BLACK ALUMNI FROM CORNELL UNIVERSITY: EXPLORING UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCES AND ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the undergraduate experiences and alumni engagement of Black alumni who graduated from Cornell University. The method used for this qualitative study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Black alumni who graduated between 1960 and 2010 and attended their affinity reunion, but not their class reunion. Critical Race Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. The findings indicate that Black students: 1) want to feel part of the campus culture through culturally relevant activities embedded in university traditions, 2) want to know that the university supports services provided by cultural centers and ethnic-based housing, 3) want to see an increase in the population of Black students at PWIs, and 4) thrive better in an environment when there are more faculty of color present and when there are other faculty members that are culturally competent and sensitive to their needs. Findings also indicate that low-income students need increased financial support from the university to reduce stress and address academic inequities. Black alumni are more likely to be engaged in university service-based activities that improve the experiences of Black students and other students of color even if they had negative undergraduate experiences and when they have had positive undergraduate experiences.

Keywords: African American alumni, African American students, alumni associations, alumni engagement, commitment, critical race theory, Black alumni, Black students, campus climate, campus environment, feelings of attachment, PWIs, prosocial behavior, sense of belonging, student experience, student engagement, student integration theory, student involvement theory, undergraduate experience, volunteerism
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Dedication

This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Evelyn Daniels who has supported me every step of the way. Unfortunately she is no longer with us but her energy is what kept me going throughout this process. I love you and miss you very much, but I always feel your presence. I know that you will continue to watch over me.
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The lack of engagement of Black alumni at Cornell University in university-sponsored alumni association events may be caused by the campus environment that Black alumni experienced while attending as students. These university-sponsored alumni events are meant to engage all alumni, however several Black alumni have stated that as students, they did not feel part of the campus culture and therefore have had no interest in participating in events that do not represent their particular interests. Typically, these Black alumni choose to only be engaged with their affinity organizations or not at all.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate how Black alumni from Cornell University make sense of and explain their undergraduate experiences in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Participants will be selected from those who have chosen to attend their affinity reunion. The perspective represented by this group of participants may inform an understanding of Black alumni engagement with the PWI. This study employs an interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore the possible effect of undergraduate experience on future alumni engagement.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni who graduate from PWIs, and research related to alumni engagement in order to provide context and background to this study. The rationale and significance of the study are then discussed, highlighting ways in which the results can benefit various student affairs professionals, primarily those in alumni affairs. The problem statement, purpose statement and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, Critical Race Theory will serve as the theoretical framework and will be introduced and explained in the context of this study.
Background and Context

The Black alumni association at Cornell University was founded in 1976 to "provide a communication network for Black alumni and ...to unite progressive forces at Cornell to improve opportunities for African Americans" (CBAA, n.d.). Every 3 years, the Black alumni association (CBAA) hosts their own reunion, even though the university sponsors class reunions for all alumni celebrating every 5th year. Some of these Black alumni choose to attend both reunions, while others only return for the Black alumni association reunion. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Black alumni who choose to only participate in their own affinity reunion make sense of their undergraduate experiences.

The role of an alumni organization is to engage alumni, not just to solicit funds. Often, Black alumni do not feel a connection to the university and choose not to be engaged. In this particular study, the focus will be on Black alumni who choose to engage with their affinity alumni association rather than their class association or the university alumni association at large. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how Black alumni make sense of their undergraduate experiences and if these experiences inform an understanding of the type of engagement they choose to have with the university post-graduation.

Black students and White students throughout the country have different perceptions of the same campus environment at various predominantly White institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For Black students attending PWIs, their experiences can be drastically different from the experiences of White students (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). The difference in climate can be seen both inside and outside of the classroom. The results from Reid and Radhakrishnan’s (2003) study highlight the fact that of the different minority groups on campus, Black and Latino
students have a heightened negativity in their perception of race matters on campus than White students.

Gaier (2005) noted that interpersonal relationships while in college are the most significant variable for determining alumni participation. He also noted that alumni were more likely to contribute financially if they were involved as alumni with their alma mater (Gaier, 2005). There is scant literature on the motivation behind alumni engagement. Very few researchers have looked at the impact of various factors on Black students experiences and its relation to future alumni engagement. Often, alumni engagement is considered in relation to its impact on giving but rarely considered independently. Although it is obvious why universities would be more concerned with giving than engagement, it is important to note that alumni engagement can contribute to the university in other positive ways.

The involvement that alumni choose to have after leaving an institution depends on the view they have of their role with the institution (McDearmon, 2013). It is important to consider the personal relationships that alumni have with their alma mater and how those relationships greatly impact the individual and the institution. That particular view will dictate the level of support they will provide (McDearmon, 2013). The author also states that in the past, universities relied on alumni to initiate personal involvement, but now the initiation of involvement must be with the institutions themselves. He states that research on alumni involvement and giving focuses on characteristics of the individual such as age or characteristics of the institution such as national rankings, which help determine the individual's interest in giving. Although these characteristics are important, McDearmon (2013) states that it does little to help determine how alumni identify with their alma mater upon graduation.
McDearmon (2013) posits that alumni who have a perceived role of behavior (e.g. it is my duty to support the university through volunteering) are more likely to be involved with their institution after graduation. He also demonstrates a strong correlation between alumni who attend athletic events and their likeliness to identify with a particular role which leads them to either donate or volunteer. McDearmon (2013) states that it is the job of the university to help alumni identify their role with the institution.

Clotfelter's (2003) study shows that alumni satisfaction is linked to the type of experiences alumni had while on campus. This includes an association with someone who may have taken a special interest in them while they were enrolled. This factor was called MENTOR. These MENTORS were identified as faculty or other college staff members. Alumni who had a mentor are twice as likely to be satisfied with their college experience. Higher levels of satisfaction increase the likelihood that alumni will make a donation and the amount given by alumni may increase (Clotfelter, 2003). Alumni engagement was not mentioned in the article, but it is interesting to note the connection between campus experience and alumni giving. Based on the earlier discussion regarding the difficult relationships between Black students and White faculty, it would be interesting to explore whether these relationships would have an impact on giving from Black alumni at PWIs. It is possible that it may also impact alumni engagement. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how Blacks alumni at PWIs make sense of their undergraduate experiences and if these experiences can provide relevant information regarding their alumni engagement.

**Rationale and Significance**

The lack of engagement of Black alumni at Cornell University in university-sponsored alumni association events is a complex problem of practice that this study will examine. This
study will investigate how Black alumni from Cornell University make sense of and explain their undergraduate experiences in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Exploring these perceptions of Black alumni from Cornell may generate knowledge that can help resolve this complex problem of practice. This acquired knowledge may also help to introduce strategies that can effect systemic change. The intent is not to attempt to generalize these experiences to all Black alumni from this particular PWI, but to allow these participants to share their own individual experiences as perceived by them.

The current literature looks at issues such as alumni donations and the effects of campus experiences, yet very few studies focus on alumni engagement. Articles that do identify the issue note that some of the issues with alumni engagement may be similar to issues of alumni giving (Gusa, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Weerts and Ronca (2008) acknowledge that alumni involvement and volunteerism is largely understudied. There are even fewer studies that look at Black alumni who graduated from PWIs and their future engagement. If Black students attending PWIs are dissatisfied with their undergraduate experience, what impact does that have on their future alumni engagement? According to Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, and Salinas-Holmes (2007), students have a large amount of control over their level of engagement, however the campus climate and culture also determines how much students are engaged.

This study will take a double hermeneutic approach to understanding the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni and any information it may garner regarding their level of alumni engagement. In order to study a homogenous group, the participants will be Black alumni who have chosen to attend their affinity alumni reunion and not their class reunion. The participants will be interviewed to investigate how their undergraduate experiences may have led them to
choose their affinity group over participation with their class. One female alumna and one male alumnus from each decade beginning from the 1960s to the 2010s who have attended at least one CBAA reunion will be identified for this study. These alumni are engaged on some level because they have chosen to return to campus for a reunion event; however, their type of engagement limits them to those within their own affinity group as opposed to engaging with others during a class reunion. Identifying these undergraduate experiences may help to develop ways to address the issue of limited engagement amongst Black alumni at a PWI.

This study is also intended to be a guide for student affairs administrators, faculty and alumni affairs/development staff in creating engaging programming and educational environments for diverse populations that can lead to more active alumni who are willing to be engaged with the university at large. College and universities as a whole can benefit from this type of study, including all administrators, faculty, staff and students. Individuals who graduate from and work at these institutions will become more culturally competent which can improve the racial climate on a campus. On a local level, alumni who are more satisfied with their experiences will not only provide more service, they will as a consequence donate more, providing more resources to the institution. These resources can be used to improve educational and extracurricular opportunities for current students.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The lack of engagement of Black alumni at Cornell University in university-sponsored alumni association events may be caused by the campus environment that Black alumni experienced while attending as students. Gusa (2010) states “that today's PWIs do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment” (p. 465). Instead, White cultural ideology is embedded in the cultural practices, traditions and language of these institutions, which allows
universities to remain racialized (Gusa, 2010). The literature focuses mainly on factors that affect alumni donations. Very few studies focus on factors that influence alumni engagement (e.g. committee involvement, affinity group membership). Articles that do discuss alumni engagement state that the factors influencing involvement may be similar to factors that affect alumni giving (Gusa, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

According to Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012), colleges and universities have increasingly become racially and ethnically diverse, but some Black students argue that PWIs have done little or nothing to change the hegemonic campus culture. The participants in this study will be Black alumni who have chosen to attend their affinity association's reunion, while choosing not to participate in the university's alumni association events. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews will be used to understand how Black alumni from this particular PWI make sense of their undergraduate experiences.

The research question that this study will seek to answer is: how do Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI? This question will help to examine how Black alumni perceived their campus environment during their undergraduate years.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

For the sake of clarity, the following certain key terms in this paper are defined below:

1) **Affinity Group/ Association** is a group of people linked by a common interest or purpose.

2) **Alumni engagement** is defined as involvement in associations, campus events and volunteer activities, directly related to their alma mater.

3) **Black alumni** refers to people of African descent from anywhere within the Diaspora including the United States, Caribbean, Continental Africa and international populations who
have completed the university requirements for graduation. The term, African American may be used on occasion when referencing particular studies, but should not to be confused with the alumni defined in this paper.

4) **Black students** refers to people of African descent from anywhere within the Diaspora including the United States, Caribbean, Continental Africa and international populations who have enrolled in a college or university. The term, African American may be used on occasion when referencing particular studies, but should not to be confused with the students defined in this paper.

5) **Cultural hegemony** in Marxist theory is defined as the manipulation of a society's value system or mores by the *ruling* class (i.e. group in power) in order to change the world view to reflect their own view in an effort to maintain dominance over others.

6) **Diaspora** is defined as the dispersion of people from their original homeland.

7) **Racial microaggressions** are defined as brief but commonplace, daily acts of verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, both intentional and unintentional that manifest as hostile and derogatory insults toward people of color. Often those who inflict these microaggressions are unaware of the impact they have on those on the receiving end.

8) **Predominantly White Institutions** refer to universities where 50% or more of the enrolled student population is White.

9) **Prosocial** is defined as behavior that is positive, helpful, and intended to promote social acceptance and friendship.

10) **White Institutional Presence** is a term which refers to the sources of hostile and chilly environments at PWIs. These sources are classified as ideologies of White mainstream values embedded in the fabric of the institution, its policies and activities.
The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework being used for this particular study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). The premise of CRT is that race is a social construct that affects all aspects of life and is deeply engrained in the fabric of society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT rejects the concept of colorblindness and race neutrality. The argument in CRT is that the world operates as if Whiteness is the norm, which causes other groups to be marginalized. Whiteness itself is viewed as property owned by White people that no one else can access (Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J., 2001). The goal of CRT is to work towards social justice and equality. In order to accomplish this, race must be addressed not ignored. CRT also seeks to counter White supremacy in which all non-Whites are intrinsically viewed as inferior, which leaves those groups in a permanently disadvantaged state (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The major tenets of CRT that will be critical to this study are: 1) storytelling, 2) the concept of White privilege, 3) anti-essentialism, 4) interest convergence and 5) the rejection of colorblindness and neutrality (Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J., 1995; 2001). These tenets aim to allow people of color to tell their own stories, from their own point of view with the understanding that they have several intersecting identities that should be taken into consideration when creating policy or developing educational environments.

CRT emerged from Critical Legal Studies (CLS). Over time the theory was used to argue that the civil rights era was moving too slow in terms of racial justice and that a more radical approach needed to occur. Derrick Bell, one of the progenitors of Critical Race Theory and Alan Freeman, a White law professor, argue that the traditional strategies of the civil rights movement
produced few gains and a more radical movement was necessary (Hiraldo, 2013). Bell argues that racism is a permanent part of American life and must be exposed in its various iterations (Lynn, Jennings & Hughes, 2013). This theory helped to explain that the Civil rights era did not necessarily occur because of empathy for Black people, but out of mutual convenience and the self-interest of White people or what he called interest convergence (Ladson-billings, 1998).

Bell (1980) states that the fourteenth amendment was less about protecting a disadvantaged and disenfranchised group of people, which would be the right thing to do, but more about finding a remedy that did not harm the interests of the middle and upper class. Racial justice tends to be a by-product of the interests of policymakers, not necessarily the goal as in the case of Brown v. Board of Education. Although the court case ended state-mandated racial segregation, Black children still attend public schools that are racially isolated and substandard. Policymakers were more concerned with the economic and political impact of the decision than the immoral underpinnings of discrimination based on race (Bell, 1980). In the field of higher education, CRT is used to connect institutional racism to the educational pathways of students of color (Savas, 2014). The purpose of CRT is to work toward a solution to dismantle institutional racism, injustice, inequality and oppressive hegemonic environments that cause Black people to be treated like second class citizens. CRT recognizes that these issues are present throughout the fabric of society and must be addressed in all areas (Ladson-billings, 1998).

Delgado (1990), another founder of CRT, argued the importance of storytelling and anti-essentialism since people of color can speak with experiential knowledge about racism in our society. He furthered Bell’s argument that the stories of people of color would never be told in the legal system in any concrete, accurate way without looking through the lens of race and the multiple experiences within (Lynn et. al 2013). The idea is that although people of color are not
homogeneous, the stories they tell about racism have a commonality that could be labeled, “voice”, which can bring power to the discourse surrounding legal issues dealing with racial justice (Delgado, 1990). This is often referred to as counter-narrative because it directly opposes the stories told in the legal system. (Khalifa, Dunbar & Douglas, 2013). The concept of anti-essentialism dictates that there is no one solution to every situation due to the varying experiences of people and how they live or how they are educated. It is possible to share a “voice” without being labelled homogenous. By ignoring the multitude of identities within communities of color, these individuals are being further marginalized (Hylton, 2012).

Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller and Thomas (1995) posit that there is no official set of guidelines that all critical race theorists subscribe to, but the two common interests that unify these scholars are 1) understanding how White supremacy and its subordination of people of color is created and maintained in America and 2) how to change the link between law and racial power (as cited in Ladson-billings, 1998). Crenshaw (1988) also argues that the liberal perspective of the traditional slow push toward civil rights is flawed because of the limitations placed on current legal paradigms. She argues that CRT requires sweeping change against racism in order to promote social change (as cited in Ladson-billings, 1998).

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that race is a social construct, which is not objective and can be manipulated and used when convenient. Racism is common, not aberrant, therefore it must be considered when developing solutions to various societal problems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The concept of colorblindness stems from the belief that race no longer matters or if race were not a factor, then everyone would have the same opportunities and privileges, which is a false concept (Khalifa et. al, 2013). Khalifa et. al (2013) posit that in America, there is a two-tier educational system; a tier for those who were never expected to
achieve in the first place (i.e. former enslaved Africans and other underprivileged racial minority groups) and a tier for those who were always privileged to have that right. Creating a law that forced institutions to provide education for all people regardless of past inequities and disadvantages without critically examining the consequences of such actions reinforces those inequities, hence the danger of colorblindness. White privilege is engrained in US culture. Savas (2014) argues that societal hierarchy breeds the idea that White culture is US culture (p. 508). White people have historically maintained access to social and political power that non-Whites have not been able to claim. This privilege interferes with the creation of policies that affect all people. The role of CRT is to challenge the subordination that White privilege causes throughout society (Savas, 2014).

**Critics of Critical Race Theory**

Using CRT is challenging due to the fact that many mainstream scholars do not honor the validity of the theory. CRT is a radical theory that encourages scholars to think critically and move beyond the existing state of affairs. CRT delves deeper than multicultural theories in order to deal with the root causes of racism and inequities in order to activate change. Subotnik (1998) states that critics of the theory believe that CRT is used to validate anything that African Americans do and prevents critics from feeling free to question the accuracy of the arguments for fear of seeming intolerant. Subotnik (1998) also argues that one experience expressed in a narrative cannot be used to create a global message. While recapping a story told by Patricia Williams, a Columbia University law professor, regarding the possible bias and effects of the price difference in the sale of white dolls versus black dolls, Subotnik (1998) wonders whether her story leaves too many unanswered questions for the experience to be universally accepted as racial motivated.
Bell (1995) posits that critics of CRT question the accuracy of the stories and do not always see the relevance of these stories. These critics feel that CRT is not analytical enough. They find CRT to be interesting, but the theory itself does not fit the mold of scholarly work as dictated by the mainstream field (Bell, 1995). Kennedy (1989), an African American scholar and an assistant professor at Harvard Law argues that CRT is highly deficient in proving racial exclusion [in legal academia] and that scholars of color have not definitively developed a "racially distinct brand of scholarship" (sec. 1749). Khalifa et al. (2013) state that some critics just view the theory as divisive. Ironically, it is that the lack of understanding of CRT that further proves the need for a theory like this in the field of academia. CRT does not fit the mold of the mainstream because the purpose is to exist outside of the mainstream and to allow other voices to be heard; voices that have been left out of the field for way too long.

It is quite likely, that most administrators and faculty are not ready to make the necessary changes that will comprehensively address the hegemonic environments that continue to perpetuate on their campuses. It takes a certain level of social and psychological commitment to honest conversations about race and power that most people do not have and are not ready or willing to address. Ladson-billings (1998) states that adopting CRT as a framework means exposing racism in education and offering radical solutions to address the situation (p. 22).

**Rationale for Using CRT**

There are several student development theories that could be used for this study; however, many of them are limited in their discussion of race and challenge of racism. Student development theories are often one-dimensional and do not address the deeper aspects of identity development for most students (Winkle-Wagner, 2012). CRT can help institutions of higher education move toward becoming more diverse and inclusive, since CRT's purpose is to reveal
what is usually taken for granted when conducting an analysis of race, privilege and exclusion (Ladson-billings, 1998; Parker & Villalpando, 2007).

One of the most important aspects of CRT is storytelling. In order for those who have not experienced what it is to be Black, narratives are told to describe those experiences and to express living situations of racial oppression. In CRT, the subjects of the study are allowed to tell their story from their own point of view, not from the interpretation of the researcher (Bell, 1995). For this reason, CRT works well with an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allows the researcher to gather comprehensive personal narratives (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). The narratives allow the researcher to explore and understand the essence of the experience by asking questions that will allow the participant to make sense and meaning of that particular shared experience within a particular context (Smith, et. al, 2009). In this instance, the shared experience is the undergraduate experience of Black alumni from an Ivy League, PWI and the context is of those who attended their affinity reunion event, but not their class reunion.

Savas (2014) states that although Black students are matriculating into PWIs, it does not mean that these students will be welcomed into this environment and experience no racial issues or discrimination. In place of the past overt racism that Black students often faced, there are more subtle forms of discrimination. Although campuses are becoming more diverse, the campus climate still favors the majority, maintaining a tradition of inequality (Savas, 2014). Feagin, Herman and Nikitah (1996) note that Black students tend to separate themselves at PWIs as a reaction to some form of expression of unwelcoming behavior by White students. This may cause Black students to feel alienated from the mainstream campus climate (Feagin et. al, 1996).

CRT seeks to analyze, challenge and attempt to dismantle this hegemonic environment. A change in the campus culture of PWIs is a major step to improving the overall of experience of
not just Black students, but all students. Faculty, administrators and staff can also benefit from this change. True diversity allows for the expression of all cultures and experiences and can provide a rich learning opportunity for all. Involvement in campus activities, specifically ethnic organizations can assist with student adjustment, sense of belonging, persistence and overall satisfaction with campus life (Bourke, 2010).

**Applying CRT to this study**

The problem of practice that is being studied is the lack of engagement of Black alumni who attended PWIs and its possible connection to negative campus experiences. Gaier (2005) mentions that interpersonal relationships while in college are the most significant variable for determining alumni participation. He also notes that the higher the level of satisfaction with their academic experience, the more likely alumni would be involved with the university (Gaier, 2005). Clotfelter (2003) conducted a study showing that alumni satisfaction is linked to the type of experiences alumni had while they were attending the university. This includes an association with someone who may have taken a special interest in them while they were enrolled (Clotfelter, 2003). Weerts and Ronca (2008) note that alumni engagement and volunteerism are not studied as frequently as alumni donation patterns, however results from a study conducted by McDearmon and Shirley (2009) did note that alumni who had positive undergraduate experiences are more likely to donate to the institution.

Using CRT will allow the researcher to explore the undergraduate campus experiences of Black alumni from a particular PWI based on the stories told by those alumni. These stories may highlight instances of White privilege, White self-interest and microaggressions that counteract the needs of Black students on campus. While attempting to answer the research question, the
study will explore the behaviors of faculty, administrators and peers that may shed light on the type of connection or loyalty these Black alumni feel toward the campus.

