00027.x


Harris, T. (2007). Black feminist thought and cultural contracts: Understanding the intersection
and negotiation of racial gendered, and professional identities in the academy. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 110*, 55-64.


Parker, W. M., & Scott, J. (1985). Creating an inviting atmosphere for college students from ethnic minority groups. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 26,* 82-84.


American graduate students: A student perspective. *Professional Psychology; Research and Practice* 32(6), 581-594.


APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter

Dear Graduate Student,

I hope this email finds you well and that you are enjoying the Spring 2014 semester!

I am inviting you to participate in a research study involving Black female graduate students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This study’s focus is on the campus leadership experiences of Black female graduate students at a PWI. This study is important because there is a scarce amount of research on the lives, experiences, and beliefs of Black female graduate students who hold campus leadership positions at PWIs.

As a Black female graduate student who has held campus leadership positions at a PWI, this study is particularly important to me. My goal is to gain a deeper understanding of how Black female graduate students view their campus leadership experiences and whether these leadership experiences enhance the overall campus experience at PWIs. The information from this study will help to inform higher education administrators and faculty.

I am asking current African American or Black female graduate students who currently serve as president or vice presidents of a registered campus club or organization to participate in this study. If you participate, you will be one of no more than three to four graduate students involved in this study.

Your active participation in this study will take, at most, five hours. You will be asked to participate in three individual interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Should you consent to participate in this study, you will participate in an initial interview of no more than 90 minutes that will be conducted during the Spring 2014 semester at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take place in person at a time and location of your choosing and be audiotaped so that I am sure that I have an accurate record of your thoughts. The purpose of the interview is to learn about your life history (e.g., family, experiences growing up). Additionally, during my initial interview, I will ask that you bring an item that best represents who you are as a Black female graduate to the second interview. I will contact you via e-mail to set up a convenient time for the interview.

- A second audiotaped interview of no longer than 90 minutes will be conducted during the Spring 2014 semester at a location and time that is convenient for you. The purpose of the interview is to find out about your experiences as a Black female graduate student leader. During this second interview of between 60 to 90 minutes, you will be asked to discuss your experiences as a campus leader, and how, if at all, race and gender influences your experiences as a graduate student leader at a PWI, and you will be asked to discuss the meaning and significance of the item that you feel best represents who you are as a Black female graduate student.
The third interview, also audiotaped, will be held a time and location that is convenient for you and will last between 60 to 90 minutes. The third and final interview will be used as a time to reflect upon and make any modifications to previous responses.

If you would like to participate in this study, I am asking that you commit to participating in all of the components, including the three interviews and artifact sharing, although you are of course free to choose not to participate in artifact sharing.

If you are interested, please contact me by email me by April 11, 2014. Please indicate your student classification (e.g. master’s or doctoral) and student campus position title (e.g. president or vice president).

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form at the first interview. The consent form that I have attached to this email provides additional information about the study. If you have questions that need answers before you decide, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you decide to participate, I will answer any other questions you may have about the study whenever they arise.

Joining the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, at any time and for any reason, without penalty. You can choose to skip over any question in the interviews that you do not want to answer, and can respond as much or as little as you choose to any particular question. Your involvement in the registered student club or organization will not be impacted by your decision to participate or not participate in the research.

I believe this study will help inform our understanding of Black female graduate student campus leadership experiences at a PWI. In addition, I believe this study will inform our understanding of the ways in which higher education administrators and faculty can better assist Black female graduate students and meet their needs. I hope that you will take advantage of this opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences.

Again, if you are interested, please contact me, Tashika Griffith, at Griffith.ta@neu.husky@edu. If you have questions you can reach me by email, or you can call me at 561-703-0936.

Thank you for your consideration of this study!

Sincerely,

Tashika Griffith
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol One

**Background Information**

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

- Where are you from?
- What is your age and cultural background?
- How would you describe yourself as a person?
- How would your friends and family describe you as a person?
- Tell me about your school experiences growing up.
- Were you involved in any activities prior to college?

Why did you decide to obtain an undergraduate degree?

- What was your major as an undergraduate experience?
- Did you attend a Predominantly White Institution?
- Tell me about your undergraduate experience.

Why did you decide to obtain a graduate degree?

- Why did you choose to attend a Predominantly White Institution?
- What is your academic program in graduate school?
- Tell me about your graduate experience.
- What do you plan to do professionally post-graduation?

Tell me about your support network.