The undergraduate experiences of Black students attending a PWI can be difficult due to many factors. A PWI by definition focuses on the cultural majority, and can perpetuate the idea that Whiteness is the norm. Black students existing in this hegemonic environment may share common experiences that differ from their White counterparts. These experiences may provide some information regarding their future engagement as alumni. Gusa (2010) states that it is not necessary for current PWIs to be overtly racist in order to create a hostile environment. The principles of White culture are rooted in the language, cultural practices and traditions of these universities, which allow them to remain centered on race. A result of these types of spaces is that PWIs become isolating environments of hegemonic power which sustain the structure of control and oppression. These ideologies become a part of university policies and practices (Gusa, 2010). She calls the dynamics of this hostile environment, White institutional presence (WIP). Her study, which is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT), states that although higher education brings different world views, the idea that one should dominate over the other is problematic. Within WIP, Gusa (2010, p.472) assigns four attributes:

1. White ascendency: the belief that members of the White race are superior, entitled and have control over the discussion of race
2. Mono-culturalism: the belief that there is only one worldview based on the concept that White culture is the norm
3. White estrangement: the physical separation of White people from other races
4. White blindness: the protection of White identity and privilege by claiming the recognition of race is unnecessary
All of these attributes can negate the experience of other cultures that are present at PWIs and may cause a level of discomfort. Some members of the dominant group tend to believe that racism is not as prominent as perceived by other groups. Harper and Hurtado (2007) state that different cultures have different perceptions of racial climate on campus and the dominant group often makes assumptions about the satisfaction of other groups.

Black students who have negative experiences at PWIs often talk about the microaggressions that occur on campus. In a study of Black male resident assistants (RA), Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram and Platt (2011) use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to expose how differently Black men experience the RA position at PWIs. While living in these environments, Black RAs experience racist stereotypes and insults, undue scrutiny by White supervisors, and racial and ethnic underrepresentation both on staff and as a resident. Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) also analyze racial microaggressions in residence halls at PWIs and its impact on undergraduate and graduate students of color. Four microaggressions are identified, including: (1) racial jokes and verbal comments, (2) racial slurs written in shared spaces, (3) segregated spaces and unequal treatment and (4) denial and minimization of racism. Harwood et al. (2012) acknowledges that these same microaggressions can occur in the classroom, in social spaces as well as off-campus. The emotional and psychological effects on Black students caused by these behaviors by the majority group can interfere with their ability to perform academically. These experiences cause Black students to have a lower level of attachment to their institution which can affect future engagement as alumni.

Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) state that understanding and analyzing the racial climate on college campuses is important for being able to examine access, persistence, and graduation. They also posit that CRT offers “insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies
that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom.” (Solorzano et. al, p. 63).

CRT will help to frame this study in a way that clearly identifies the best approach to answering the research questions using open-ended semi-structures interviews to gather the stories and perspectives of certain Black alumni who attended this PWI. These stories can then be used to create a solution for improving the experiences of current and future students who attend the PWI and possibly encourage Black alumni to be more engaged on a broader level. In chapter two, there will be a review of the literature focusing on 4 major topics: 1) feelings of attachment and sense of belonging at PWIs, 2) undergraduate experiences and campus climate at PWIs, 3) Black student engagement at PWIs, and 4) alumni engagement at PWIs.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The lack of engagement of Black alumni at PWIs may be caused by the campus environment that Black alumni experienced while attending as students. Prior research has shown that alumni who have had positive undergraduate experiences and strong feelings about their alma mater are more likely to donate and/ or participate in alumni events. Gaier (2005) notes that students have a higher rate of satisfaction when cultivating positive relationships with faculty and are more inclined to give back to their institution in the form of time and donations as alumni. Clotfelter (2003) conducted a study that shows that alumni satisfaction is linked to the particular types of experiences that alumni had while on campus as students.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Black alumni who choose to only participate in their own affinity reunion make sense of their undergraduate experiences. The intent of this literature review is to discuss various factors that influence Black student experiences at PWIs and how it may influence their potential alumni engagement. Articles for this review were retrieved from ScholarOneSearch, Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses and Eric using keywords such as: alumni engagement, Black alumni, campus climate, PWIs, and undergraduate experience.

This review is organized into four sections. The first section discusses the feelings of attachment and sense of belonging of college students. In order to explore this concept, the theories of student integration and student involvement are discussed. The second section discusses campus racial climate and the undergraduate experiences of Black students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Within this discussion, the concept of White Institutional Presence (WIP) as a result of the hegemonic environments created on campus, is used to explore the impact of campus climate on Black students. The third section highlights student
engagement as a factor in possible coping mechanisms used by Black students at PWIs. Finally, the fourth section discusses the overall alumni engagement at PWIs. This section will explore the various factors that may impact the willingness of alumni to give of their money, time and effort.

Feelings of Attachment and Sense of Belonging

There are many factors that influence a student’s experience on campus. Several studies have identified these factors using surveys, interviews, focus groups and phenomenological methods. There seems to be a common thread throughout the studies mentioned. If a student feels attached to the institution that they attend, it stands to reason that that feeling will continue after graduation. However, does that feeling translate into physical involvement post-graduation? What factors influence feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging for Black students? The scope of this section is to discuss the factors that may influence Black students’ sense of belonging and attachment at a PWI.

Attachment

According to Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010), ethnic minorities feel less comfortable in their educational environment than their classmates from the dominant culture. Their sense of belonging is much lower. Astin (1999) created a Theory of Student Involvement, which includes the concept of attachment as one of the components or verbs he would use to describe involvement. He believes that the amount of energy that a student exerts in activities on campus is related to the level of attachment that the student feels to the campus.

A student that is more engaged on campus is more likely to feel positive about the campus (Astin,1999). Astin’s (1999) study, as well as many others, focuses on how involvement or feeling of attachment correlated to the success and achievement of students. Transition and
adjustment to a new environment is already difficult without the factor of race being added to the equation. Unfortunately very few studies consider level of attachment and its possible connection to future alumni engagement.

Burley, Butner, Causey-Bush and Lawson Bush (2007) note that Black alumni who attend PWIs from different decades express different feelings of attachment to their institution. The older alumni feel less attached than the younger alumni. The initial assumption that one may make is that the longer you are out of school, the less attached you may feel, however, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) mention that older Black alumni experienced more overt discrimination and hostility during the time they were on campus. As a result, there is a decreased commitment by older Black alumni to the institution.

To change the level of discomfort that Black students have on White campuses, McDonald and Vrana (2007) suggest that the university offers purposeful, structured programs such as service learning activities, intergroup dialogue sessions and diversity programs to encourage interracial communication (p. 137). It is also important to acknowledge that in order for Black students to fit in, they do not have to assimilate to the cultural norms of the dominant culture.

Involvement in campus activities, specifically ethnic organizations can assist with student attachment, sense of belonging, persistence and overall satisfaction with campus life (Burley et. al, 2007). Black Fraternities and sororities have been instrumental in creating a more positive environment for both members and non-members. Several scholars suggest that in order for Black students to succeed, they either have to become bicultural or create their own support groups within the larger environment placing the responsibility for change on the student.

**Belonging and inclusion**
According to Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Integration as cited in Museus (2008), students who come from cultures that are not the same as the dominant culture in their campus environment, abandon their home or pre-college culture and assimilate with the values of the dominant campus culture in order to increase their sense of belonging and to succeed. In other words, these students must detach themselves from what is natural and attach themselves to something foreign in order to maintain their ability to perform and feel connected to the campus. Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) posit that sense of belonging has a direct and positive impact on the institutional commitment of the student.

Jones, Castellanos and Cole's (2002) study includes feedback from four focus groups with students of color at a predominantly White research university. Each focus group has a minimum of seven students. The four focus groups were broken up into four racial/ethnic categories: Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American. The authors recorded the anecdotes of various student experiences. The following experiences where the most common among the majority of the participants: 1) feeling of alienation or isolation, 2) feeling of “being different”, 3) overt racism and discrimination, 4) offensive and dismissive comments by faculty, 5) feeling unsafe on campus, 6) feeling that they did not belong or not feeling “fully accepted”, 7) fear of rejection when trying to make friends with peers from other ethnic groups, and 8) values not represented in non-ethnic-specific student organizations. All of these experiences can interfere with attachment to the university and sense of belonging.

Santos, Ortiz, Morales, and Rosales (2007) interviewed several students at two ethnically diverse public colleges in Southern California to examine ethnic identity and social adjustment. According to their study, many students, mostly minorities, express a sense of belonging and inclusion, however some students identifying as White feel the opposite. White students felt a
sense of ethnic tension and discomfort and also felt the need to fight for resources. These White students became threatened and less accepting of diversity (Santo et al., 2007). Santos et al. (2007) hypothesized that these feelings became apparent because these White students came from predominantly White communities and were accustomed to being the dominant culture. Predominantly White campuses tend to model the culture of the dominant society, hence the feelings of isolation and lack of connectedness by minority groups.

Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn and Terenzini (1996) state that positive student feelings towards openness to diversity was related to the perception of the institution's openness to members of all races and ethnicities. In a study conducted by Simmons, Wittig and Grant (2010), the authors conclude that multicultural campus programming had an overall positive influence on the acceptance of diversity by White students by encouraging interaction with diverse groups.

Manning and Coleman-Boatwright (1991) discuss their Cultural Environment Transitions Model, which demonstrates the path universities need to take in order to embrace diversity and become a truly multicultural campus. Unfortunately, it is not an easy process. According to the authors, there are many stages involved. The model also assumes that there is organizational growth taking place. This process includes 1) creating a policy of no tolerance for racial slurs and bias, 2) revising policies and procedures to include welcoming language and images for all students, not just the majority, and 3) incorporating multiple learning and presentation styles (Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991).

The ultimate goal is that people from different cultures learn about each other and respect each other’s differences. Manning and Coleman-Boatwright (1991) admit that conflict is inevitable as priorities shift and the dominant culture is forced to give up power and privileges.
They also note that resistance to change is normal and it may be necessary to let go of staff or faculty who cannot adapt to these changes. At the end of the process, the university should be more flexible and allow for multiple styles of management (Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991).

An aspect of increasing a sense of belonging in Black students includes validation. Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, and Mugenda (2001) highlight three stages of validation for Black students: 1) recruitment, 2) orientation, and 3) exit interviews. During the undergraduate recruitment phase, Holmes et al. (2001) recognize that it is important to provide a safe and supportive environment for minority students and their families or significant others to ask questions without feeling anxious due to their affiliation outside of the dominant group. Validating both the students and the significant others will create a positive first experience with the university that can assist with retention and improves the students' sense of belonging.

In terms of out-of-classroom validation, Holmes et al. (2001) identify the following factors that must be considered when validating Black students: 1) campus climate, 2) residence halls, 3) work experience, 4) peer interaction, 5) academic advising, 6) university recognition, and 7) faculty-student interaction outside the classroom. Validation during orientation includes introducing students to Black faculty and administrators while directing them to key resources that can ease the pressure of being a first year student. It is also important to consider in-classroom validation. Holmes et al. (2001) state that in-classroom validation should factor in the types of course content, type of instruction, student-faculty interaction, evaluation and feedback and reward structure.

In order to increase the sense of belonging for Black students without sacrificing their identity and culture, it is necessary to develop efforts that may eliminate negative stereotypes and
provide reassurance of their academic capabilities (Hausmann, et.al., 2009). Validation, positive, open engagement, and involvement increases commitment to the institution, persistence and retention (Harper & Quaye, 2007). The authors admit that self-reflection is required in order for faculty members to determine if the course content reflects a non-mainstream perspective and that all biases and assumptions have been considered in the process of developing the curricula (p. 38).

Administrators are also responsible for changing the climate at PWIs. Harper and Hurtado (2007) state that administrators should audit their campus climate and culture in order to determine how to change it. By focusing on ways to develop a more inclusive environment and curriculum, campuses can encourage an environment that is conducive to students regardless of background, thus increasing student feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging. According to Harper and Hurtado (2007), an institution that truly wants to provide a welcoming environment for all students must commit to a transformational change; “one that is deep, pervasive and intentional” and requires a “shift in values” (p. 20). These changes must affect the daily activities of the entire campus.

**Conclusion**

Attachment and sense of belonging are important factors that impact a student's success in college. Based on the literature we can conclude that a positive campus experience influenced by engagement activities can increase the level of attachment and sense of belonging that students feel toward their institution. For Black students, involvement in cultural and ethnic organizations is crucial at PWIs in order to increase their level of attachment and sense of belonging, especially when confronted with issues of discrimination on campus. Black students may feel pressured to assimilate with the dominant culture on campus in order to succeed at
Some Black students have expressed that various levels of microaggressions, feelings of isolation and overt racism have decreased their level of attachment and sense of belonging at PWIs. More than structural diversity, it is necessary for universities to create more inclusive environments that embrace diversity throughout its policies, programming and academic support services. It is also critical for PWIs to provide safe environments and validate minority groups on campus. For some institutions this will require a transformational change in order to improve the campus climate for minority populations. This change in campus climate may increase feelings of attachment, sense of belonging, and overall commitment to the institution.

**Undergraduate Experiences and Campus Climate at PWIs**

Undergraduate experiences are influenced by many factors. It not only includes peer interaction, but relationships developed between faculty and students. Race is a key factor in exploring the experiences of students on campus, especially for a minority group at a PWI. The scope of this section will explore how the experiences of Black student at PWI may be affected by perceptions of race and the types of interpersonal relationships developed with their peers and with faculty.

**Perception of Race on Campus**

Black students and White students throughout the country have different perceptions of the same campus environment at various predominantly White institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For Black students attending PWIs, their experiences can be drastically different from the experiences of White students (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). The difference in climate can be seen both inside and outside of the classroom. The results from Reid & Radhakrishnan’s (2003) study highlight the fact that of the different minority groups on campus, Black and Latino
students have a heightened negativity in their perception of race matters on campus than White students.

Marcus, Mullins, Brackett, Tang, Allen and Pruitt, (2003) during their study on the perception of racism on campus, determine that campuses are no different than the general society. The results show that Black males feel the effects of racism more than Black females. Black students of both sexes perceived racism more than White students of either race. The study also notes that Black students perceived professors to be more racist than their peers (Marcus et al. 2003). The authors suggest that each university conducts a survey of its faculty, staff and administrators in order to the status of race relations at their institution. This is similar to the suggestion made by Harper and Hurtado (2007) to conduct a university climate audit.

Gusa (2010) states that it is not necessary for current PWIs to be overtly racist in order to create a hostile environment. The principles of White culture are rooted in the language, cultural practices and traditions of these universities, which allow them to remain centered on race. A result of these types of spaces is that PWIs become isolating environments of hegemonic power which sustain the structure of control and oppression. These ideologies become a part of university policies and practices (Gusa, 2010). She calls the dynamics of this hostile environment, White institutional presence (WIP). Her study, which is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT), states that although higher education brings different world views, the idea that one should dominate over the other is problematic. Within WIP, Gusa (2010, p.472) assigns four attributes:

1. White ascendency: the belief that members of the White race are superior, entitled and have control over the discussion of race
2. Mono-culturalism: the belief that there is only one worldview based on the concept that White culture is the norm

3. White estrangement: the physical separation of White people from other races

4. White blindness: the protection of White identity and privilege by claiming the recognition of race is unnecessary

All of these attributes can negate the experience of other cultures that are present at PWIs and may cause a level of discomfort. Some members of the dominant group tend to believe that racism is not as prominent as perceived by other groups. Harper and Hurtado (2007) state that different cultures have different perceptions of racial climate on campus and the dominant group often makes assumptions about the satisfaction of other groups.

**Cultural values and Cross-racial interaction**

Bourke (2010) posits that 1) Black students who interact with White students in various campus settings experience alienation and isolation, 2) campus culture is dominated by Whiteness 3) the experiences of Black students are devalued, and 4) stereotypes and assumptions imposed by White students, impact the overall interaction and campus involvement of Black students. Manning and Coleman-Boatwright (1991) state that these issues stem from the definition of culture that is chosen as the dominant value system. Within the campus culture, a clear decision was made in terms of which traditions and experiences would be embraced by the university system. White culture is not just represented in the symbols and the language, but in the art and architecture of the campus itself. It is also found in the university curricula that are chosen as the norm (Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991). The chart below represents the values and beliefs that one associates with White culture (Katz, 1985 as cited in Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991):
Bourke's (2010) study confirms Gusa’s (2010) conclusions regarding a hostile environment. In Bourke's (2010) study, he concludes that race overtly impacts the experiences of Black students at Southern State University (SSU) and that these students are marginalized based on the covert campus culture of Whiteness. The covert definition of normalcy for campus culture is based on the dominance of Whiteness and interferes with the opportunity for Black students to effectively engage in campus culture. His argument is an extension of Gusa's (2010) case regarding the concept of WIP.

Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, and McBride (2013) state that Black students are afraid to hold conversations with White students about Black culture for fear of being ignored or perpetuating stereotypes. To be connected to the general population can cause stress, but to be
apart from the general group does not encourage change in relation to the dynamics of the campus climate. These students find themselves in a dialectal pull between integration and segregation, which causes frustration both personally and academically (Simmons et al., 2013). The relationship between Black students and their universities is one of tension and discomfort. This is important when considering the effects of campus environment on feelings toward the institution.

Black students must grapple with an internal struggle between two opposing views, Black pride versus a melting pot ideology, in order to survive at PWIs (Simmons et al., 2013). Wei, Liao, Chao, Mallinckrodt, Tsai, and Botello-Zamarron’s (2010) confirm the notion that ethnic minority students do not always feel welcome and often experience stress due to discrimination. Hastings and Boone (2009) noted that compared to White students at a predominantly White institution (PWI), ethnic minorities experienced higher levels of stress due to the lack of ethnic minority role models represented in the faculty or lack of other ethnic minority students in the classroom.

According to Wei et al. (2010), Black students experience a unique type of stress distinct from general stress known as minority stress, which is usually caused by discriminatory campus interactions. Wei et al. (2010) argue that for ethnic minorities to cope with this type of stress, they have to increase their level of perceived bicultural competence (PBC), which will allow them to live in both cultures without compromising their own. Unfortunately this position puts the responsibility on the ethnic minority student to deal with adverse effects of campus discrimination. Johnson (2012) acknowledges that there should be a transformative practice that puts the responsibility of change on the institution, not on the students since they have very little power in the educational environment (p. 344).
Faculty-student relationships

Reynolds, Sneva, and Beehler (2010) note that students who are without academic engagement and connectedness, which includes getting to know their faculty and studying with other students, are likely to struggle to find motivation to deal with stress and the demands of college. Reynolds et al.’s (2010) findings are consistent with earlier research as cited in Baldwin, Chambliss, and Towler (2003); Guiffrida, (2003) that students of color who are able to find social support from family and connect with their peers are more likely to be successful. Grier-Reed (2013) suggests that informal networking groups for Black students are therapeutic and may assist in dealing with these stressors.

It is critical for students to build strong relationships with faculty in order to succeed in college (Summers, Svinicki, Gorin, & Sullivan, 2002). Unfortunately, faculty members seem to be confused about how to help students of color feel connected to the campus. According to Summers et al. (2002), faculty members equate lowering their standards to providing academic encouragement to students of color in order to accommodate an increasingly diverse campus. Ogbu (1994) as cited by Burley et al. (2007) states that there is a Pygmalian Effect by which teachers and administrators perceive Black students differently than White students leading them to treat Black students differently.

Faculty-student relationships are strongly correlated with student satisfaction in college (Guiffrida & Douthiti, 2010, p. 312). Black students are unable to make a connection with White faculty due to Black students' perceptions of cultural insensitivity by White faculty. According to Guiffrida & Douthiti (2010), Black students complain about stereotypical comments made about them in the classroom, generalizations of opinions made by individual Black students to reflect all Black students, and the failure of White faculty to acknowledge and incorporate Black
perspectives in the curriculum. This kind of behavior makes it difficult for Black students to approach White faculty for assistance. They also have a difficult time viewing White faculty as role models (Guiffrida & Douthiti, 2010). The results of the study show that Black faculty went above and beyond to help Black students in order to compensate for White faculty who are not as willing to make the extra effort (Guiffrida & Douthiti, 2010).

**On-campus housing environment**

Living arrangements for Black students can also be even more uncomfortable than their classroom experiences. In a study of Black male resident assistants (RAs), Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram and Platt (2011) use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to expose how differently Black men experience the RA position at PWIs. While living in these environments, Black RAs experience racist stereotypes and insults, undue scrutiny by White supervisors, and racial and ethnic underrepresentation both on staff and as a resident. Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) also analyze racial microaggressions in residence halls at PWIs and its impact on undergraduate and graduate students of color. Four microaggressions are identified, including: (1) racial jokes and verbal comments, (2) racial slurs written in shared spaces, (3) segregated spaces and unequal treatment and (4) denial and minimization of racism.

Although this study is conducted with a focus on living experiences in the residence hall, Harwood et al. (2012) acknowledges that these same microaggressions can occur in the classroom, in social spaces as well as off-campus. The emotional and psychological effects on Black students caused by these behaviors by the majority group can interfere with their ability to perform academically. The authors conclude that the following steps should be taken to rectify these situations: 1) reevaluate the education purpose of university housing, 2) manage the
perception of university housing, and 3) provide training for students and staff to manage racial microaggressions (p. 170).

Although the method and theoretical framework that Harwood et al. (2012) uses is different than that of Harper et al. (2011), many of the results are similar, confirming the difficult campus environment for students of color. Both studies highlight that microaggressions can occur campus wide and not just in the residence halls. Harwood et al. (2012) states that the cumulative effect of these [negative] experiences contributes to students of color often feeling like outsiders in the university (p. 169).

As a result of this hostile environment, Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, and Yonai (2014) note that for students of color, observations of and encounters with racism on campus increased their environmental stress and decreased their positive feelings of the institution ultimately affecting their interest in persistence. In order for Black students to persist at PWIs under these stressful situations, it is often helpful for them to find or create an environment where they are comfortable and can develop a sense of belonging.

To compensate for these racial discomforts, some PWIs have created ethnic-theme based housing for students that serve as cultural centers that mitigate hegemonic environments. Ethnic theme housing, also known as program housing or living-learning communities, can provide that kind of support. However, some students who choose not to live in these types of housing environments and never visit them may have the perception that they are not welcome in this environment. This leads to the perception of self-segregation of minority groups. According to a study conducted by Feagin and Sykes (1995) self-segregation seems to be a defense mechanism that protects Black students from the harsh reality of institutional racism.
Lum (2008) states that although it is unclear how many ethnic-theme houses exist, it is clear that these housing options provide a safe space for students of color at PWIs to discuss issues of race among other topics. She also states that these housing options allow different students to learn about each other and they also allow minority students to learn about their own heritage. In one of her interviews, a Black student states that ethnic-theme houses are the best retention tools available for Black students due to the comfortable atmosphere it provided (Lum, 2008).

According to Jones, Castellanos and Cole (2002), cultural centers also provide a safe space for students who have been denied opportunities and access on campus. They offer educational and cultural enrichment for students of color, while enhancing a multicultural campus environment, however, cultural centers also allow universities to neglect their full commitment to diversity by not proactively dealing with the lack of inclusion throughout the rest of the campus (Jones, et al., 2002).

Self-segregation, better known as de facto segregation does not just occur on college campuses. It occurs all over the country. Ihlanfeldt and Scafidi (2002) stated that there are many reasons why Black people self-segregate. In their studies, the authors noticed that Black people were willing to spend more on rent in order to live in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Some Black people choose not to live in predominantly White neighborhoods for fear of hostility which led to housing segregation. Botello-Zamarron’s (2010) confirmed the notion that ethnic minority students do not always feel welcome and often experience stress due to discrimination. This reflects a common fear for Black college students.

**Conclusion**
Race is a significant factor in how students perceive their campus experiences. Due to the cultural hegemony that exists at PWIs, Black students have had a difficult time adjusting to the environment both in the classroom and off-campus. The campus climate is often reflective of the dominant culture with little consideration of the needs of minority populations. In order to persist, Black students have had to develop separate communities within the campus to avoid microaggressive behaviors from the dominant group. Classroom interaction has been difficult for Black students due to the lack of mentors and strong relationships with supportive and culturally sensitive faculty. This has a huge impact on Black students since the literature clearly shows that strong relationships with faculty have proven to increase academic success and connectedness to the campus. There is also an internal identity struggle that Black students face when integrating into PWIs. Since PWIs focus on the needs of the dominant cultural, Black students have to either assimilate or become bicultural to thrive in these environments. These situations cause Black students to develop a unique type of stress that further challenges their ability to cope with the campus environment. This in turn affects their perceptions of their campus experiences, which can ultimately undermine their sense of belonging and attachment to the campus.

**Black Student Engagement at PWIs**

While conducting their study, Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams and Salinas-Holmes (2007) discover that Black students attending HBCUs are more engaged than Black students attending PWIs. This is due to the supportive environment that HBCUs provide which is very different than the culture at PWIs (Allen et al. as cited in Nelson et al. 2007). At PWIs, Black students find ways to engage by trying to connect to like-minded students. Quite often this is in the form of creating or joining Black cultural organizations in the absence of other
cultural outlets. This section will discuss the reasons and the benefits of developing coping mechanisms such as this to be able to thrive at a PWI as a Black student.

**Black student organizations**

Harper and Quaye (2007) during their phenomenological study of Black male leaders at PWIs in student organizations realized that although some joined mainstream organizations, several joined Black organizations in order to enhance Black identity and to advance the Black community PWIs. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) posits that there are many reasons why Black students join multicultural organizations: 1) to affirm their presence on campus, 2) to engage in out-of-class experiences, 3) to acknowledge a commitment to serve disenfranchised members of the community, 4) to foster a sense of "mattering", and 5) to provide opportunities to share their skills and talents with the Black community (p. 33).

Guiffrida's study (2003) affirms many of the findings of Sutton & Kimbrough (2001), especially the fact that Black students need to develop relationships outside of the classroom. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) suggest that based on research conducted at PWIs, Black students should be encouraged to actively participate in Black student organizations. By participating in these organizations, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) state that Black students would be able to give back to their community and gain a sense of purposeful belonging. It would also allow Black students to connect with Black mentors while finding a comfortable place to socialize and be their true selves.

There appears to be many benefits to joining Black organizations or organizations that focus on Black culture at a PWI. Strayhorn's (2011) study on Black students who participate in the gospel choir at PWIs illustrates that their active involvement helps students to establish a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of marginalization. Kuk and Banning (2010) also
concur that the goals and behavior of campus student organizations can increase the sense of belonging and persistence of diverse students.

Affiliation with Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) at PWIs enhances the engagement of Black students especially in relation to faculty and peer interaction (Patton, Bridges & Flowers, 2011). Prior research suggests that BGLOs provide closer bonding with other Black students, particularly amongst Black men (Trenor, Grant, & Archer, 2010). BGLOs also foster a stronger connection to the campus environment and greater knowledge of Black history (Patton et al., 2011). It is also clear that BGLO members can facilitate positive student interactions on campus (Patton et al., 2011).

**Importance of cultural programming**

During individual, semi-structured interviews with 19 students of color at a large, predominantly White research institution, Maramba and Velasquez (2012) discover that 8 of the 19 students feel that representation of ethnic minorities was poor. The students also note that university provides very little in terms of cultural programming. At least half of the students mention that the few activities that are available are usually planned by students or campus cultural centers. Eight of the students state that there is no real campus community and that they did not feel a sense of belonging.

Adjustment for Black students at PWIs can be very difficult. Museus' (2008) findings demonstrate that ethnic student organizations assist with cultural adjustment by serving as a source of cultural familiarity and validation and a venue for cultural expression. These student organizations allow students of color to connect with their peers who share similar backgrounds. Museus’ (2008) findings support prior research which asserted that subcultures created by ethnic student organizations were important to the experiences of ethnic minority students at PWIs.
These findings also confirm that ethnic student organizations are a critical form of social involvement for Black students.

Hall, Cabrera and Milem (2011) hypothesize that student engagement is a *learned behavior* and that involvement or lack thereof with diverse communities prior to college will dictate involvement in diverse activities while attending college. They also highlight that Black students and White students experience engagement differently because of race (Hall, Cabrera & Milem, 2011). The authors found that although White students were less engaged in diverse activities, yet they were still engaged equally in comparison to other students overall. In a study conducted by Kuh, Cruse, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008), the authors find that Black students benefit more from engagement in academically enriching activities than White students. Guiffrida (2003) noted that Black students who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods benefitted from joining Black organizations because they were able to connect with other Black students who grew up in diverse communities. It also helped these students learn about their African heritage (Guiffrida, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Positive engagement is critical for Black students to have positive experiences on campus. This includes participating in culturally relevant activities, and feeling a sense of validation of their cultural needs. In order to feel part of the campus, it is necessary for administrators to incorporate cultural activities campus wide, in addition to activities created by the students themselves. Majority students should also be encouraged to participate in diverse activities. As mentioned earlier, majority students benefit from participating in diverse programming because they are more accepting of diverse groups through cross-cultural interaction. It is important to involve diverse groups of students in the program planning
process in order to accurately meet their needs and ensure that these students will be fully invested in the activities. Providing these culturally based activities validates Black students who often feel isolated at PWIs and can also create a sense of belonging.

**Alumni Engagement at PWIs**

There are several reasons why alumni decide to donate money or participate in activities offered by their alma mater. Most studies focus on the latter. Even fewer studies analyze the impact that race has on alumni giving and participation. This section will discuss the perceived role that alumni feel towards their alma mater, the various types of engagement possible, and the factors influencing engagement.

**Types of engagement**

Weerts, Cabrera and Sanford's (2010) study emphasizes how important it is to look beyond monetary donations and focus on the other ways that alumni can contribute to an institution. He believes that universities have become shortsighted. Some of the other ways that alumni can contribute include: joining advisory boards, advocating politically, mentoring students, and recruiting undergraduate. What the authors notice is that the university tracks volunteerism when alumni are on boards and in associations, but they rarely track activates such as mentoring and political advocacy since many of those activities can be done individually and without the knowledge of the university.

Weerts and Ronca (2008) admit that alumni involvement and volunteerism is largely understudied. The purpose of their study is to identify characteristics of alumni who choose to be involved with their alma mater. The study shows that alumni mainly between the ages of 35 and 44 who had positive personal experiences, interest in civic activity and ties to a particular program or department within the university were more likely to volunteer. They also discover
that alumni with children under 18 are more likely to volunteer than alumni with no children. Also, White alumni are more likely to volunteer than Black and Asian alumni and women volunteer more than men.

**Factors affecting alumni engagement**

Gaier (2005) mentions that interpersonal relationships while in college are the most significant variable for determining alumni participation. He also notes that the higher the level of satisfaction with their academic experience, the more likely alumni would be involved with the university. Satisfaction is determined by factors such as quality of faculty and advising, coursework in major, relationship with faculty and staff, amount of contact with faculty, quality of instruction, and access to academic support systems (Gaier, 2005). Gaier (2005) notes that the most significant variable is the relationship with faculty and staff. The better the relationship, the more likely alumni reciprocate in terms of time and/or resources. This is confirmed by McDearmon and Shirley’s (2009) study where the survey respondents who have a positive undergraduate experience are more likely to donate to the institution.

Those who participate in extracurricular activities during their undergraduate experience are likely to donate and even more likely to participate in alumni activities than those who do not participate in student activities during their undergraduate experience (Gaier, 2005). His study shows that although Greek life participation did not impact alumni giving, it did impact alumni engagement. Students involved in Greek life have stronger ties to the campus community and are likely to participate as alumni in the future. (Gaier, 2005) However, these findings were more associated with younger alumni who were not attached to families.

A study conducted by Barnard-brak, Robinson, and Harris (2011) proves that athletes had a strong sense of belonging because they identified with the campus. They also noted that this
involvement in athletics enhances future alumni engagement. These students often identify as athletes first and then as students. Although there is an equal amount of Black and White participants in the study, race is not a variable in determining a sense of belonging (Fearon et al., 2011). The study conducted by Fearon et al (2011) on athletes did not account for attitudes of race when discussing sense of belonging. Based on the results, it would seem that athlete identity supersedes racial identity.

Collins (2013) states that if alumni offices want to see alumni more engaged, they need to give alumni what they want. He states that it is as simple as conducting a survey, soliciting post-event evaluations or having an informal discussion (p.40).

Perceived role of alumni behavior

The involvement that alumni choose to have after leaving an institution depends on the view they have of their role with the institution (McDearmon, 2013). It is important to consider the personal relationships that alumni have with their alma mater and how those relationships greatly impact the individual and the institution. That particular view will dictate the level of support they will provide (McDearmon, 2013). The author also states that in the past, universities relied on alumni to initiate personal involvement, but now the initiation of involvement must be with the institutions themselves. McDearmon (2013) states that research on alumni involvement and giving focuses on characteristics of the individual such as age or characteristics of the institution such as national rankings, which help determine the individual's interest in giving. Although these characteristics are important, McDearmon (2013) states that it does little to help determine how alumni identify with their alma mater upon graduation.

McDearmon (2013) posits that alumni who have a perceived role of behavior (e.g. it is my duty to support the university through volunteering) are more likely to be involved with their
institution after graduation. He also demonstrates a strong correlation between alumni who attend athletic events and their likeliness to identify with a particular role which leads them to either donate or volunteer. McDearmon (2013) states that it is the job of the university to help alumni identify their role with the institution.

Clotfelter's (2003) study shows that alumni satisfaction is linked to the type of experiences alumni had while on campus. This includes an association with someone who may have taken a special interest in them while they were enrolled. This factor was called MENTOR. These MENTORS were identified as faculty or other college staff members. Alumni who had a mentor are twice as likely to be satisfied with their college experience. Higher levels of satisfaction increase the likelihood that alumni will make a donation and the amount given by alumni may increase (Clotfelter, 2003). Alumni engagement was not mentioned in the article, but it is interesting to note the connection between campus experience and alumni giving. Based on the earlier discussion regarding the difficult relationships between Black students and White faculty, it would be interesting to explore whether these relationships would have an impact on giving from Black alumni at PWIs. It is possible that it may also impact alumni engagement.

Alumni can play an important role in student engagement. Rissmeyer (2010) states that collaborative programs and activities, such as homecoming, will bring students, faculty, staff, and alumni together and can build institutional pride and loyalty. She mentions that alumni may take an interest in cosponsoring activities that are appealing to undergraduate students. Events can include lectures, career workshops or mentoring opportunities. Singer and Hughey (2002) highlight the importance of alumni to participate in the recruitment, admissions process and selection of new students as well as participation in new student orientation. Singer and Hughey
(2002) mention that alumni who have had positive experiences are more likely to volunteer to speak to prospective students. The authors even mention the creation of student alumni associations that can provide service to the community.

Other areas where alumni can assist students include: job placement, internships/externships, lecture series, and hosting visiting students (Singer & Hughey, 2002). However, the authors make no mention of the impact that this type of engagement can have on Black students which is a notable gap in the literature. If Black alumni made a concerted effort to provide these types of services to Black students at PWIs, chances are that the experiences of Black students can become more positive. This may create a reciprocal effect when they become alumni.

**Factors influencing alumni giving**

According to McDearmon and Shirley (2009), alumni who graduate more recently give significantly less than earlier graduates. This would make sense since young alumni are not established in their careers and do not have the income to make a significant contribution. It is also possible that recent alumni are paying back loans from their undergraduate education or may have decided to attend graduate or professional school directly after completing their undergraduate degree. Another factor that influences giving is in-state versus out-of-state residency status. In-state students are more likely to give than out-of-state residents. These students often pay more tuition than in-state students, which contributes to higher debt. It is likely that the higher level of debt influences their giving patterns.

Alumni who received financial awards as students are more likely to give to the institution; however, those with significantly high loan debt do not donate (McDearmon and Shirley, 2009). This was confirmed by Meer and Rosen (2012) who state that students who leave campus with a considerable amount of debt are less likely to donate due to a possible feeling of
resentment and the reduction in disposable income while paying back the loans. Meer and Rosen (2012) also note that scholarship recipients felt excluded from the majority campus culture when they were undergraduates, which in turn reduced their affinity towards the institution.

Older alumni tended to give more financially due to stability of income and participate less due to reduction in available time. This changes somewhat if the older alumni have children who also attend the institution since it give the parent(s) a reason to return to the institution. Overall, Gaier (2005) asserts that alumni giving has a stronger relationship to alumni satisfaction than alumni participation (p. 287).

Although these studies clarify the type of factors that influence alumni financial donations to a university, unfortunately they do not give a clear distinction in terms of physical engagement. It may be possible that similar factors affect engagement. This is an explicit gap in the research. However, in reviewing research by Newman and Petrosko (2011), it is noted that graduates are more likely to join alumni associations if they fall into the one of the following categories: (a) were donors, (b) were relatively older, (c) had positive experiences as alumni, (d) had positive perceptions of the alumni association, (e) were more frequently involved with their alma mater, and (f) knew other members in the association. Participating in an alumni association is only one aspect of alumni engagement, but a very important one.

The traits for those alumni who were less likely to join the alumni association include: (a) employed by the alma mater, (b) attained a higher level degree, (c) had positive feelings about student experiences and (d) had positive university perceptions (Newman & Petrosko, 2011). The authors however were clear to make a distinction between those alumni who join an association and those alumni who chose to donate. So it is likely that a positive student experience will lead to alumni giving but not necessarily lead to joining an association.
McDearmon and Shirley (2009) also find that alumni donations increase based on the level of interest that was shown by someone at the institution during their student experience.

Wastyn's (2009) study analyzes factors that lead non-donors not to give. She found that non-donors had four major reasons for not giving: (1) they considered the college a commodity, not a charity, (2) they did not believe the college needed the money, (3) they had misperceptions of how the money was used, and (4) they do not make logical giving decisions. Unfortunately, there were no correlations made between non-donors and their engagement level with the university. It is possible that these alumni will give time, but not money.

**Black alumni giving and engagement**

The biggest factor missing in this discussion is race and how it may change the level of engagement of Black alumni. Campus climate is a factor when discussing Black student engagement at PWIs, but how does that affect the conversation regarding alumni engagement of Black students who graduate from PWIs? In Drezner's (2010) study on giving at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), he states that knowing more about what motivates students to give is important because their giving affects future donations as alumni (p. 128). The author notes that it is important to instill prosocial behavior at the undergraduate level by creating programs that encourage joint fundraising between students and alumni. This will improve the chances of students becoming active and giving alumni. In his study, Drezner (2009) recognizes that for Black people, donating is usually associated with a cause related to their community (Dresner, 2009). Newman and Petrosko (2011) notes that students involved in affinity groups are not likely to give since they are typically members of minority groups that feel less integrated into the campus community and therefore are less attached to their alma mater.
Conclusion

In reviewing the current literature, the main factors that influence alumni giving and engagement are (a) individual characteristics, (b) feelings toward the institution, (c) ability to give, (d) participation in undergraduate activities, and (e) a connection to the campus culture through activities such as athletics or Greek life. Although factors such as residency, age, year of graduation are important, campus experiences and relationships are at the top of the scale when determining factors that influence alumni engagement. Alumni satisfaction is also critical to giving and engagement. There are many strategies that can be used to influence these particular factors in alumni engagement, especially for Black students attending PWIs. One must consider the reasons why Black students choose to be involved, why they choose to give, what is their perceived role as alumni and how their campus experiences influence these decisions.

Summary

Based on this review, one can conclude the following: (1) there is a culture of Whiteness that permeates the campus environment creating a hostile environment for Black students; (2) encounters with racism on campus increased the level of environmental stress on Black students and decreased their positive feelings of the institution; (3) Black students who engaged in campus activities, especially ethnic student organizations, developed a sense of belonging and improved feelings toward their alma mater; and (4) satisfaction with one’s undergraduate experience is a factor in future alumni engagement and support.

The literature has shown that Black students at PWIs have had difficult experiences on campus with their peers, faculty and administrators stemming from negative stereotyping, lack of attachment to university traditions, and overall feeling of rejection by the institution caused by
White institutional presence (WIP). In most cases, the curriculum does not reflect the diversity of the campus other than the offering of ethnic or gender studies classes. Living environments have proven to be challenging for Black students. Relationships with White faculty are not as nurturing as they are with Black faculty. Changing the campus culture of PWIs is a major step to improving the overall experience of not just Black students, but all students. Faculty, administrators and staff can also benefit from this change.

It is clear that negative student experiences can have a detrimental impact on Black alumni engagement. To alter these negative experiences, it is necessary to revamp the entire campus culture in a way that is more inclusive of others outside of the traditional “norm”. This is a longer and more intense process than just offering diversity programs. True diversity allows for the expression of all cultures and experiences and can provide a rich learning opportunity for all. Minority students must be validated both on and off campus.

Alumni participation is mainly considered in relation to its impact on giving but rarely considered independently. Even fewer researchers have considered the engagement of Black alumni at PWIs. By investigating these areas, suggestions can be made to alter the campus programming and curricula in a way that truly embraces diversity. Alumni can play a large role in this change. Campus events such as homecoming and reunion can incorporate diverse cultural themes and new traditions can be developed that are universal for all students.

Improving the relationship between alumni and the institution can be of great benefit to both the institution and the students who attend. Programs can be developed to build strong relationships between Black students, Black student organizations and the Black alumni association. As the literature has shown, alumni with positive feelings for their alma mater tend to make donations to the institution. It is also possible that these positive feelings may increase
alumni engagement. This increase in alumni engagement will ultimately have a positive impact on the experiences of current Black students on campus. By encouraging stronger relationships between Black students and alumni, we can expect that these students will be active alumni in the future. We can also expect Black students to have better experiences on campus. It is a cyclical relationship. Active alumni can intervene when there are difficult situations on campus and provide support. Finally, this increase in alumni engagement may also lead to increased donations to the institution, which in the end will benefit everyone. The results of this research will be instrumental to the activities and goals of alumni affairs and student affairs offices nationwide.

This research will allow Black alumni to have a voice by sharing narratives of their undergraduate experiences on campus. The goal is to investigate how these alumni make sense of their experiences and to determine if these experiences inform an understanding of Black alumni engagement. This study will have a practical use that can be adopted by other private institutions that are interested in improving these undergraduate experiences while cultivating institutional advancement and diverse alumni involvement. The following section will provide a description of this study, the research question and the method chosen to complete this study.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The aims of research in this particular doctoral program was to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research site and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. The purpose of this study was to examine the specific problem of the lack of Black alumni engagement at Cornell and how the perceptions of undergraduate experiences as expressed by Black alumni may provide information regarding their alumni engagement.