- Who is included in your support network?
- How would you describe your support network?

How would you describe your campus community?

- How would you describe your campus experiences at a PWI thus far?
- Tell me about your interactions with faculty and administrators.
- Tell me about your interactions with your peers inside of the classroom.
- Tell me about your interactions with your peers outside of the classroom.

*In preparation for the second interview, please bring one artifact that best represents who you are as a Black female graduate student leader.

Concluding Question: Is there anything you would like to add about your background?

- What other questions should I have asked you?
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol Two

Campus Leadership Experiences

When did you first become involved as a student leader?
  o Were you encouraged or motivated to become involved on campus by an administrator, faculty, or peer?
  o How would you describe yourself as a graduate student leader?
  o Describe your responsibilities as president/vice president of a campus club/organization.
  o Which aspects do you most enjoy as a graduate student leader?
  o Which aspects do you least enjoy as a graduate student leader?
  o Who do you interact with most often as a graduate student leader?
  o How would you describe these interactions?
  o How would you describe your campus leadership experiences?

Black Female Graduate Student Leader

What does it mean to be a Black Female Graduate Student Leader at a PWI?
  o How do you perceive your interactions with administrators, faculty, and peers with regard to your race at a PWI?
  o How do you perceive your interactions with administrators, faculty, and peers with regard to your gender?
  o Please describe the artifact that you feel best describes who you are as a Black female graduate student.
  o What is the significance of the artifact with regard to your role as a Black female graduate student leader?
  o How has your involvement as a Black female graduate student in a leadership position influenced your perception of your overall campus experience at a PWI?

Concluding Questions

  o Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences?
  o What other questions should I have asked you?
APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol Three

- Interview questions will be determined after data is analyzed for interviews one and two.
APPENDIX E

Northeastern University Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson, Tashika Griffith

Title of Project: You Can’t See What I Can See: Examining the Campus Leadership Experiences of Black Female Graduate Students at a Predominantly White Institution

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a Black female graduate student leader currently enrolled at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to better understand the ways in which Black female graduate students who hold campus leadership positions at a PWI view their leadership experiences.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in three individual face to face one on one interviews, each lasting between 60 to 90 minutes per interview. Each interview will be audiotaped in order to have an accurate record of your thoughts. The initial interview will include questions regarding your background (i.e. family, experiences growing up) and at the end of the first interview you will be asked to bring an artifact to the second interview that best represents who you are as a Black female graduate student. During the second interview, you will be asked to discuss your campus leadership experiences and how, if at all, race and gender influences your experiences as a graduate student leader at a PWI. Additionally, you will also be asked to discuss the significance of the artifact that best represents who you are as a Black female graduate student leader. The third and final interview will be used as a time to reflect upon and make any modifications to previous responses during previous interviews.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed on three separate occasions, at a time and place that is most convenient for you on campus. Each interview will last between 60-90 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There will be no foreseeable risk or discomfort as a result of your participation in this study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study however the information learned from this study may help you to better understand your value within the campus community as a student leader.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Confidentiality measures will be employed through the application of alias names/pseudonyms for all participants. All audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked and secured filing cabinet to protect the identity of participants. Additionally, all digital files stored will be stored on a password protected computer that only the researcher will have access to. No identifiable information will be used and upon completion of the study, all audiotapes and transcripts will be destroyed by the researcher.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have? N/A**

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There are minimal risks involved for participants associated with the research. However, should you suffer any harm from this research; I will provide students with the opportunity to be debriefed after their participation will explain the option to seek out the site’s campus counseling center to cope with any harm incurred.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a graduate student leader.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tashika Griffith at griffith.ta@husky.neu.edu or at 786-300-8268. You can also contact Dr. Corliss Brown-Thompson, the Principal Investigator at co.brown@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu or the University of Miami Human Subjects Research Office at 305.243.3195 or hsro@med.miami.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no costs incurred by you for your participation in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

**I agree to take part in this research and be audiotaped for the interview.**

____________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part in study

________________________
Date

Printed name of person above ____________________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

__________________________________________
Printed name of person above ________________________________________________

_____________________________________
Date
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: April 4, 2014

Principal Investigator(s):
Corliss Brown Thompson
Tashika Griffith

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
You Can't See What I Can See: Examining the Campus Leadership Experiences of Black Female Graduate Students at a Predominantly White Institution

Participating Sites:

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval:
12 months
Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.

2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.

3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.

4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.

5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.

6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University
Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630