The research question that this study answered was: how do Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI? This question helps to explain how Black alumni perceived their campus environment during their undergraduate years. The population that was studied attended the Cornell Black Alumni Association (CBAA) reunion, but not their class reunion. The assumption is that there are aspects of their undergraduate experiences that may have influenced the decision to attend their affinity reunion with other Black alumni over their class reunion with other classmates.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

In order to investigate this question, a qualitative research study was conducted. Qualitative research is the process by which the researcher gathers various types of data, conducts an analysis and attempts to make sense of the data in order to solve a real world problem utilizing inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research allows this researcher to use her experience and background in a way that informs her interpretation of the experiences of the participants. The purpose of qualitative research is to use the voices of the participants to solve a complex problem with the goal of becoming a change
agent (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the researcher used qualitative research to explore the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni in an attempt to understand how these experiences inform her regarding their alumni engagement. The overall process began with a set of assumptions based on an interpretive lens or framework. The researcher attempted to create an environment that allowed the participant to share his or her story in a way that was empowering and reduced the power tension between the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2013). This particular environment included asking Black alumni a set of questions which allowed them to reflect and interpret for themselves how they perceived their undergraduate experiences.

A constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is the approach used in this qualitative study. This specific paradigm was used in order to explore the meaning behind the problem of the lack of Black alumni engagement at Cornell, recognizing that there are multiple and equally valid realities (Ponterotto, 2005). These realities reside in the minds of the participants and can be extracted through deep reflection and a conversation between the researcher and the participants (Ponterotto, 2005). The purpose was to capture the story based on the lived experiences of the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm focused on the individual and examines specific behaviors and cultural phenomena that are unique to that individual (Ponterotto, 2005).

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm worked well for this study because it allowed the researcher to focus specifically on the minute details of individual cases of Black alumni who are not engaged in university sponsored activities in order to create an overall portrait of their experiences. It allowed the researcher to understand how Black alumni think about their experiences in order to be able to solve the problem of lack of alumni engagement. This paradigm also recognizes that the researcher has a vested interest in capturing these stories because of her own experiences as an alumna. Although the researcher had to bracket her
experiences, these experiences were still used as a lens in determining how the research was conducted. In contrast to the post-positivist, the interpretivist can acknowledge their own values as long as they are contained. Since the relationship between the researcher and participant requires prolonged interpersonal contact it is almost impossible for the researcher to avoid bias (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher may even identify with the participant’s experiences.

Through this prolonged interaction, the researcher was able to bring these lived experiences to the surface from deep within the consciousness of the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). Using a qualitative methodology allowed this researcher to investigate these undergraduate experiences through a series of semi-structured, open ended questions that allowed Black alumni to share their interpretation of their experiences in a way that helped inform others about how to solve the lack of alumni engagement problem.

**Methodology**

The specific methodology used for this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA requires the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon by attempting to understand experiences as relayed by the participants being studied (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This study explored the phenomena identified as the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni who graduated from Cornell. IPA was chosen because it uses a double hermeneutic approach where the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant, while the participant is trying to make sense of the phenomenon (Smith et. al, 2009). IPA was also selected because it allowed the researcher to focus on the lived experiences of the participants. The idiographic aspect of IPA allowed the researcher to focus on particular instances of the lived experience of the participant and present a detailed analysis.
IPA combines three concepts of philosophical thought: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Farina (2014) describes phenomenology as a method that studies the change in the perception of the world based on the core of the experience of a particular individual as it relates to a deliberate act. The idea is that our knowledge of the world is also based in our senses, not just the content of the experience or basic reason. A person (i.e. subject) experiences the world (i.e. object) based on the relationship within it, since the subject and the object are inseparable (Farina, 2014).

Although Husserl is deemed the father of phenomenology, even his definition of the method has changed and evolved over time as his studies deepened (Farina, 2014). Husserl moved from a mathematical understanding of the world to a philosophical understanding, influenced by Franz Brentano, a German philosopher and psychologist, who looked at the difference between a perceived object and how that object is perceived by us. Sadala and Adorno (2002) state that Husserl's concept of phenomenology focuses on the description of an experience more so than the explanation of that experience. The authors also state that the crux of Husserl's belief is that before any objective reality, exists a subject who experiences that reality and a world that exists prior to the objectivity and that knowledge begins after the experience occurs since knowledge itself is based on life (Sadala and Adorno, 2002, p. 283). Husserl believes that we must bracket or put aside our assumptions about the real world in order to understand our perceptions of the world (Smith et al., 2009).

Gadamer (2004), a German philosopher, focuses on the hermeneutic perspective which analyzes the participants' biases, preconceptions, and their unique understanding of the world and acknowledges that these factors cannot be ignored. Hermeneutics is defined as interpretation, which is an important part of the interviewing process. Interpretation involves
making sense of the phenomenon as detailed by the participant. This requires the researcher to bracket their assumptions or at least acknowledge their own preconceptions, which are shaped by his or her own experiences, during the process of interviewing the participant (Smith et. al, 2009). The researcher focused on the story of the participant and allowed it to unfold in the participant's own words without interference from the researcher's own point of view (Smith et. al, 2009). While analyzing the data, the researcher was influenced by his or her preconceived notions. Once the researcher, an outsider to the experience, was able to understand the combination of these elements through dialogue, a shared human consciousness was formed (Gadamer, 2004).

Smith et. al (2009) underscores that the researcher is experiencing the participant's story as told by the participant through the researcher's own experientially-informed lens (p. 36). The primary focus was the participant's sense making process, while the researcher's interpretation was secondary (Smith et. al, 2009). IPA is also double hermeneutic in that the researcher was attempting to be both empathetic and investigative, simultaneously. In other words, the researcher was trying to understand and make sense of the experiences as shared by the participant as if these were the researcher's own experiences while also looking at the experiences as an outsider questioning different aspects of the experience (Ricoeur, 1970; Smith et. al, 2009). During the analysis phase of IPA, it was important to understand the participant and the experience of the participant (Smith et. al, 2009). The phenomenological aspect of this process is to get as close to the essence of the participant's experience as possible, while the hermeneutic aspect is to interpret that experience with the participant (Smith et. al, 2009).

Smith (2009) argues that conducting a detailed, focused analysis allows the researcher to make a significant contribution to psychology (p. 37). This careful analysis allowed the
researcher to identify common themes while also being able to identify divergent themes and distinct voices (Smith et. al, 2009).

The intended outcome of using IPA for this study was to interpret the undergraduate experiences of a particular subset of Black alumni who graduated from Cornell to analyze these experiences and discern whether these particular experiences can provide a context for why Black alumni may or may not choose to be engaged with the university. The IPA approach allowed these Black alumni to recount in their own words their particular stories and give room for a detailed, interpretive analysis as it relates to the researcher's interest while making a significant contribution to the field of higher education.

Open-ended interviews with questions related directly to the main research question allowed the selected group of Black alumni to discuss their individual undergraduate experiences highlighting important relationships with peers and faculty, activities in which they were involved and significant events that may have occurred during their time as students on campus. This interviewing strategy allowed these participants to make sense of these personal accounts and access whether these narratives have any influence on their level of engagement. The following section will discuss the research setting, the participants of the study and the type of data that was collected during the study.

Setting

Cornell University, founded in 1865, is a predominantly White, Ivy League university located in upstate New York. The university is comprised of 7 undergraduate colleges, four of which are private and the other three, public. It is a large, research institution with over 21,000 students, 1,600 faculty and over 8,100 staff and administrators. It has an alumni population of
approximately 250,000 living alumni. Of that number there are approximately 7,000 self-identified, Black alumni.

Participants

Seidman (2013) suggests *purposeful sampling* when selecting participants for a qualitative study, allowing the researcher to identify participants that are best familiar with the phenomenon being studied. Creswell (2013) suggests the use of *homogeneous sampling* as a type of purposeful sampling that focuses on sub-groups with defined characteristics. To create a homogenous sample, the particular Black alumni chosen for this study attended their affinity alumni reunion but not their class alumni reunion. This study was restricted to Black alumni who have completed their undergraduate degree requirements at the university. Alumni who attained a graduate degree from the institution, but not their undergraduate degree were excluded.

For this study, the focus was on the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni who graduated from a predominantly White institution and their subsequent alumni engagement. With the help of the Office of Diversity Alumni Affairs, purposive sampling was used to identify participants for this study. Staff from the Office of Diversity Alumni Affairs searched the alumni database and provided emails, phone numbers and mailing addresses for alumni who meet the criteria of the study. The researcher sent a letter of intent (see Appendix A) to an identified group of Black alumni who met the specified criteria via email and/or direct private messenger via Facebook. Of the group that was willing to participate, the researcher attempted to select at least two Black alumni per decade, who graduated with an undergraduate degree from the university between 1960 and 2010. A snowball method was also used to identify participants via referral (Creswell, 2013).
The researcher also attempted to identify at least one male alumnus and one female alumna per decade. Since the lived experiences of Black males and Black females may be different, it was important to identify one of each per decade to give a more comprehensive interpretation of the experience. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to identify a female who graduated from the 1960s who attended a CBAA event, but not their class reunion. Ultimately the researcher identified 1 male alumnus from the 60s, 2 male alumni and 1 female alumna for the 70s, 2 male alumni and 1 female from the 80s, and 1 male alumnus and 1 female alumna each from the 90s, 00s. The age range of alumni was between 29 and 68 years old. An additional 2 participants that did not meet the criteria were interviewed because they provided information that was important and relevant to the study. Since their data did not meet the standards of the study, the data from these 2 interviews are discussed at the end of chapter four as relevant observations. Of the 7 colleges at Cornell, participants from 6 of those colleges were interviewed. No participants from the Industrial Labor and Relations (ILR) school volunteered to participate in the study. A demographic chart of participants is located in Appendix E.

The key to IPA is to focus on quality, not quantity. Therefore IPA requires a small and specific sample size for the most accurate, detailed account of individual experiences (Smith et. al, 2009). A small sample size allowed the researcher to spend an extended period of time getting to know the participants and allowed them adequate time to share their experiences. More detailed information allowed for a richer analysis. The data set was also more manageable since the researcher worked with small numbers (Smith et. al, 2009). The maximum sample size for this study was 11 not including the 2 outliers. This sample size allowed the researcher to identify common themes across several decades by exploring the individual experiences of each participant.
Types of data

The type of data collected for this study was in the form of open-ended, semi structured interviews that were digitally recorded. Archived documents that are related to campus experience, racial climate and alumni engagement were also used in this study. The strength of using interviews for data collection is the ability to gather in-depth narratives from Black alumni regarding their undergraduate experiences in their own words. Each participant went through a series of three interviews. One weakness in the study for some participants was the ability to recall information about those experiences due to the amount of time that has transpired since graduation. Archived documents relevant to these experiences helped to fill in the gaps during the analysis and created a context when a participant was unable to recall the information. Examples of these documents included campus newspaper articles, campus policy documents, and college yearbooks.

Procedures

In order to conduct this study, approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at Northeastern University and Cornell University was acquired. Upon receiving approval, the participants for the study were identified and recruited. The letter of intent ensured that their participation was voluntary, giving them the option to end their participation at any time. It also stated that the participant's identity remained confidential throughout the study and pseudonyms were used in areas where necessary. Participants were notified of the time commitment to ensure their ability to participate. All participants were notified of how the data will be used, where the data will be used and why. The participants were also informed that some of the information gathered would be included in this published document that they can access. Each participant gave verbal consent based on the informed consent document reviewed and emailed to them (see
Appendix B) stating that he or she understood his or her rights and the parameters of the study. The information provided was repeated prior to the beginning of the process. All participants were given the option to leave the study, if they felt uncomfortable for any reason. Participants were also given the option not to answer any question that he or she deemed uncomfortable. Fortunately, these scenarios did not occur for any of the participants in this study.

Once the participants were identified and consent was received, each interview was scheduled via phone or email and an interview confirmation was emailed to each participant. Since the participants in this study were located all over the country, interviews were conducted via phone conferencing and completed at a time that was convenient for the participant.

In-depth, semi-formal, open-ended interviews were conducted in order to gather data related to the undergraduate experiences of the participants and their level of alumni engagement. All interviews were conducted individually. Seidman (2013) suggests conducting a series of three interviews with each participant, which allows the researcher and the participant to reflect on the context and meaning of the experiences and increases the validity of the study. This set of three interviews was modified from Seidman’s (2013) approach.

The first interview lasted between 20-30 minutes and was used to explain the purpose of the study, review the research protocol, and solidify the interest of the participant in completing the study. The second interview consisted of a series of approximately 11 questions (see Appendix D), with the goal of answering the main research question, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Questions were rephrased for clarity when necessary. This interview was digitally recorded using Freeconferencecall.com and transcribed via a service called Rev.com for convenience and accuracy leaving out unnecessary non-verbal utterances. Significant non-verbal
utterances were identified by a note in the transcription (Smith et. al, 2009). The participants had an opportunity to share their own interpretations of their undergraduate experiences.

The third interview was used for member checking. The researcher emailed a copy of the transcript to the participant with interpretive comments on the right-hand side of the page, highlighted quotes and themes that emerged during the initial analysis. The researcher then interviewed the participant for 20-30 minutes to ensure accuracy of the interpretation and stated themes.

At the completion of this study, the researcher conducted a total of 38 interviews, including the 2 outliers mentioned earlier. A participant tracking sheet was created in Microsoft Excel to keep track of the participant's contact information, college graduation year, and individual college within the university. Microsoft Outlook was used to keep track of the scheduled interview times and contact numbers. The data from the transcription were collected and organized using Microsoft Word for important quotes and Microsoft Excel to organize emergent themes and patterns across participants. A separate analysis for each participant was drafted in Microsoft Word using a pseudonym instead of the participant's name. All information was secured on a password protected personal computer and backed up in a password protected cloud.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved a six step process. The first step in IPA analysis included reading and rereading the data while listening to the digital recording. This allowed the participant to be the focus of the data analysis (Smith et. al, 2009). To assist with bracketing, it was necessary for the researcher to document his or her own interview experiences and observations in a notebook during the initial analysis process (Smith et. al, 2009). Step two included writing notes and
comments on the transcript, focusing on language and meaning while reading. Notes and comments included information such as similarities, differences, and contradictions (Smith et. al, 2009). Descriptive comments highlighted key words or phrases that described the participant's thoughts and experiences (Smith et. al, 2009). Conceptual comments allowed the researcher to move from a descriptive analysis to a more in-depth analysis. Conducting this type of analysis caused the researcher to question his or her own experiences, but it was important that the focus remained on the participant (Smith et. al, 2009). Step three involved identifying emergent themes throughout the text in the order that they appeared. The goal was to reduce the amount of information while keeping complex concepts. The themes are in the form of phrases that identified the essence of the experience being described (Smith et. al, 2009). Step four focused on identifying patterns and connections across emergent themes. Once commonalities were found among themes, they were listed together and given a new name, creating a super-ordinate theme to identify the group. Making connections by comparing divergent themes and frequency of themes was also useful (Smith et. al, 2009). Step five involved moving to the next case and repeating steps one through four while bracketing the information received from the previous case. Each case was dissected independently (Smith, 2009). Finally, in step 6, the researcher looked for patterns across all of the cases. This required the relabeling of some themes (Smith et. al, 2009). These new themes and their super-ordinate themes were listed in table format using Microsoft Excel. In order to conduct a deeper analysis of these themes, it was necessary to conduct several levels of interpretation focusing on the original research question (Smith et. al, 2009). Since the sample size for this study was 11, it was necessary to focus on identifying emergent themes across all cases while considering frequency (Smith et. al, 2009).

**Ethical Considerations**
Seidman (2013) cautions the researcher to be mindful of pre-existing relationships with participants. Pre-existing relationships can complicate the interview and lead to assumptions, distorted information, or lack of candor from the participant (Seidman, 2013). Participants for this study were identified with the help of the Office of Diversity Alumni Affairs. Any alumnus that served on the alumni board during the time the researcher served as president of the alumni association was not selected while they were in office in order to avoid any unethical situations caused by pre-existing relationships or power issues. In order to maintain an ethical study, the researcher attempted to conduct equitable and fair interviews. It is suggested that interviews are conducted in a place that reduces the power issues (Creswell, 2013). The interviews in this study were conducted over the phone during a time that was convenient for the participant.

According to Agee (2009), in order to conduct an ethical study, the interview questions should not be leading or judgmental, but should allow the participant to speak honestly about his or her own experiences. Prior to conducting the second interview, the researcher notified the participants that she would refrain from discussing her background and personal experiences, identifying with or corroborating any of the experiences that were shared or making any statements that indicated an opinion about their experiences. The researcher in this study limited the conversation to asking questions that allowed the participants to feel comfortable expressing themselves and only made comments when necessary to gain clarity about unclear or conflicting statements. The researcher also read and had a clear understanding of the "Protection of Human Subjects" as stated in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46 regarding how to ensure ethical standards (Seidman, 2013).

To protect the participants' information, all data collected from each interview were saved on a password-protected personal computer and the files will be backed up in a digital cloud with
a secure password. Written notes of critical information will also be taken, scanned into the computer and uploaded to the backup folder in a digital cloud. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms and participants were encouraged not to give identifying information for themselves or anyone else during their interview.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research the terms: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used to determine the trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to confidence in the reality of the findings or its believability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was ensured through extensive interviewing and engagement with the participants. Once the main interviews were completed, a debriefing session was conducted with each participant. This is known as member-checking. It allowed the participants an opportunity to review the interview transcripts and notes to verify that the information gathered was accurate (Creswell, 2012).

Transferability refers to the ability to show how the findings can be applied to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, a thick description using block quotes from participants and extensive descriptions will help other researchers determine the extent to which the findings are applicable in a similar context. If this study is replicated at a similar university using the same methodology with the same sample size, the results should be similar.

Dependability relates to the ability to replicate this study through an independent audit trail by maintaining a detailed chronology of the research design (Murrow, 2005). Smith et. al (2009) state that a proper audit trail would allow someone else who is not related to the study to hypothetically follow the logic of the study and understand the full process from the initial concept of the research question to the final report. The authors state that not only is this helpful
in checking the validity of the study, it also helps the researcher to develop a coherent line of arguments between the initial data and the final report (Smith et. al, 2009).

Confirmability relates to the extent that the findings are shaped by the participants’ responses rather than the bias of the researcher. Understanding one's positionality allowed the researcher to be aware of these biases. It required self-reflection and a genuine commitment to providing quality research that will inevitably impact the field of higher education. The next section will discuss strategies to assure credibility in more detail.

**Potential Research Bias**

In IPA, bracketing is a very important process that must occur before the data analysis stage. It is necessary for the researcher to identify his or her relationship with the phenomenon and be conscious of any biases that may be present in order to avoid allowing these biases to influence questioning during the interview process. Although bracketing is almost impossible for a researcher to do, it is still a very critical step in the research process (Greonewald, 2004). Although it is almost impossible to avoid bias, it is possible to mitigate its effects on the study.

The first step is to be aware of the bias. The researcher's interest in the exploring the effect of undergraduate experience on Black alumni engagement at a predominantly White institution stems from the researcher's own experience at Cornell University as a Black female who experienced overt racist and microaggressions. There are several assumptions being considered by the researcher: 1) a positive experience will encourage these students to be more engaged as future alumni, 2) the experience(s) of Black alumni may have been negative, and 3) a negative experience will somehow interfere with future alumni engagement. These assumptions are based on a particular view of the racial climate at the university and the research's role as the former president of the Black alumni association.
These assumptions may or may not be true. However, Gaier (2005) found that the higher the level of satisfaction with their academic experience, the more likely alumni would be involved with the university. Gaier (2005) also noted that those who participated in extracurricular activities during their undergraduate experience were likely to donate and even more likely to participate in alumni activities than those who did not participate in student activities during their undergraduate experience.

It is important to realize that bias must be mitigated at all stages of the research process (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010; Creswell, 2013). Being aware is just one component of managing bias. The researcher of this study created a standardized protocol for selecting participants in a fair and transparent manner, which ensured that all defined characteristics for the ideal participants in this study were equally met. Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) state that interviewer bias can occur when the process by which information is requested, interpreted and recorded is not completed in an equitable way across the study.

The researcher of this study created an interview protocol (see Appendix C) that was used for all participants, which included interview questions that were not leading and the process for recording the interviews. The researcher also avoided sharing personal experiences during the interview process, allowing the participant to share his or her own true narrative. The interview protocol included a statement that was read to each participant which stated that the interviewer will refrain from discussing her background and personal experiences, identifying with or corroborating any of the experiences that are shared or making any statement that indicates an opinion about the participant's experiences. During the data analysis process, the researcher shared all information even if it was contrary to her assumptions. The researcher avoided taking sides with the participant, also known as "going native", when analyzing the data (Creswell,
2013). As a side note, even the term "going native" connotes some level of bias since it is a pejorative term and is only being mentioned in order to identify a common phrase used in the field.

Ultimately, the researcher had an ethical responsibility to both the cultural community and the academic community when conducting research and providing quality education. It required self-reflection and a genuine commitment to providing quality research that will inevitably impact the field of higher education.

**Limitations**

This study was conducted using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework. Using CRT narrowed the focus of this study and prevents the consideration of other factors. The consideration of race was one of the major factors driving this study, however other factors such as age, geographic background, sexual orientation or economic status could have been considered. Another limitation which affects the ability to generalize the results of this study is the fact that only Black alumni who completed their undergraduate degree were included in this study.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

This purpose of this study is to understand how Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI. In this chapter, we will explore the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni who graduated from Cornell University as expressed by the participants in an attempt to interpret how their experiences can inform us about their alumni engagement. The analysis has identified 5 superordinate themes and 13 subthemes. The chart below identifies each emergent theme identified from the analysis along with the frequency in appearance of each theme:

**Table #1: Emergent Themes with Frequencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings of isolation during undergraduate experience</th>
<th># of participants w/ shared theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest in campus-wide traditions</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of social justice, community involvement and volunteerism</td>
<td>6 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited or negative interaction with or inability to relate to White students</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 out of 11</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bonds formed with like-minded individuals contribute to positive experiences</th>
<th># of participants w/ shared theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living in or spending significant time in ethnic theme housing for safety and/ or reassurance</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining cultural or fraternal groups with similar interests for comfort</td>
<td>9 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending significant time at cultural centers on campus or with other Black students</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>9 out of 11</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence of faculty relationships on student experiences</th>
<th># of participants w/ shared theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative interactions, feelings of indifference or distrust towards White faculty</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant relationships and/or positive interactions with Black or White faculty</td>
<td>7 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 out of 11</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appreciation for and challenges of attending Cornell University</th>
<th># of participants w/ shared theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of financial or academic concerns</td>
<td>8 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation for Cornell and the possible opportunities it provided</td>
<td>6 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>8 out of 11</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited alumni engagement due to campus experience</th>
<th># of participants w/ shared theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Identifying only with alumni affinity groups or career based events | 9 out of 11
Limited to no interaction with classmates | 8 out of 11
Engaged to improve the experiences of other like-minded individuals | 9 out of 11

**Superordinate Total:** 9 out of 11

**Feelings of isolation during undergraduate experience**

This superordinate theme focuses on the aspects of campus that alumni define as experiences that may have contributed to their feeling of isolation or feeling separate from the overall campus culture. The overall campus culture described in the interviews suggests that the campus culture was not inclusive. Three subthemes have been identified. Lack of interest in campus-wide activities was the first subtheme. Although there were general campus traditions, the participants described those traditions as largely based on the interest of majority students. The campus traditions did not necessarily include culturally relevant activities for other students. The second subtheme was the importance of activities around volunteerism. In response to their lack of interest in the campus culture, participants discussed their interests in activities around culture, social justice and indicated that volunteerism served as responses to their feelings of isolation. The last subtheme focuses on limited or negative interaction with or inability to relate to White students. Some of these interactions were impacted by pre-conceived notions held Black students regarding the behavior of Whites. Other interactions were impacted by a difference in cultural views. Some of these interactions were marred by acts of racism. These interactions with White students at different levels, whether they were negative or insignificant, may have also contributed to Black students' feelings of isolation on campus.

**Lack of interest in campus-wide traditions**

Based on the descriptions provided by the participants in this study, university-wide events tended to mirror the interests of majority students and seldom included
interests related to other cultures. The rare instances where students of color felt included were due to their own influence. Although participants may have attended university-wide events, these decisions were often based on whether friends from similar backgrounds also attended. Most of the participants mentioned that their involvement in campus-wide activities were superficial. If Black students chose to attend these events, it was often due to the fact that they incorporated some of their own interests as well by creating auxiliary events around the larger campus events. Either they were involved because their friends were there or they participated in an affinity group that was somehow affiliated with the event.

Langston noted that even though he grew up in a similar environment in upstate NY, he felt overwhelmed by White culture at Cornell. He was more accustomed to racial mixing and dialogue in Syracuse. For him the climate was less overwhelming in Syracuse. At Cornell, the relationships were more complicated. He felt that there were two separate worlds and the Black students did not participate in the same events as the White students which caused a level of internal conflict for him. He wanted to identify with both groups, but he felt that the university activities were not relevant to the experiences of Black students. He believed that the college traditions were outdated and reminiscent of the 50s. When describing homecoming and other university events, Langston says:

As if there weren't enough White people at Cornell already, the invasion of alumni, it was just a lot...I remember some of that stuff, just on the face of it, being hopelessly old-fashioned... A lot of those things for one reason or another just never appealed to me. Entering Cornell, especially at that time was a very racially polarized environment. Physically the trauma was the racial climate at
the time, trying to connect with White students in an environment where the two didn't mix very much. The Black students I was beginning to get to know weren't into that sort of thing. We weren't included in those traditions. It was a counterculture moment. We had to create our own traditions.

Harriet grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, but was bused to a predominantly White high school because she tested well academically. Cornell for her was a similar environment to her high school from an academic standpoint. What was different was the social interaction. She did not feel connected to any of the campus-wide events even as a cheerleader. Her decision to be a cheerleader was less about rooting for Cornell than it was about her interest in dance and spending time her friends.

We had homecoming ... but it wasn't anything. No, I don't remember doing anything particularly related to homecoming other than my singing and dancing and performing with my friends. I did perform, but I wasn't all excited, "Oh it's homecoming and I have to go to there."... [My friend] was looking for Black cheerleaders and I was a cheerleader in high school. She persuaded me to try out for Cornell cheerleaders. As a cheerleader, I would have to cheer for the football game, so I guess in that way, I participated, but I didn't really see it as anything special.

Other than homecoming, Dragon Day was a very popular event. It was a campus-wide Spring tradition which is over 100 years old, where architecture students would create a dragon and would compete against the engineering students who created a Phoenix. The students would ritualistically burn the dragon once it reached the Arts quad until campus regulations banned students from setting fires on campus due to safety
issues. Kirk, as a first year architecture major at Cornell was required to participate in this event. Through this process, he did acknowledge that this event allowed him to interact and get to know others who were from different backgrounds, but overall these students did not relate to his interests. For him, the highlight of the event was setting the dragon on fire.

Dragon day...that was almost as a default, I was a freshman in the architecture program so I kind of had to be involved in it...It was a week long process, we basically had to construct the dragon from Monday to Thursday then the whole thing of marching it through campus happened on Friday... I started to meet other students in architecture school who are not Black or Latino. I was dealing with students who didn’t look like me or didn’t relate to the kinds of things that I related to. At that time we were still setting the dragon on fire so the bonfire at the end was pretty much the highlight of the day.

Cornelliana night is an event where students from different singing and acapella groups get together for one event. Kirk mentions that even though he was part of Cornelliana night through Pamoja-Ni gospel choir, it was still an awkward moment to see the majority students sing the alma mater with such glee and connection, while the Black students had difficulty relating to the emotion. Kirk also expressed a feeling of obligatory involvement and an overall lack of connectedness. He says:

Oh, I did participate in Cornelliana Night... Pamoja-Ni all sat together. We kind of stood there snickering. We’re singing the alma mater and looking at the other groups coming off as warm and convivial. Even with all of that we just couldn’t get into it, we could not relate. We could never relate.
Alfreda was a first generation college student. She had a difficult academic experience being one of only four African American students majoring in animal science. She used her social life to help her cope with the experience. Alfreda mentioned Zinck's night, which is a campus tradition named after a bar keeper in Ithaca that owned a bar that was a haven for college students. Alfreda found no interest in this event, however, she did participate in Slope day because it was an opportunity for her and her friends to celebrate the last day of school. Instead of participating in the university-wide homecoming, she mentions a separate homecoming sponsored by a Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha and the Festival of Black Gospel. She states:

I absolutely participated in Slope Day. Slope Day just seemed like a group effort. It was the end of the year...everyone's excited to be finished with the year. So that's kind of a given. I'd say the Alpha Phi Alpha homecoming was something that we always did. Honestly now as an alumni, I look back and get all these messages about the events, like Zinck's Night and all that. I didn't participate in any of that, the traditional Cornell events. [Instead] we had the Black Gospel festival... Honestly I think if my group of friends and community didn't seem very involved, weren't very involved in events like Cornell's Homecoming and Zinck's and all that, I didn't seem very interested in it. Even knowing the history I just wasn't very interested in participating. Just not something that was part of who I was.

Although Marcus was very involved in many aspects of Cornell, he mostly participated in traditional campus-wide events when his friends joined him. For him, participating in these events was something he did because it was a part of his college experience: 
I never thought about being motivated [to participate]. I guess it was part of the college experience. I did participate in Slope Day, I guess because my friends who went out there, we would go out together. Sometimes actually, there were times that I didn't participate, some of my years. Other activities, I guess it really depended on if your friends were going out there.

Philip grew up in a homogenous, lower income, urban environment in Chicago. Although he attended Slope Day, it was due to the stroll competition developed by the Black Greek-letter organizations. He also attended concerts at Cornell, which historically have been conducted by mostly hip-hop and pop artists. He only participated in Dragon Day as a spectator. He mentioned feeling like an outsider while participating in sports on campus:

Yeah. I participated in Slope Day, mainly [BGLO] stroll competition and attended concerts. Dragon Day, just kind of sat on the side and watched it. I participated on the sprint football team. Just kind of like an outsider, trying to find a space...

Again it was a full team of 65, probably five or six people of color period, not even URMs, period.

**Importance of social justice, community involvement and volunteerism**

Some participants stated that their ability to cope with the isolation at Cornell was out of their involvement in social justice activities. Historically, Black students at Cornell have been heavily involved in community activities and social justice based on the relationship between Blacks on campus and Blacks in the Ithaca community and the history of protest and struggle on campus. Many of the activities were prompted by overt racism such as violence towards Black students on campus or more covert racism such as the lack of inclusion of the Black experience in the classroom or the lack of culturally relevant books in the library.
One such protest was known as the Willard Straight Takeover where Black students responded to acts of violence and discrimination against them by taking over one the university's major student centers. Some of the participants expressed the importance of participating in events such as protests, political lectures, and service projects because these events validated their experience as Black people. As a result of these protests, Cornell created living and learning institutions that explore diverse cultures, such as Ujamaa Residential College. Several of the participants appreciated the fact that Cornell created institutions that nurtured this type of activity and involvement. Unfortunately, even though these spaces were available, Black students still had to cope with the violence that occurred against these institutions and the lack of cultural acceptance on campus. Their involvement in social justice activities helped Black students to support each other and unify around common interests and became a coping mechanism for the intolerance and isolation they faced on campus.

Malcolm lived in a very segregated environment in Brooklyn, NY prior to attending Cornell and credits much as his attitude toward race relations to his experiences during the Civil Rights movement. His pre-conceived notions of race and culture created a lens for how he interacted with others at Cornell. As he learned more about the history and struggle of Black people throughout the Diaspora, he chose to spend more time with other Black people, while intentionally avoiding White people. Malcolm seemed to associate increased awareness of Black history and culture with the need to abandon activities associated with White people. His actual experiences at Cornell also dictated his interaction with others. He mentions the intimidation of Black women on campus and how he felt compelled to get involved with protests around the issue. His interest in social justice at Cornell was based on his need to identify with other Black
students and feel connected to them. Participating in social justice activities allowed Malcolm to unify with other Black students around a common interest:

I think it was mainly because I was a product of the 1960s, the civil rights struggle, the push for Black people to be empowered, to define ourselves. This was also a time when I'm Black and I'm Proud came into being. The more I read, the more committed I became to fraternizing with my own people....for that reason I think I never needed nor felt compelled to form a bond with any of the White students who were there...The activities I participated in were related to Black student protests around the intimidation of Black women. I also felt that overall I was able to participate in the Willard Straight Hall Takeover and that I think was a very important influence on me. It really helped me appreciate Cornell and appreciate the camaraderie between the Black students, because we were all united at that particular time.

However, not all students were interested in social movements. Langston felt obligated to participate because of the threat of violence towards them by majority students. He was very uncomfortable with politics and the level of student activism on campus. He mentioned living through a time of the urban rebellion in the late 1960's while in high school and how similar the experience was at Cornell. He chose to isolate himself at the beginning and depended on his hobbies for self gratification. As tensions increased on campus, he was forced to align himself with his cultural community and participate in the protests. Langston described his campus experience as "traumatic", especially during the time he arrived in the Spring of 1969 immediately following the Willard Straight takeover. There was a lot of tension on campus. He
talked about how the Africana Center was destroyed by arson on April Fool's Day during his spring break. He says:

There was a lot of activism around that and at that point I felt that I had no choice but to participate although very much as a follower. The events progressed to the point where I couldn't [avoid it], although I would have been happy to not get caught up in a lot of the more activist kind of things, political things going on.

Unlike, Langston, Jocelyn did not avoid campus activism, she embraced it. Jocelyn was influenced by the revolutionary speakers that would come up to Cornell and the Africana courses that she took. She learned that it was important to give back to the community and to be a change agent. She states that:

If there were any additional student rallies, anything that related to students of color, Black students, any kind of activities that we had to rally around and protest for, I was involved in [them].

Kirk was raised in an urban environment in Baltimore to a large, single-parent working class family. He spent most of his time in Ujamaa and participated in protests and other activities that fought for better conditions for Black students on campus. Kirk was involved with various protests and was affected by incidents on campus were Black men were being attacked:

I remember that 1st unity hour at Ujamaa, the RHD was getting everybody together and saying, “Our brothers were attacked down on west campus and this is the situation that we are in.” I think from almost the very beginning, we were made aware the fact that we were in a hostile environment, that the environment wasn’t the best for us.
Kirk states that he felt that university-wide administration was not welcoming and not accepting of Black students and that they did not have Black students' best interests at heart. He says, "We were always fighting, we were always protesting, whether it was divestments from South Africa or financial aid". He even stated that the library books were not relevant to their experience. During one protest, Kirk and a few other Black students marched to Uris library, dumped piles of books from the shelves onto the circulation desk and said, “These books do not relate to my people.” Kirk felt that the stories of Black people were being left out of the curriculum.

Marcus on the other hand attributed his ability to cope with the isolation to the support he received from institutions that spoke to cultural inclusion and social justice. These institutions helped with his racial identity development and validated his experience as a person of African descent even when he couldn't get that experience back home in Miami.

As a student, he volunteered as a teacher and administrator for a Saturday school in a local in the Ithaca community. During the summers, he worked as a literacy intern at the Harlem Literacy Program, a Cornell Cooperative Extension initiative. He even received funding from various sources at Cornell to do work internationally as a medical intern volunteer at an OB/GYN clinic in Ghana. He credits his four years of living at Ujamaa Residential College as inspiration for wanting to participate in these activities. Marcus states that:

The fact that [Ujamaa] was an institution that catered to the needs of those wanted to learn more about the African continent and about social justice issues spoke to me...It also felt like there was a lot of crystallization. Many of the lessons I learned as an adolescent, many of those lessons crystallized with further knowledge, consciousness elevation, increased understanding of social justice concerns. Those are some of the things I remember.
A coping mechanism to the campus-wide isolation of Black students was political awareness and involvement. Most of the participants acknowledged that their ability to cope with the isolation at Cornell was due to institutions that encouraged social justice. These institutions were created as a response to the negative social interactions that were occurring on campus due to individual and institutionalized racism.

**Limited or negative interaction with or inability to relate to White students**

Several of the participants stated that although they interacted with White students, the experience was either insignificant or negative. The experiences of White students seemed to be vastly different from the experiences of Black students. Some of the interactions with White students were influenced by stereotypes and inappropriate perceptions of Black students. Some Black students avoided interaction with White students because of assumptions based on pre-conceived notions of behavior. Other Black students talked about being treated differently in housing or on sports teams.

Malcolm was invited to live in an all-male cooperative on campus where the residents were mainly a mixture of White, Anglo-Saxon protestants and Jewish men. He talked about his difficulty getting through some of the interviews. He believed it was due to some of the residents questioning if he would fit in as the only Black male:

I can easily remember one time, but I think there might have been two other callbacks for an interview, because there was some reluctance in some of the members to admit me into Von Cramm Hall... Here's an African-American from New York City and many of them, I would say, never interacted at all with Black people before they came to that campus and certainly in any living situation. I would say among those who were reluctant that there was the sense that "will he
fit in?". The main thing is "how would he fit into our environment, is he a good
fit, and are we prepared to take the first African-American into our cooperative?

Harriet did not expect to have such a hard time living with White students. She assumed
that since she attended a school in a White neighborhood and interacted with White people in
high school, that the experience would be the same at Cornell. What she did not take into
account were the cultural differences that emerge when living in the same environment. The
experience for her was unpleasant:

I don't remember how I wound up in Mary Donlon [residence hall], but that was a
horrible experience my freshman year. That was the first time I'd lived with White
people, lived with White women, young women, and it was just an awful
experience. Culturally we are so different... not that I disliked any of my White
classmates or White people or White professors. I didn't really relate to them very
much. In fact, I don't even remember most of them at this point.

Jocelyn did not want to live on West campus because she heard that mostly White
students lived there and that there was a lot of drinking, however, she still ended up living and
working as an RA in a predominantly White dorm on North campus. Jocelyn had difficulty
explaining her college experiences. Some of the difficulty seems to stem from not wanting to
focus on the negative experiences. She believes that her experiences, both good and bad shaped
her life and made her the person she is today. Jocelyn almost seems more fascinated with the
behavior of White students than upset. She acknowledges some of the traditions that the White
students participated in that were very different from her own. She also talks about how White
students took the liberty of over-generalizing her experience as a Black student:
That was an experience [in] itself because becoming a resident advisor meant that you had to oversee the students over there. It was different 'cause we had to organize beer parties, keg parties...They became very comfortable with talking with me about the fact of my being Black and their being White and what that meant to them, and what they saw or what they thought about it...Would ask questions about what the so-called Black experience was, and it just opened up a whole other realm of looking at Whites.

Bessie was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. Her family is from Grenada in the Caribbean. Growing up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, Bessie had limited contact with White people. Her experience at Cornell with students in her speech class surprised her. She mentions that a student in her class gave a speech about how, because of affirmative action, a less qualified Black or Latino student was admitted to Cornell as opposed to his sister. Although Bessie states that these incidents didn't occur frequently to her, she was still impacted by the microaggressions that her friends faced on campus:

A lot of the other incidences that happened on campus happened more so to a lot of close friends of mine, but I felt it nonetheless. Friends being followed when they went into Donlon Hall to go meet other classmates of ours. The [Black] men, especially, were being followed by the White residents. People screaming out all sorts of racial slurs as you're walking past Donlon.

Philip spent much of his time at Cornell trying to identify with his peer group. His White teammates were not tolerant of his "type" of music during their practice sessions. He felt alone when his teammates would spend time together after practice. He was not embraced by members of his sports team because of what he viewed as an "old boy's network". Out of 65
players, only 5 or 6 were students of color. Many of his White team members were legacies and received special privileges. Philip was passed up for more prominent roles on the team. Philip says:

I'm hesitant to pull the prejudice, bias, racist card when the situation is unfavorable but I try to be rational about it. It was an old boys club...I felt like what I produced was stronger. I was a running back the time that I played with them and what I produced as far as yards and touchdowns and stuff looks pretty good for the amount of time that I played. They're playing me second string and weren't starting me. When they would actually put me out there and I would get my hands on the ball, I'm scoring. I felt some kind of way about it and worried about it. I questioned myself because it was just like, "Okay, well maybe I'm just not doing enough. Maybe I could be working out more."

Philip did not want to attribute the decisions of the coach to racism, but based on the facts, he could not explain it anyone other way. Being passed up on the team began to make Philip feel insecure and question his own ability.

Conclusions. Feelings of isolation were prevalent throughout each decade, regardless of background or gender. Black students want to feel part of the larger campus culture without having to sacrifice their own cultural identity. If they are in an environment that lacks an interest in their cultural activity, they will create their own outlets and events in order to cope. Black students experienced feelings of isolation due to the overwhelming Whiteness of the culture and the campus traditions. If Black culture is included in a campus event, it is usually an add-on activity or an event that was culturally appropriated such as the campus concerts. It seems that in order for Black students to feel comfortable at a PWI, they need to feel like their experiences
matter. This includes having institutions that support their culture and history, participating in events that reflect who they are as people of color, receiving equal treatment and respect, being able to take courses that incorporate their experience, and not being viewed as secondary to other cultures. Their experiences should be considered equal to the experiences of others.

Because of the unique experience that Black people have in this country around racism and prejudice, community involvement, social justice and volunteerism are important aspects of the Black experience. Some of the experiences expressed by participants included being unable to relate to campus traditions, feeling threatened, knowing classmates who were physically attacked, being disrespected by their White peers, denied equal opportunity for advancement and being excluded from the curriculum. The injustices on campus and in the Ithaca community perceived by the participants related to racism, intolerance, and discrimination mirror the injustices in the larger society. Many Black students feel compelled to be a part of a social movement that will improve their experiences and the experiences of others like them.

Experiences with White students on campus can impact the overall campus experience of Black students regardless of their background. Some Black students chose not to interact with White students based on pre-conceived notions of behavior or actual incidents of racism or prejudice. Even when Black students do interact with White students, quite often the relationships were superficial and did not last beyond college. Some of the actual incidents of racism and microaggressions on campus created a hostile environment for Black students and negatively impacted their undergraduate experiences. The next superordinate theme highlights the relationships developed with other like-minded individuals on campus through participation in clubs, affinity groups or cultural centers.

**Bonds formed with like-minded individuals contribute to positive experiences**
This superordinate theme identifies the clubs, organizations, living environments and support centers participants identified with that positively influenced their experiences as undergraduates. Three subthemes have been identified. The first subtheme identifies situations where living in or spending significant time in ethnic theme housing provided safety and/or reassurance to Black students. Participants mentioned experiences where they felt threatened and feared for their safety. Others talked about their feelings of racial or ethnic insecurity and chose to live in these environments to help with their identity development. The second subtheme discusses the phenomenon of Black students joining cultural or fraternal groups with similar interests as a source of comfort in an environment where they feel isolated. Several participants in this study mentioned the importance of participating in affinity groups and cultural organizations to help cope with issues of bias, macroaggressions, and microaggressions. The third subtheme focuses on Black students spending significant time at cultural centers on campus or with other students like themselves. According to the participants, these centers helped provide much needed support to maintain academic, social and financial stability for Black students on campus and assisted with retention and graduation. Spending time with other like-minded individuals provided an environment for dialogue, connectedness and camaraderie.

**Living in or spending significant time in ethnic theme housing for safety and/or reassurance**

Participants felt the need to live in ethnic theme housing for a variety of reasons: validation, safety, support, identity development, and friendship. It seemed that many of the participants were trying to find an environment that provided a level of comfort similar to their home environment in order to cope with the difficult academic and social environment at Cornell. Some of the participants expressed concerns about their safety on campus due to
incidents of rape and physical violence. Other participants used their time in ethnic theme housing to learn about their culture and heritage, which helped with identity development. Some participants mentioned that living in an ethnic theme house with people of similar backgrounds and interests helped them cope with depression and insecurity caused by difficult academic experiences in class or uncomfortable interactions with their White peers.

Ujamaa Residential College is an ethnic theme house that was founded on the Kwanzaa principles of familyhood and cooperative economics. The purpose of Ujamaa is to explore the experiences and history of people of African descent and to provide a supportive environment for all of its members. Harriet, Bessie and Philip all mentioned the importance of feeling safe on campus even though Harriet is decades apart from Bessie and Philip, which indicates that not much has changed.

After Harriet's unpleasant experience living in a predominantly White dormitory, she immediately gravitated toward Ujamaa where her boyfriend lived. Harriet was even more driven to live in Ujamaa due to the support she witnessed after one of the residents suffered a traumatic and violent experience. She mentions that the administration did not take the incident seriously and that Black students felt a need to protect themselves. A buddy system and campus patrol were created by residents of Ujamaa. Harriet recalls:

I believe it was that spring when we had the rape of one of our sisters. [The rape] was random. It wasn't anyone she knew. Possibly a White fraternity member. At that time, we didn't have the blue lights [safety system]. It was just dark. I remember the night that we had a special meeting in Ujamaa and the discussion was we have to take care of our own and so we started the buddy system with the brothers and the sisters.
Kirk spent most of his time in Ujamaa and participated in protests and other activities that fought for better conditions for Black students on campus. His connection to the campus was based on the close friendships he developed with other Black students. Kirk was involved with various protests and was affected by incidents on campus were Black men were being attacked. Kirk says, "I think Ujamaa was that family. It was that safe space that we had, we didn’t think we [had] in other parts of the campus so we all kind of drew to each other”.

Alfreda received most of her support from living in Ujamaa. She enjoyed being part of a community and having an opportunity to learn about her African history. She saw Ujamaa as a comfortable retreat from her difficult experiences as one of four animal science majors. She felt that Ujamaa and other theme houses created a community for students of color to prosper in a tough environment. Alfreda states:

I think it really created a community on North campus for those of us to thrive. I think I found... I learned more about myself being a part of that community.

Marcus was born in Queens, but grew up in Miami and attended public school there. He explained that he was interested in learning more about the African Diaspora. Unfortunately, living in Miami limited his exposure to Black culture. Living in Ujamaa at Cornell was a positive experience for him because he had an opportunity to learn about various cultures within the African Diaspora. Institutions like Ujamaa validated his experience in a way that he was not accustomed to while living in Miami.

My four years of living at Ujamaa Residential College. The fact that it was an institution that catered to the needs of those wanted to learn more about the African continent and about social justice issues spoke to me. I felt that Cornell, because of Ujamaa, Cornell invested in those who were similar to me, who had
concerns or wanted to learn more about this space that we didn't learn about,
didn't have the opportunity to learn about too much in public schools in Miami. I
felt like [Ujamaa] investment in institutions like this showed an importance.

Bessie had a difficult time coping academically while at Cornell to the point that she was
forced to take time off by the campus administration. She was challenged by self-doubt which
led to depression. Some of her self-doubt was caused by her White peers who ridiculed her in
class. She identified with her peers who had similar experiences and challenges as a Black
student at a predominantly White school. She attributes her ability to cope to her close
friendships and a supportive RHD at Ujamaa. Living there helped her to cope with her
challenges:

Well, I would say that it kept me sane, it kept me whole, it kept me connected...Sane,
because I realized that it became home, the place of safety that we would come to [in
order to] be able to go out and engage and battle in the rest of the world and that was so
very much needed.

Coming from a segregated neighborhood in the Southwest side of Chicago, Philip had
difficulty finding his niche in an environment like Cornell. He enjoyed the comforts of being
around like-minded individuals, but he admits to wondering whether he used it as a way to avoid
getting to know other people. He also wonders if he would have been more prepared to deal
with other populations in the "real world" if he was forced to interact with them. However he
also mentioned that he viewed all of Cornell to be a microcosm of the "real world". Philip
acknowledges that the "safety net" that Ujamaa provided probably influenced his interest in
meeting people of other backgrounds, but he valued the experience because he created a positive
environment in the midst of a difficult one:
I loved my experience living in Uj. I loved it. It was needed and warranted. Could I also have gained that experience not living there? I don't know. It's just like I probably would have ended up spending most of my time there. At the same time, sort of these forced interactions, not being in a predominately Black environment would have probably opened up new experiences and relationships with people.

**Joining cultural or fraternal groups with similar interests for comfort**

In order to feel part of the campus, most ethnic and cultural groups create their own academic, social, cultural and political organizations. This is usually in response to a need for support from others who can understand and identify with their concerns. Some participants just wanted to be able to identify with others that had a similar interest and a similar background. Some activities included Greek-letter organizations, career-based organizations, spiritual groups and singing groups. Spirituality seemed to play an important role to help as a coping mechanism for a difficult environment.

There were clearly campus-wide organizations which existed that served similar roles, but Black students felt the need to have their own groups instead of joining the campus-wide groups. It seems that most of the participants felt that their concerns were unique to the concerns of majority students and needed to have a safe space to deal with these issues. There was a 'shared experience' amongst Black students. The participants seemed to be looking for something familiar. Jesse, Harriet, Robert, and Philip all mentioned the benefits of joining a Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) as part of their outlet and the close bonds that were developed. Harriet, Kirk and Bessie chose to nurture their spiritual interests by joining a gospel choir.
Jesse joined Alpha Phi Alpha in order to bond with like-minded individuals. Alpha Phi Alpha was the first Black Greek-letter intercollegiate fraternity in the United States founded on Cornell’s campus in 1906 initially created as a Black men's literary and support group. The purpose of the organization is to foster strong bonds between men of African descent who faced racial prejudice. The organization combines social purpose with social action. Jesse wanted to be part of the brotherhood:

I just had more relationships with African Americans at Cornell than I did with majority students...As far as my pledge interest, and subsequently being initiated by Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, a couple of my close friends were in the frat. They spoke good things of it, and I thought that it would be nice to join and be part of the brotherhood that was for us.

Harriet found solace in pledging Delta Sigma Theta, a Black Greek-letter sorority dedicated to public service, which was founded in 1913. One of her really good friends, who was a Black Cuban, decided to pledge with her. She also sang in Pamoja-Ni gospel choir. Harriet talks about the importance of community in an isolated environment:

I think that Blacks who wind up going to Cornell, in part because we have this shared experience of being in an isolated environment. I think all of us grow, in part as a result of figuring out how to deal with whatever challenges come up, the social and cultural challenges, and I think that that winds up bonding us as a community.... One of my really good friends, who's a Black Cuban, we decided to pledge Delta. I was also in Pamoja-Ni. It's definitely the people... That's what has maintained my connection with Cornell.
Robert was a member of the Black Biomedical and Technical Association (BBMTA), which is a professional organization for students of color interested in entering the health professions. Coming from Canada, Robert was unfamiliar with BGLOs until he arrived at Cornell. He decided to join Alpha Phi Alpha. The organization has had a great impact on his undergraduate experiences and his adult life. He maintains strong relationships with his fraternity brothers to this day. Robert mentions:

The fraternal bond is such a strong bond. When I go to a city I usually end up hooking up with one of my fraternity brothers for drinks or dinner, or we get together, at least annually, if not more. I stay close with them a lot. I think that was all consuming in a lot of ways.

Kirk's father was a minister, so spirituality is important to him. Kirk sang with Pamoja-Ni gospel choir to be close to his faith and others who had similar interests. He joined the choir when he heard some of the members singing in one of the study lounges in Ujamaa. Kirk talks about his first experience with Pamoja-Ni:

Definitely Pamoja-Ni and Festival of Black Gospel were almost no brainer. I grew up in the church. My father was a minister so that was almost like the natural thing for me to … I had gone into my room and was kind of sitting there and I heard these people singing. I was like wow that really sounds great. After a while I realized that I was not listening to a recording. I found myself getting up out of my room and walking out. Pamoja-Ni was right there rehearsing in the lounge. That was the first group I got into and then everything kind of grew out of that. It was like home.
At first, he wasn't sure what he was hearing was live, but it "moved" him. Kirk considered himself a "sheltered kid". He did not spend much time in groups, but he saw Pamoja-Ni as an opportunity to change that. It was an activity that was very important to him. Kirk also helped to create an organization called MOAPP, the Minority Organization for Architecture, Art and Planning because he was concerned that there were not enough Black and Latino students in the field of architecture. It was also an opportunity to spend time with familiar people:

They were places where I felt I can best make a contribution. Then the organization for AAP that came later when I started to be concerned about the fact that there were not very many Black or basically students of color like Hispanics from the Caribbean getting into the architecture program. Asians were also pretty privileged so we started the organization within the school to deal with the director of minority affairs for architecture, art and planning at the time. To make our concerns known and we were able to get more students of color from lower social economic back grounds in to the school of architecture, art and planning...

It was about familiarity.

Bessie struggled academically and dealt with depression, but even through her difficulty, she felt compelled to help others. She identified with her peers who had similar experiences and challenges as a Black student at a predominantly White school. Her bond with the institution was born through struggle and her sense of community at Ujamaa and Wari House (a Black women's cooperative). She also held onto her faith through participating in the gospel choir. Helping others allowed her to help herself. These experiences minimized her depression:

I was a part of How Excellent gospel choir [and] Baraka Kwa Wimbo, which is an acapella gospel group. With Wanawake Wa Wari it became a way of, in a way
solidifying who I was, as that, I guess, warrior woman, to be involved in the home, not just living there but eventually becoming the house mother.

Philip had difficulty identifying with other Black students at Cornell because of the cultural and financial differences. He struggled to find other Black men dealing with similar issues. He decided to create an organization to help other Black men struggling with some of the same issues. He also was able to connect with other Black men through his involvement with a BGLO:

My work study job was as an assistant to the [director of minority affairs] and so I helped him out with his research in different aspects. We were looking at graduation rates and attrition rates for men of color on campus. He had tasked me to try and figure out something to address it. Part of that was ... [an organization for diverse men] developed from that. Just a feeling of wanting to share my experience with other people struggling like me and then see who else out there could use the help... I was involved in a lot of community service activities and also part of a fraternity.

**Spending significant time at cultural centers on campus or with other Black students**

Campus cultural centers are an important way for universities to validate the experiences and interests of diverse student groups. These centers provide resources, organize culturally relevant activities and serve as hubs of support for students of color at PWIs. Creating opportunities for people of similar backgrounds to share their experiences and common history seemed to help with developing a sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution. Jocelyn, Alfreda and Robert did not live in Ujamaa, but spoke about how important the institution was to them.
Malcolm was very involved in the political aspects of the campus based on his civil rights interests. The Black Students Association was a natural choice for him. He also had a strong interest in listening to speeches, so the Speakers' Bureau, which was formed after the Willard Straight Hall Takeover, was also a draw. Malcolm describes his undergraduate experience as the "Black Cornell". In a sense, he has created his own version of Cornell that allows him to feel a part of an otherwise homogenous campus culture.

Langston described himself as a "loner" when he first arrived at Cornell. It seems that spending time in various cultural centers helped him to truly embrace his college experience. He did not know how to socialize with others. He spent most of his time in class or working for a Cornell newspaper. He began socializing with students after he took a class at the Africana Center and when he became one of the charter residents of Ujamaa. The more time he spent with other Black students, the more comfortable he felt. He even enjoyed spending time with alumni from different classes who had similar experiences to his. Once he allowed himself to branch out and meet other Black students with similar experiences, he described his Cornell experience as "gratifying":

I felt myself to be pretty much a loner...By the end it was gratifying in that what I learned, educationally, the connections I made, both personal and professional. Especially the personal relationships. I enjoyed my time. My relationships with other Black students who have gone to Cornell who were there with me and who I know just because we had that shared experience even if we weren't there at the same time. That has become very important to me... For me then, engaging with Blackness at Cornell through the Africana Center was more comfortable than either through say, parties or BSA meetings. From taking a class at Africana in
the Spring of my first year to being one of the charter residents of Ujamaa in my senior year, it was steps in. I was sort of slowly finding my comfort level within.

Jocelyn did not live in Ujamaa, but she spent a significant amount of time there. Even though she was an RA in another building which allowed her to meet students of various backgrounds, she still came back to Ujamaa in order to spend time with students that shared her experience as a person of African descent. She especially enjoyed spending time with other Black students who were interested in medicine:

Being able to be with other Black students who were going through the same experience, especially as it relates to going into medicine...That's what kept me connected to Cornell.

Although Robert did not participate in the COSEP pre-matriculation program, he still made an effort to spend time with students who did. He mentioned that COSEP, "has a warm place in his heart". He also participated in events that were sponsored through the office that managed the program. The awards he received through the program meant a great deal to him. Robert did not live in Ujamaa but spent time there so that he could socialize with other Black students. He also spent a significant amount of time at the Africana Center.

Alfreda received a lot of support from the Ujamaa community. She believed that the RHD had the strong ability to always hire staff that were committed to having an influence on your life in a positive way. She stated that, "The staff didn't just focus on rules, they were concerned about the well-being of members in the community". The interaction that she had in Ujamaa helped her cope with her challenges:

All of us felt connected there...Like I said, I never lived there, but I always knew [the RHD] was a resource if we needed help or anything. Being a part of that
community and all the events and issues and things that we did as a community, that really helped me get through being at Cornell and dealing with whatever issues that came up.

One thing that Marcus stated that he learned through his experience is the importance of supporting and giving back to his community. He views institutions like Africana and Ujamaa as integral parts of his community. He particularly credits his hall director for such a positive experience.

My RHD was a phenomenal human being. If you were a janitor, RHD, president of the University, I felt that he would have treated me much the same way. I modeled many aspects of myself as an organizer, as a human being, on [him].

Conclusions. A significant part of one's undergraduate experiences are the friendships that are made. These friendships are born out of shared experiences. Each participant discussed how integral cultural centers and organizations were in enhancing their experiences. Living and spending time in an ethnic theme house contributed to that feeling of safety, not just physically but emotionally. Even those participants that did not live in an ethnic theme house mentioned the importance of the support that they received as members of the community. Staff who worked in these cultural centers helped Black students cope with difficult situations by showing compassion. Ethnic theme housing seems to provide a sense of home for Black students who feel isolated on campus. The Africana Center was important even for those students who never took a class. The ability to spend time with other students at the center was just as important in creating bonds. The COSEP program also provided an opportunity for bonding, even for those students who did not participate directly. Organizations and cultural centers provide a forum for Black students to study and be immersed in their own identity and learn more about their history
and culture. This is something that is lacking in the classroom and in the overall campus environment.

In order to cope with feelings of isolation on campus, Black students have found ways to create spaces on campus that help them to feel connected to the campus environment. These students either joined cultural or professional groups that already existed or created their own groups when a gap existed. The bonds created within BGLOs also served as a coping mechanism for Black students at a PWI. This seemed to be especially true for Black males. These organizations as well as others assist with academic and moral support. Several participants discussed the importance of having a spiritual connection to others. Joining a gospel choir provided an outlet for those students seeking this connection. This also creates a sense of familiarity and ties Black students back to their home or culture of origin. These comforts of home are important for the satisfaction and retention of Black students at PWIs. The next superordinate theme will focus on the impact of faculty relationships on the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni from Cornell.

**Influence of faculty relationships on student experiences**

The following superordinate theme discusses the impact of the types of faculty relationships on the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni. Two subthemes have been identified. The first subtheme looks at negative interactions, feelings of indifference and distrust towards White faculty. Several participants had difficulty relating to their professors because of their different backgrounds. Some participants felt intimidated or had preconceived notions of their White professors. Other participants cited examples of racial bias and stereotyping in the classroom, which led to an unbalanced curriculum and lack of academic support for Black students. The second theme discusses significant relationships and/ or positive interactions with
Black or White faculty. Participants mentioned how positive interactions with both Black and White faculty contributed to a supportive environment and positive memories of the campus. These positive interactions were due to faculty who took an interest in the lives of their students outside of the classroom and spent time getting to know them on a more personal level.

**Negative interactions, feelings of indifference and distrust towards White faculty**

Some students do not make an effort to form relationships with their faculty for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is due to the position of power and authority that the faculty person holds, which can be intimidating for a student. Other times it can be due to pre-conceived notions of not being able to relate to the professor. Issues of race can make these relationships even more challenging. Langston and Jesse, who are both faculty members now, reflected on their experiences as students and were able to see their undergraduate relationships with faculty through a different lens. They both realized that based on how the student perceives the professor, that perception will dictate the extent to which the student will make a concerted effort to engage with the professor.

Langston talked about the irony of being a professor in his current field after avoiding faculty members as an undergraduate student. He mentioned how difficult it was to relate to his faculty advisor because he seemed so "ancient". Langston recalled that as an advisor, he gave him very little advice. Langton stated that they seemed to have a "caricature relationship". He was a student in an old, musty book-lined office, waiting for the faculty member to impart his years of wisdom. Langston never felt like he was being "mentored in any meaningful way". He actually felt as if his faculty advisor made very little effort to get to know him. However, Langston also admits that he did not do all that he could to facilitate the relationship either.
Looking back, I realize [the relationship] was not what it should have been and I take responsibility for that. Not knowing, I spent the last thirty years advising and mentoring students on how they should interact with faculty and all the things that I failed to do myself. My [faculty advisor and I] had a few pleasant conversations, but not much of a relationship.

Jesse felt intimidated by his professors and avoided interacting with them. He put his professors on a pedestal where he saw them as unreachable. He also assumed that his White professors wouldn't go out of their way to help him if he asked questions. Jesse rarely used office hours and when he did, he only spoke to the teaching assistants. Now as a professor, he also sees the irony in his behavior. Jesse states:

I just didn’t feel comfortable stepping to them and saying, I’m having this problem here can you help me out. Which I guess makes it feel ironic that I’m [teaching] now.

Bessie did not make any attempts to interact with White faculty inside or outside of the classroom because she did not feel that she could not relate to them. She stated that she was "probably invisible to most of my non-Africana faculty". According to her, the only thing they had in common was that they were in the same place. She also states:

I had already positioned myself to really do the work and I did not need their support like that so there was nothing that led me to want to draw a closer bond. I did not necessarily see too much more value of them in my life beyond the instruction that they gave in the classroom.

Sometimes stereotyping can interfere with the ability to build open and trusting relationships. These stereotypes can lead to false perceptions and can be harmful to a student's
ability to achieve their goals. Harriet mentioned an instance where her professor had low expectations for Black students and stated his bias through coded language in class:

So many of us had this same experience because apparently the same professor used this line every time to talk about who he didn't think would make it from the urban area. He didn't say Black, he said, "This is very rigorous and about 70% wind up dropping out. So those of you from the urban areas, I have found are not prepared for this class."

Harriet stated that this was one of her worst experiences. She felt that her White professors were not necessarily racist, but were definitely indifferent.

One of Jocelyn's professors actually taught false information in class based on racial stereotypes and provided limited sources from non-White authors. She mentioned that his actions were not subtle and that she considered the comment racist:

I remember a specific incident in my History of Biology course. The professor talked about the brain of Blacks versus Whites, and I was one of two Blacks that were in the class. The racism would come out because he would talk about all these lies that were in the sciences, but talk about them as if...well if we could not prove it; maybe there was some sense for them to be there because somebody actually said it. The only Black person he ever quoted was Thomas Sowell.

Another one of Jocelyn's professors was racially selective in terms of who she provided moral and academic support. Jocelyn stated, "Here's this person who is at a point where she can helpful, and was not." She was frustrated by the professor's comments:

I think I was actually still taking a Biochem course and initially I was not doing as well as I could, but she was very much not supportive and really being very
dismissive saying "Well if you can't handle this then why would you even consider going to medical school". I believe this was directly racist because I saw what she did with White students versus Black, and what she said. Jocelyn made every effort to prove to the professor that she was wrong. She ultimately did very well in the course and went back to the professor just to show her how well she did.

Kirk had a professor who made assumptions about his motivation due to his inability to afford academic supplies. He was not accustomed to working with low income students and did not understand the challenges these students faced in college. He tried to send Kirk to the campus store to buy supplies and noticed that instead of going to the store, Kirk would borrow materials from his classmates or go without:

They couldn’t relate to students who weren’t from wealthy White families. [The professor] says, “You didn’t seem like you cared about your preparedness for class, you never got the stuff you needed.” I was like, “I did not have money for that. My mother didn’t send me money. What I had through financial aid as far as left over cash was what I had. He kind of sat there and he looked at me like a light bulb had gone on his head and he was like, “oh.”

One of Kirk's other professors, in an attempt to be supportive, actually embarrassed Kirk and other Black classmates. His professor gathered all the freshmen at the end of class and said, “I would like all the COSEP students to stay later because I know you guys have special needs. I want to sit down with you and go over how we can help you all.” Kirk was one of three COSEP students in the class was embarrassed for being singled out. After Kirk and the other COSEP students approached the professor and explained the purpose of the program, the professor states:
“Wow, I had no idea that this is the way COSEP works and that you all aren’t intellectually disadvantaged. You all are just, you don’t have money like these other kids in here have.”

Kirk believes that his White professors did not know how to relate to students of color who did not fit the mold of a "typical" Cornell student.

Alfreda could not relate to any of her animal science faculty because of the drastic difference in background. She stated that the faculty did not make her or any of the other Black animal science majors feel welcome. She mentioned that the faculty was a homogeneous group of people, coming from farm lands in places like Australia or New Zealand. According to Alfreda, one of her faculty members tried to sabotage her chances of getting a scholarship by writing her a poor recommendation letter:

I did not have a very good relationship with my animal science professors. I remember applying to a scholarship and asking for a letter of recommendation from my [advisor]. He agreed, "sure I'll write you a letter of recommendation!" I picked [the letter] up from his office...When I left, I held it up to the light [to read it]. He said the most horrible things about me...He said I was an average student at best, that I probably wouldn't be a good fit for veterinary school.

Alfreda was upset that her professor would try to destroy her chances of winning a scholarship instead of just saying that he could not write a strong letter on her behalf. She felt that African-American students were not welcome in the animal science department. She could not build any "deep" relationships with White faculty.
Marcus acknowledged that he didn't always see eye to eye with his White professors, especially due to the position of power that faculty held, but he treated it as a learning experience. He felt that he was often on "opposing sides of the table":

All of these interactions shaped a great understanding of how I engaged what I perceived to be power. It gives me a fuller understanding of how to assert my own power. Even if they were in negative situations, I gleaned some sort of lesson from the interactions because of them. But yeah, many of the professors who did not find potential in me were the ones that were not of African descent.

**Significant relationships and/or positive interactions with Black or White faculty**

Although relationships with faculty can be quite intimidating, Black students seem to feel more comfortable building relationships with Black faculty because they can identify racially and some Black faculty members tend to make an effort to reach out to Black students to help them navigate at a PWI.

Langston mentioned close relationships with Black faculty not only in the Africana Center, but also in the humanities department in the College of Arts and Sciences. His first meaningful interaction was with a faculty member in the Africana Center. He built a relationship with a Black female faculty member who taught a Black theater class. There were a few other Black faculty members that Langton had in the English department and in the social sciences. One of his professors ran an outreach program in downtown Ithaca, Southside Community Center. His most memorable professor was possibly the first Black tenured professor in the English department.
Jocelyn was very close to the associate dean in her college. She still has a strong relationship with this individual. Jocelyn also named several faculty members in the Africana department that she felt were supportive of her endeavors:

My dean (a Black female), she was great. She became more than simply a dean, but actually a family member.

It is not unusual for Black faculty members to have some connection to the same neighborhoods as Black students. Several of the Black faculty members were from urban areas before moving to Ithaca. Robert lived in the same building as one of his professors who was originally from New York. He was able to develop a relationship with him outside of the classroom:

A couple of [faculty] had a lasting impact on my life. I lived 15 years in the same building as [a Black faculty member] in Harlem, so I would see [him] regularly and say hello. Every once in a while have breakfast with him. But all the professors I saw or maintained any relationship with were all Africana professors.

Like Robert, Marcus had strong relationships with faculty at the Africana Center. They were supportive and made special efforts to help Black students succeed. He described the welcoming nature of the Africana faculty and the amount of commitment they had to students whether they took a course in the department or not:

I identified with several professors, especially in the Africana Center. The Africana professors I encountered, whether I was in their class or not, whether I was a participant in their course or not. If I walked the hallways while they were giving a class, [a professor] would ask me to come sit in front and I was happy to take in and sometimes participate in his course, despite not being in the course.
Although there seems to be a preference for Black students to build close relationships with faculty that look like them, it is important to recognize that Black students are able to build close relationships with faculty of other backgrounds as well. For this to happen, there has to be a mutual level of trust and openness. The faculty member should have a genuine interest in the goals and aspirations of the student. It is also helpful for the faculty member to invest time in learning more about the student's background and interests.

Malcolm was able to build a relationship with one of his White professors after he realized that the professor took an interest in the struggle of Black people during the civil rights movement. The professor extended himself to Malcolm and genuinely had Malcolm's best interest at heart. Malcolm describes his experience while having dinner at the professor's home:

He had a very progressive attitude as it came to race relations. As we spoke through the evening, I discovered that he was unlike whom I had any preconceptions of being dissociated from Black people. He seemed to be engaged.

Harriet noted that there were some White faculty members who tried to connect with her because she was doing well academically. They would say to her, "You're doing well. You're getting A's. You're clever. What do you wanna do?" She admits that the relationship was one way because she did not make much of an effort to reciprocate:

There were those professors who took an interest, but I would say they took the interest. I'm not sure that I necessarily went out of my way to get to know professors, but just by virtue of being in a small classroom environment and doing well, I got to know them.
Jocelyn enjoyed meeting people of diverse backgrounds while taking some courses that she usually would not have considered. Through this process, she interacted with supportive faculty of different backgrounds.

A lot of faculty I found to be very supportive. It's not only Black faculty, but also White faculty. There were some, again, where just taking some obscure courses that allowed me to meet up with people who just were in a different realm of thinking that I never would have met or been introduced to outside of that.

Marcus believes that relationships with majority faculty members are developed based on the perceptions they have of the student. The faculty that he engaged with showed a genuine interest in him as a person.

The best example I could give, would be professors like [my White sociology professor]. [He] was someone who displayed a need to invest in my success...who understood and saw and felt my potential and was interested in being a part of molding who I am today.

**Conclusions.** Faculty relationships play an important role in undergraduate student experiences. Perceptions developed by the student and the faculty member often affect the extent of the relationship. If the professor has a certain perception of the student, it may also affect the effort that professor makes in trying to engage the student. The same applies to the student and their perception of the faculty member. This is true across all decades. All of the participants in this section felt that it was important to be able to relate to their professors on some level. Unfortunately, stereotypes and misconceptions often hindered the ability for White faculty to have significant relationships with Black students. If a Black student was made to feel different or inferior to their classmates, intentional or unintentional, they were unable to trust or
seek support from that faculty person. These stereotypes also impact the way faculty teach their curricula and the texts used in the classroom, which ultimately affects all students.

Black students developed close relationships with faculty who had a genuine concern for their well-being and success regardless of their racial background. It is important for the professor to take an interest in the student’s background and interests outside of the classroom. However, it was easier for Black students to develop these relationships with faculty that looked like them and had a shared experience and background. The next superordinate theme addresses the various benefits and challenges that Black alumni experienced while they were students at a prestigious institution.

**Appreciation for and challenges of attending Cornell University**

The following superordinate theme discusses the major challenges that Black alumni faced while attending a prestigious, Ivy League university and their appreciation for their undergraduate experience. Two subthemes have been identified. The first subtheme focuses on the academic and financial challenges specific to this type of institution, which had a significant impact on the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni. Although participants stated that these challenges were beneficial because of the careers gains received upon graduation, these challenges may have affected their self esteem and coping abilities. The second subtheme discusses the appreciation for Cornell and the possible opportunities it provided. Participants felt grateful for the opportunities afforded them for attending an institution like Cornell and viewed it as a learning experience and a lesson in personal growth.

**Impact of financial or academic concerns**

A significant aspect of the undergraduate experience is the ability to pay for it. A student's undergraduate experience can be drastically different based on his or her socio-
economic status. Jesse chose to attend Cornell because it offered the best financial aid package of all the schools where he applied. Attending an Ivy League institution was important to him, especially one with a highly reputable engineering program.

Most importantly as far as going [to Cornell], ultimately their financial package was more favorable than most of the other schools that accepted me.

Jocelyn's undergraduate experience was difficult due to her lack of financial stability. She was still grateful for her experiences because they were critical to her development. This experience also influenced her decision to become a resident advisor since the position offered free housing and food.

There was points where I'd think I was just starving 'cause I didn't have any money to actually be able to afford to eat... I was a resident advisor for like a year or so... Sundays and Saturdays, there would be dinner or desserts or something that's cooked in the communal kitchen, and so [I] would hang out there... All of that helped me to form where I'm at now. For that I'm always grateful.

Robert moved to a different part of campus in order to become an RA because of the financial benefits. His reason for choosing Cornell was based on the scholarship he received. Even though he had never visited the campus prior to being accepted, he was happy with his decision to attend.

[A friend of mine], he and I became roommates, and we moved up to North Campus to High Rise 5. After those choices my RA rolls were also just to help with cost. I was a pretty active RA, but the cost savings was a big part of that...I had an 800 on my math SAT, which got me a scholarship to Cornell. It was the best thing that ever happened.
Kirk could not afford to attend college without a full financial aid package. His family did not have money to supplement his expenses. He talked about the financial challenges that he faced while applying to college:

We were short on cash so my mother’s best friend who’s daughter didn’t get in lent my mother the money for me to fill out the application. When I got accepted, she gave me the matriculation fee as a high school graduation gift.

Kirk compares his experience to White students in his class by saying, "I went to school with sons and daughters and nephews and nieces of people who I had read about in architecture journals, yet they had somebody [like me] coming to class who couldn’t stay awake because I was up worrying about financial aid. I couldn't afford my supplies."

Bessie talked about how important living in Ujamaa was to her. She often struggled to afford food. Since the theme of Ujamaa is cooperative economics, she received assistance from other members of the community in order to secure food:

It kept me alive. Alive, because I remember there were times when I didn't necessarily have enough money for food and because of having my friends in the upper classes and having that community, I knew that I was going to be fed.

Philip grew up in a low income, urban area of Chicago. His experience was similar to Kirk and Bessie yet he felt alone in his dilemma. He had difficulty identifying with other students, both Black and White because of his economic background. He states:

I had a hard time finding people who related to my... who were Black and also related to my impoverished upbringing. They would be Black but then they would have a different upbringing so we couldn't relate on that level but we could relate culturally.
Other important aspects of the undergraduate experience are the academic challenges that students face which make it difficult to graduate. Several participants talked about their disappointment with their weak academic performance or their financial difficulty and the effect it had on their undergraduate experience. Langston described his experience as traumatic, coming from his high school where he had strong grades, and attending a competitive college where he was no longer at the top of his class. Even through this experience, he still appreciated the opportunity to attend Cornell because of its reputation:

All the first-year student students in places like that have been among the best where they were and then just sort of going through that adjustment and trauma of no longer being special in that way academically. I had taken a couple of academic hits in the first year, which I was unused to. I still appreciated Cornell for its educational reputation.

Jesse also experienced academic difficulty, but he was still successful in his career due to the skills that he learned while attending Cornell and his ability to leverage the reputation of the institution:

My undergraduate experience, academically, was challenging. It would’ve been nice to have better success academically, but as a result of that I wouldn’t regret the decision to go because I did get an opportunity to use my Cornell experience as a springboard and background to a good professional career in a constructive management real estate development and now academia.

Alfreda had a challenging academic experience with little support in her major. She used her social life and community to help her cope. Looking back on her experience, she realized that she still loved her experience at Cornell, but mainly because she was able to survive the
experience. When she goes back to campus for CBAA reunion, she states that she is not excited to go back and visit the animal science building. She sees it as just a means to an end:

I didn't have a lot of support as one of 4 Black animal science majors in my year.

Overall, I love Cornell and actually at this last CBAA reunion I walked by the animal science building and it was more of a "I got through you! Let me go back and hang out with my people."

Bessie suffered from depression because of her academic experience. Her experience was different from Alfreda's in that Bessie had support but didn't know how to access it. She blamed herself for not doing well:

That's where I guess, the depression came in. I had given up by the time I had gotten to the end of my sophomore year, feeling like I couldn't cut it. Feeling like I just didn't know how to be there and not wanting to be there anymore...Just feeling, even though I had good support there, I did not necessarily know how to reach out and get it.

Bessie's time away from the institution during her academic dismissal helped her appreciate the support she received from her friends and mentor while there. She admitted that her Cornell experience helped her to become an adult:

It's a wonderful institution and I think that there's a lot to be had there besides just a quality education. I think it can give you quality life experiences and learning and growing, in a way I would say learning to be an adult.

Philip was disappointed in his academic achievement at Cornell. Like Bessie, he also blamed himself for not doing as well as he thought he was capable of doing. Although he was far from the only one, he felt isolated in his experience.
I struggled to graduate. I felt like I was more capable then what showed through my grades, through my experience...I loaded on too many credits. From there it was a struggle to try to change... I've always been pretty strong academically... but at Cornell it was just a whole 'nother beast... A lot of times it really felt like I was the only one experiencing that and feeling so much like an outsider.

**Appreciation for Cornell and the possible opportunities it provided**

Quite often, students choose their college based on its reputation and the strength of its curriculum. The participants mentioned the importance of earning a Cornell degree. The majority of these participants happened to be men, which suggests that they may be more concerned with reputation than the women in this study. This is not to say that the women in this study were not concerned with the school's reputation, but it was not as prevalent during the interviews.

Malcolm mentioned that his Cornell education helped to prepare him for medical school. He felt like his degree made him equal to everyone else and gave him the confidence to achieve his goals:

> I felt just as prepared as any other single individual sitting in that hundred person entering class. I have to credit my undergraduate experience at Cornell with giving me that sense of confidence, that sense of oh I can do this, oh I know how to study.

Jesse stated that his Cornell degree was so influential that he was accepted to his doctoral program without the required master's degree. The skills and preparation that he received, helped him meet the doctoral program's expectations. He also received successful career opportunities, that he may not have normally had access to as a Black man:
The fact that I had an engineering background from Cornell, they thought that I would be capable of managing the workload without that Master's background in a doctoral program. I must have been able to confirm their assumptions because I did successfully complete it. ... I feel the school, as a result of attending there, gave me opportunities where all other things being equal I might not have been considered for certain things if I did not have the Cornell degree to back me up.

Harriet appreciated her experience at Cornell due to the opportunities she received through her college. She also had a unique connection to the institution because her daughter is now a student there. She states:

Since I've graduated and I've been out for so long, I have expanded my thinking about Cornell and I appreciate it now in a way that I did not appreciate it when I was younger. I think I appreciate it more holistically now than I did. I appreciate my college and all that it had to offer...I think Cornell, it's what you make of it and again, I also have the benefit of being able to appreciate it through my daughter's eyes, which is a whole 'nother conversation.

Jocelyn talked about how much she benefitted from her international experience while attending Cornell. Currently she travels around the world as a physician caring for patients that can't get access to healthcare. She noted that there were people from around the world that she would not have had access to if it weren't for her time at the institution:

I would have to say there was another point of ... that's international, where I'm seeing people from all around the world. That was another experience that came from Cornell. Taking classes that I would never have taken, or never would have
thought about, and having that opportunity to do that was something that helped
to form where I'm at now. It secured my purpose as a physician.

Kirk felt connected to Cornell because of the pride of graduating from a prestigious
institution. Similar to Jesse, he believed that having Cornell on his resume helped to open doors
to several career opportunities that he may not had access to as a Black male:

There have been a lot of doors opened for me, especially interviewing and they see
that Cornell on the resume now when I get to the interviews and they have actually
seen me face to face, that whole adjustment period because I know they were
already expecting somebody else but I got my foot on the door a lot of times I
think because of that school.

Like Jesse and Kirk, Philip noticed that people responded to him in a certain way
because he attended Cornell. He also received access to opportunities because of his
Cornell degree. Philip stated his connection to Cornell was more about its reputation
than nostalgia.

Seeing others talk about their experiences with college and just Cornell's name
and the doors that had opened; how people react and respond when you say you're
an alum from Cornell. That kind of connected me more with it than the nostalgia
of just thinking about that time.

Conclusions. Financial challenges, academic difficulties and institutional reputation at a
prestigious institution can have lasting effects on the experiences of Black students. Financial
challenges can interfere with the ability to take advantage of certain opportunities, limit the
chance to interface with more affluent classmates or cause stress that can distract them from
favorable academic achievement. It can also impact decisions such as living preferences. For
example, four of the participants chose to be resident advisors in order to receive financial benefits even though the positions required a great deal of time and commitment. Academic difficulties can lead to depression, dissatisfaction with one's undergraduate experience or a feeling of insecurity. These feelings can affect future engagement as alumni.

In this study, it appears that institutional reputation is very important to Black alumni, particularly Black men. Due to historical inequities in the job market, it is helpful for Black men to have an Ivy League education listed on their resume to help get past some of the racial barriers. This suggests that there is still a high level of bias in certain career fields based on race and combined with elitism. An Ivy League education is also helpful in gaining critical skills that will make Black males more attractive while in the job market and when applying to other degree-granting programs. For the women in this study, their appreciation had less to do with their ability to leverage a career using Cornell's reputation. The Black women in this study did not seem to express the same concerns with racial bias in the job market or graduate school application process as the men. For Black men it would seem that this would cause added pressure to perform well and graduate in order to be successful in their potential careers. The next superordinate theme focuses on the level of alumni engagement of Black alumni from Cornell.

**Limited alumni engagement due to campus experience**

This subordinate theme somewhat synthesizes all of the undergraduate experiences expressed by Black alumni and demonstrates the impact that it may have had on their past, present and future alumni engagement. Three subthemes have been identified. The first subtheme focuses on the fact that Black alumni tended to identify with affinity groups or career based activities when they are engaged with the institution. These activities had a direct benefit
for Black alumni because they were either culturally relevant or provided an opportunity to network with others to advance in their careers. Black alumni also expressed that they had stronger bonds with individuals in their affinity group. The second subtheme highlights the fact that most Black alumni did not attend their class reunion. This was often due to the fact that they did not identify with their classmates or had vastly different interests. The third subtheme shows that most Black alumni were only engaged with the institution in order to improve the experiences of other like-minded individuals. This type of engagement with the university was based on the interest of Black alumni in connecting with current students in order to create a positive environment for them to thrive on campus. Quite often Black alumni felt the need to make sure that current students did not face the same struggles that they did as students.

**Identifying mainly with alumni affinity groups or career based events**

Some Black alumni choose to identify with Cornell mainly through their affiliation with affinity groups or career activities. Without these organizations, it is likely, that they would not be engaged at all. Malcolm attended the CBAA reunion because he wanted to connect with others who have similar interests. He enjoyed the music, the camaraderie and the ability to meet people from different classes. He was happy to see that the population of Black students continued to increase after he graduated. His connection to Cornell is directly tied to his connection with other CBAA members:

I always gravitate towards the CBAA because it was the feeling of family. We had the same culture. We shared the same interests, and I had wonderful interactions with brothers and sisters, especially those in classes after mine.
Jesse looked forward to seeing his friends and participating in events at the CBAA reunion. He was also connected to the university as an alumnus by participating in career events based on his interests:

Other than CBAA events and the periodic dues submissions, occasionally I’ll go to some [Cornell Club of Washington] events in D.C., but other than that I have not [been engaged]. A couple of the events that I went to were real estate related, and real estate and finance are my study interests when I pursued by PhD.

As an alumna, Harriet identified with the university through an all woman's affinity group. She also participated in the University Council. Harriet chose to join these organizations to advance herself and to represent CBAA in order to address the needs of other Black alumni and future students, specifically as it pertained to issues such as middle class families and financial aid. She did not feel like Cornell sincerely cared about Black alumni so she decided that her involvement as an alumna should suit her needs and the needs of her community. She states:

Again, all they want is our money... I felt the need to use the Council and even use PCCW as a forum to represent CBAA or represent our perspective on the Council...Specifically PCCW, there's a personal benefit from relationships with other really successful, influential, powerful women period. You never know who you're going to know from a career perspective or whatever.

Similar to Malcolm, Marcus also attended a CBAA reunion because he believed there would be events that were relevant to his interests, unlike the class reunions:
The CBAA reunions were always, well not always, but I felt that they represented a lot of my interests. Something that I didn't think the broader population did as the years passed.

Philip attended CBAA for the same reasons he lived in Ujamaa, he wanted to spend time with Black people because he would have a better experience than going to his class reunion:

To meet up with folks, to reconnect, to explore, and just socialize and have a good time. I just relate my experience at Cornell with being around Black folks. That's what I felt comfortable with.

**Lack of interest in attending a class reunion**

Several participants admitted that they had very little, if any, interaction with students in their class and for that reason decided not to attend their class reunion. Malcolm did not feel connected to his class and did not think he would remember anyone:

As it relates to my class, again there's a disconnect with me and the class.

Attending a class reunion, I wouldn't know a single soul.

Harriet could not identify with her classmates. She was in a small program and there were very few students with a similar background. She wasn't even sure what would connect her to her classmates since they had nothing in common:

Well my own class reunion, there was no question. I wouldn't do that because I had not formed any relationships with very many people in my class. I think that ... because the class is predominately White, there weren't that many Black people in my class actually. I don't feel an affinity to my class at all.

Kirk mentioned that his closest friends who were Black refused to come back to Cornell. Although they had great experiences with each other, his friends did not have a good relationship
with the university. He wasn't close to his other classmates, so he chose not to go to his class reunion:

I can’t relate to the whole class thing. I didn’t know anyone from [my] class. I knew either the people who lived in Ujamaa or in Pamoja-Ni or in BSU or some of the other organizations.

Marcus was disenchanted with Cornell because he felt that they were not truly committed to supporting students of color. He was upset that Cornell tried to eliminate support programs for students of color and institutions such as Ujamaa and the Africana Center. This made Marcus feel less connected to the Cornell. He decided that if Cornell was not invested in creating relevant programming, then he would not be interested in attending his class reunion:

I just didn’t feel like they cared about what I loved and cherished about Cornell. I felt instead of strengthening these institutions, they were being dismantled and that really discouraged me to participate in class reunions.

Since Bessie had to take time off from school, she is disconnected from the class that she entered. She also felt closer to the friends that she made during the COSEP summer program. Bessie also preferred the CBAA reunion to her class reunion because it was intergenerational:

I would see more of [my friends] at CBAA than if I went to just my class reunion because I also got to know so many people from so many different classes that the class reunion just wouldn't do it for me, it just wouldn't cut it.

Engaged to improve the experiences of other like-minded individuals

As we saw in the first subtheme, the Black alumni in this study who are engaged with Cornell are usually engaged through an affinity association in order to spend time with like-minded individuals. Those alumni who are also involved in other aspects of Cornell choose to
do so in order to address the needs of alumni of color and future students of color or to feel a part of the process of change through holding leadership roles.

Malcolm enjoyed being part of university council because it made him feel connected to Cornell. He had an active role in helping the university communicate its mission to other alumni and spent time with other campus leaders with similar goals. He was also involved with interviewing potential students. Now he is only engaged through CBAA. He states:

The most exciting and connectedness I felt was the Cornell University Council, which I was on for 3 years. It was a way of reinforcing the connectedness that alums would feel...There was a discussion around students, faculty, and around curriculum...At the present time, my only involvement is through CBAA.

Langston was also a member of university council and joined because of his active involvement with CBAA. He talked about how important it was to have intergenerational conversations with other Black alumni. Langston also discussed the impact on the experiences of Black students on campus when they have an opportunity to interact Black alumni:

I am on the University Council and that was a result of my participation with CBAA. One of the things that we made a point of from the beginning of CBAA, was the importance of that mentorship. How important it would have been for us to know and connect with people, 5, 10, 20 years ahead of us. But specifically to the lives and experiences of undergraduate students having people of color, Black people, actively engaged as alumni can also directly and beneficially impact their experiences while they are students and make it more likely that they themselves will continue to be active participants as alumni themselves.
Jocelyn was part of several affinity groups, but she used this opportunity to help increase the numbers of women and students of color on campus and to positively affect their experiences at Cornell. She also served as a mentor for Black students interested in medicine:

With BBMTA, coming up as an alum for the conferences every year to mentor Black students interested in medicine... I felt the connection, and wanting to see women of color, but no matter what, just the fact of pushing for women to be at Cornell, and providing a support mechanism there. I became an interviewer specifically asking for students of color to push as much as possible to get more students of color and to show support and be there as a mentor.

Alfreda is active in the Cornell Fresh program. The Fresh program is a career exploration program for Cornell freshmen that connects them with alumni sponsors to learn more about a career field of interest. Alfreda used this opportunity to mentor Black students who were interested in her field of pre-vet and animal sciences. She also participates in the annual Alvin Ailey Scholarship fundraiser sponsored by CBAA to raise money for Black students:

I definitely always avail myself to work with specifically African-American students who are pre-vet, animal science majors or otherwise, but who specifically have the intention to go to vet school because I just don't think there's enough support for those students.

Other than CBAA, Kirk was interested in helping with the organization that he created for architects of color. He was happy to know that the organization still existed since the 80s and that current students knew who he was:

I told myself that I was going to try to connect again with MOAAP because I was surprised the last time I was on campus that MOAAP actually still existed and there were kids who knew who I was because I was one of the founding members.
**Conclusions.** It seems that Black alumni are more likely to be engaged in alumni activities when there are a significant amount of people that look like them in attendance and when there are activities that are relevant to their interests planned during the event. Black alumni may also participate in activities that provide some type of benefit such as networking opportunities, career advancement or a platform to advocate for a particular agenda that is helpful to the Black community. Black alumni also enjoy participating in events that are intergenerational. It is less likely that Black alumni are engaged at a PWI simply because of nostalgia.

The majority of the Black alumni in this study chose to be involved with Cornell through their participation in affinity groups primarily because of a shared interest. Most of the Black alumni in this study showed little to no interest in class related activities, since they did not have strong relationships with their classmates as students. This is due to the inability to relate to the same interests as their classmates. They viewed their role as one of mentorship and support to current students of color.

This type of engagement suggests that if Black alumni are engaged with Cornell it is due to a personal obligation that they hold towards their community and others that share their experiences, not necessarily because of an obligation to Cornell. This is due in part to their undergraduate experiences of Black alumni and the level of commitment that Black alumni felt Cornell has made to support services that assist with the recruitment, retention and satisfaction of Black students on campus.

**Outliers**

During this study there were 2 participants that were interviewed that did not meet the specified criteria. Both of these participants attended not only the affinity reunion, but also a class reunion. They are being included in this session because some of their experiences also
shed light on the reasons why alumni choose to engage with the university. Outlier #1, Emma, graduated in the 2000s from the School of Hotel Administration and is from Belvidere, NJ. Outlier #2, Benjamin, graduated in the 2000s from the Architecture Art and Planning (AAP) college and is from Brentwood, NY. Both the hotel school and AAP are small college that creates a unique dynamic of bonding based on the specificity of the fields and the size of the class. Both Emma and Benjamin had a close relationship with their classmates and decided to go to their class reunion, however, the decision was based on whether other Black students decided to attend as well. They also participated in university-wide events for the same reason. Neither of them lived in Ujamaa but spent significant time there.

Benjamin stated that from his perspective, the younger classes did not identify the same way with CBAA the way the older classes did because of the history of social justice that created the organization. He states that many Black students still choose to spend time with each other, but feel more comfortable doing it with their class. Benjamin felt connected to Cornell through his relationships with other Black students. He was involved in minority organizations such as LINK which is a Black male empowerment organization. He was also a member of a BGLO. His major concern is that there are fewer administrators of color on campus and that the university keeps altering the services available for students of color. He mentioned that he is concerned about the "changes in Africana and the constant discussion around dismantling Ujamaa".

Emma participated in university-wide events and minority organizations. She discussed the microaggressions she faced while living in a traditional dorm. She stated that she developed a relationship with a White faculty member who took interest in students of color and minority organizations. Emma states that she feels connected to the university because of her involvement
in minority organizations like the Black Women's Support Network. She was also a member of a BGLO. She grew up in a neighborhood where her family was the only Black family in the area. This prompted her to want to meet other people of color. She eventually moved into the Multicultural Living Center (MCLLU) which was another ethnic theme house on campus.

Based on the interviews held with the outliers, many of the themes identified previously still apply even though they attended their class reunion. The common theme between the two participants was Bonds formed with like-minded individuals contribute to positive experiences. Although these outliers did not meet the full criteria of the study, the reasoning behind their type of student engagement was consistent with the experiences of the other participants. Ultimately, Black students are trying to connect with other students like themselves in order to gain support, be successful and have a satisfactory experience while living and studying in a challenging environment.

All of the aforementioned themes inform us about the experiences of Black students and Black alumni engagement. The majority of the experiences expressed are supported by the literature. The conclusion below will use the supporting literature to make recommendations on how to enhance the experiences of future Black students and alumni.

**Conclusion**

The research question that this study answered was: how do Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI? Based on the data collected for this study, it appears that Black alumni interpret their undergraduate experiences based on: 1) the strength of the relationships that were developed with their peers and faculty and 2) the support services and organizations that were
made available to diverse populations, which encouraged personal satisfaction and academic success.

Based on the feedback given by Black alumni, their undergraduate experiences included feelings of isolation due to the lack of diversity in campus traditions and university programming. Other factors that may have influenced their undergraduate experience included financial stability and academic performance.

Coping mechanisms included spending time with other students from similar backgrounds who had common interests, building relationships with supportive faculty that understood their needs as Black students, and joining diverse organizations or performing community service.

Black alumni have limited to no interest in participating in their class reunion. Their engagement appeared to be connected with how they viewed their undergraduate experiences. Engagement was primarily limited to joining organizations that had an impact on the recruitment, retention and satisfaction of Black students on campus. This seems to suggest that positive undergraduate experiences are directly affected by the amount of interaction that Black students have with each other. As a result, Black alumni who are engaged are making an attempt to improve the environment for future Black students while actively assisting with recruitment. A more diverse campus that provides cultural programming, personal and academic support services and diverse resources can increase satisfaction for Black students and Black alumni.

These findings are based on in-depth interviews conducted with Black alumni who graduated over a period of 5 decades. The researcher followed a strict interview protocol and refrained from sharing personal experiences during the interview. Each participant was given an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews and read the initial analysis written based
on their interview for accuracy and feedback. Direct quotes from the participants with thorough
descriptions were used in this chapter to validate each emergent theme. A detailed research
design was included in Chapter 3 for other researchers to replicate the study, if desired. The
researcher also conducted journaling and self-reflection exercises to minimize bias during the
study. In the next and final chapter, the researcher will explain these findings in greater detail
and discuss implications for practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how Black alumni who choose to only participate in their own affinity reunion make sense of their undergraduate experiences in a predominantly White institution (PWI). The theoretical framework used for this particular study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Ladson-Billings (1998), the premise of CRT is that race is a social construct that affects all aspects of life and is deeply engrained in the fabric of society. The theory rejects the concept of colorblindness and race neutrality. Since the participants in this study are Black alumni, CRT worked well in answering the research question. The specific methodology used for this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allowed the researcher to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data from participants in order to focus on a particular phenomenon and use a double hermeneutic approach to make sense of this phenomenon. These interviews allowed participants to make sense of their undergraduate experiences and how it relates to their current alumni engagement with the university.

Upon thorough analysis, the following five superordinate themes were identified in the study:

- Feelings of isolation during undergraduate experience
- Bonds formed with like-minded individuals contribute to positive experiences
- Influence of faculty relationships on student experiences
- Challenges of and appreciation for attending Cornell University
- Limited alumni engagement due to campus experience

The findings from each of these themes will be discussed in depth in this chapter referencing how they are situated in the literature. This section will also include an analysis of
the data received from the two outliers that were interviewed but did meet the criteria of the study. Then there will be a discussion about the implications of each of these findings, providing specific examples of how these findings can be used in the practice setting. Finally, this chapter will include suggestions regarding potential areas of future investigation for this study.

**Feelings of Isolation During Undergraduate Experience**

Black students want to feel part of the campus culture through culturally relevant activities embedded in university traditions. The literature frequently mentions that Black students often feel marginalized at PWIs because of the overwhelming culture of Whiteness on campus. Gusa (2010) corroborates this when he states that PWIs don't have to be obviously racist to feel unfriendly. If the overall culture is one that only represents the interests of the majority population, by extension, it sends a subtle message to the *others* that their culture and interests do not matter. This study is consistent with the extant literature, but expands by highlighting the fact that not only do Black students lack interest in campus wide activities, they often create their own activities to supplement what is available to them on campus.

Karkouti (2016) mentions that this culture of Whiteness is created from remnants of the historical beginnings of higher education. Black students were excluded from higher education until after the Civil War, which hindered their social mobility. Griffin and Hurtado (2011) also mention the importance of acknowledging and addressing the role that exclusivity played in the early beginnings of these institutions. Institutions of higher education were also affected by legal cases such as Scott v. Sandford that ruled Black people were property, the proliferation of Jim Crow policies, and recent attempts to overturn affirmative action (Karkouti, 2016). Since these institution of higher education where initially created to be exclusionary, it is expected that a predominantly White campus would exclude the cultures of *others* (Karkouti, 2016).
Since PWIs often develop traditions and events based on the interests of the majority student population, students of diverse backgrounds often feel the need to create their own programming on the periphery. A study conducted by Maramba and Velasquez (2012), showed that ethnic minorities felt that PWIs did very little to include them in campus traditions and sponsored very few activities relevant to their culture. The participants in this study consistently mentioned the lack of interest in campus-wide activities. Their participation in such events was usually motivated by whether other students like them planned to participate or feelings of obligation. In addition to these options, the students in this study took a step further and created their own activities.

Bourke (2010) found that most campus traditions at the PWI which he studied lacked diversity and were centered around a culture of Whiteness. Bourke (2010) also states that in his study, Black students tend to be marginalized to the point where they are unable to participate in the campus traditions and see their culture as part of the norm. A similar argument can be made in this study. If Black students do not see themselves or their culture reflected in the university traditions, they will create their own to compensate for the lack of inclusion in campus-wide activities. The experiences expressed by Black students in this study led to feelings of isolation, which is consistent with the extant literature, but also added to the literature by showing that Black students will compensate for their feelings of isolation by infusing their own cultural context through supplemental activities.

Several participants in this study discussed their upbringing and the neighborhoods they grew up in prior to attending Cornell. For those that came from predominantly Black neighborhoods, the environment at Cornell was quite a culture shock. This feeling made them more aware of their racial identity. Those participants who grew up in predominantly White
neighborhoods found themselves gravitating toward other Black students in order to have an opportunity to share common experiences. Most of the participants made a concerted effort to seek out opportunities to volunteer in organizations or communities similar to their own background, which is corroborated in the literature. Lott (2008) noted that as racial identity increased amongst Black students, their level of community service and social capital bonding also increased. Putnam (2000) states that the bonding that occurs during community service involvement creates opportunities for participants to strengthen their identities while providing much needed social and psychological support to each other.

In a study conducted by Jones and Hill (2003), several of the participants who were involved in community service felt personally connected to their service projects because of their experiences as marginalized people. These participants felt that the services they received were inadequate and felt compelled to help others who were also marginalized (Jones & Hill, 2003). By participating in these organizations, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) state that Black students would be able to give back to their community and gain a sense of purposeful belonging. The participants in this study also felt a need to give back to the community in a way that validated their own experiences, which is consistent with other studies. Harper (2015) states that Black male students are also inclined to get involved in community service and take on leadership roles in organizations in order to promote positive images of Black students and help dispel the myths and racist stereotypes that White students hold against them.

White cultural ideologies become a part of university policies and practices which create isolating environments for students of color (Gusa, 2010). Harper and Hurtado (2007) state that different cultures have different perceptions of racial climate on campus and the dominant group often makes assumptions about the satisfaction of other groups. These assumptions affect the
relationships between racial groups. Harwood et al. (2012) state that the cumulative effect of [negative] experiences contributes to students of color often feeling like outsiders in the university (p. 169).

Bourke (2010) mentions that Black students face many stereotypes based on myths that are held by White students. These stereotypes often lead to microaggressions. Participants in this study discussed situations where they were faced with racial slurs, followed around campus because of assumed threat, left out of important events or just misunderstood due to differences in cultural expression. These feelings often created an environment where Black students were reluctant to interact with White students. These microaggressions caused a level of stress that other students often do not understand. Caplan and Ford (2014) states that migroaggressions lead to feelings of insecurity, frustration, isolation, and powerlessness, which is consistent with what the participants in this study have expressed. The findings in this study expound on the extant literature. Due to feelings of isolation caused by the lack of culturally relevant events or traditions and microaggressions inflicted by their White peers, Black students cope through self-organized cultural events in addition to community volunteerism. This is also why Black students look to form bonds with other students with similar experiences and interests which is discussed below.

**Bonds Formed with Like-Minded Individuals Contribute to Positive Experiences**

Black students want to know that the university supports services provided by cultural centers and ethnic-theme housing. Black students also want to see an increase in the population of Black students at PWIs. To compensate for the lack of cultural traditions and events on campus, Black students join cultural organizations and historically Black fraternities and sororities. The extant literature confirms the findings from this study.
Living arrangements for Black students can be more uncomfortable than their classroom or general campus experiences. Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) analyzed racial microaggressions in residence halls at PWIs and their impact on undergraduate and graduate students of color and identified four microaggressions that Black students were faced with including: (1) racial jokes and verbal comments, (2) racial slurs written in shared spaces, (3) segregated spaces and unequal treatment and (4) denial and minimization of racism. Lum (2008) states that ethnic theme housing options provide a safe space for students of color at PWIs to discuss issues of race among other topics. The findings in the study show that even Black students who do not live in ethnic theme housing choose to spend time there to cope with campus microaggressions. In addition to ethnic theme housing, Black students join cultural groups to help cope with an uncomfortable environment as discussed below.

When culturally relevant organizations do not exist, Black students take it upon themselves to create their own organizations or groups to address concerns or develop programming relevant their community. The focus of these organizations or groups can range from political, cultural, spiritual, fraternal, or career-based. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) posits that there are many reasons why Black students join multicultural organizations: 1) to affirm their presence on campus, 2) to engage in out-of-class experiences, 3) to acknowledge a commitment to serve disenfranchised members of the community, 4) to foster a sense of "mattering", and 5) to provide opportunities to share their skills and talents with the Black community (p. 33). The participants in this study talked about the importance of joining cultural organizations and volunteering in Black communities in order to create a feeling of community on campus.
These organizations allow for bonding and support. Trenor, Grant, & Archer (2010) suggest that Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) provide closer bonding with other Black students, particularly amongst Black men. Affiliation with Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) at PWIs enhances the engagement of Black students especially in relation to faculty and peer interaction (Patton, Bridges & Flowers, 2011). According to Strayhorn (2011), Black students who participate in the gospel choir at PWIs illustrates that their active involvement helps students to establish a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of marginalization.

Adjustment for Black students at PWIs can be very difficult. These organizations allow diverse groups to gain a sense of purposeful belonging (Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010). Museus' (2008) findings demonstrate that ethnic student organizations assist with cultural adjustment by serving as a source of cultural familiarity and validation and a venue for cultural expression.

Several participants in this study were members of BGLOS and gospel choirs which is consistent with the literature. Other participants mentioned creating their own organizations to help with academic support. Through membership in these organizations, Black students felt validated and included. The bonds that were created with students of similar backgrounds and interests allowed them to develop a sense of belonging on campus. Cultural centers also provided these benefits as well as others.

Patton (2006) states that Black students go to cultural centers at PWIs because they feel safe and view them as welcoming spaces. Jones, Castellanos and Cole (2002), also state that cultural centers provide a safe space for students who have been denied opportunities and access on campus. This includes diversity affairs centers and ethnic studies centers. Hefner (2002) and Young (2002) both state that Black cultural centers provide support to Black students and assists with their overall success. Young (2002) adds that these centers provide a space for dialogue
around values and the sharing of knowledge and skills. Patton (2010) explains that these centers allow students to discuss dilemmas facing their community and provide a space to develop solutions for those dilemmas. They also teach history and culture and assist with identity development. Jones & Williams (2006) state that PWIs are structured to meet the needs of White students and that Black students are expected to assimilate. Since this does not affirm Black students' experiences, Black students feel the need to spend time with others like them.

The stories of the participants in this study corroborate what has been written in the literature. Participants discussed incidents that occurred on campus that made them feel unsafe, which made them seek supportive environments. The participants also talked about the importance of having a space where they could learn about their history and culture. Several participants gravitated toward ethnic theme housing even if they were not residents because of the supportive environment from the other students and staff that lived there. One participant did state however that being forced to interact with other students would have probably exposed him to new experiences and relationships with people. It is important to note that cultural centers are voluntary spaces and students should feel free to interact with all populations.

Jones (2002) acknowledges that cultural centers offer educational and cultural enrichment for students of color, while enhancing a multicultural campus environment, however, he believes that cultural centers also allow universities to neglect their full commitment to diversity by not proactively dealing with the lack of inclusion throughout the rest of the campus. This is an important point. Diversity must occur throughout the fabric of the campus. Karkouti (2016) states that enhancing diversity includes changing admissions policies, increasing available financial aid for low income students, incorporating diversity into the curriculum, and facilitating
the entry and promotion of minority faculty. The next section will discuss the importance of faculty-student relationships and the impact on Black student campus experiences.

**Influence of Faculty Relationships on Student Experiences**

It is critical for students to build strong relationships with faculty in order to succeed in college (Summers, Svinicki, Gorin, & Sullivan, 2002). According to Guiffrida & Douthiti (2010), faculty-student relationships are strongly correlated with student satisfaction in college (p. 312). The extant literature confirms the findings in this study.

According to Guiffrida & Douthiti (2010), some Black students are unable to relate to White faculty because Black students perceive White faculty to be cultural insensitive. Ogbu (1994) as cited by Burley et al. (2007) states that there is a Pygmalian Effect by which teachers and administrators perceive Black students differently than White students leading them to treat Black students differently.

Black students complain about stereotypical comments made about them in the classroom, generalizations of opinions made by individual Black students to reflect all Black students, and the failure of White faculty to acknowledge and incorporate Black perspectives in the curriculum (Guiffrida & Douthiti, 2010). This kind of behavior makes it difficult for Black students to approach White faculty for assistance (Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) note that White faculty tend to question the intelligence of Black students based on preconceived notions and stereotypes, which affects their ability to fairly evaluate Black students. White faculty and administrators at elite schools tend to make Black students feel inadequate, especially in the sciences because they don't believe that Black students are smart enough to handle the material ("Persisting Racial Gap", 2004).
Gonsalves (2002) states that White faculty tend to grapple with two concerns when reviewing work submitted by a Black male student that is struggling academically; their feelings about race and their beliefs about academic standards. In order to manage these feelings, Gonsalves (2002) states that White faculty must become racially self-aware and self-reflective, which can be accomplished through cross-racial dialogue. This helps White faculty to deal with issues of stereotypes, preconceived notions, and guilt.

The data from Love's (2011) study shows that Black students who have positive faculty relationships have a higher retention rate. In Guiffrida's (2005) study, he notes the following findings: 1) Black students are more comfortable with Black faculty because they feel that Black faculty will go above and beyond to help them and 2) Black students trust White faculty that use a student-centered approach in teaching and advising. Although Guiffrida (2005) believes that part of the solution is training White faculty to become more culturally competent and hiring more Black faculty to serve as role models, he also believes that it is important for White faculty to go above and beyond to help Black students similar to the way Black faculty do.

The participants in this study discussed scenarios where assumptions were made about them as Black students by White faculty. They also discussed issues of mistrust due to the negative actions of White faculty. Most of the participants felt that they were able to identify and relate with Black faculty over White faculty. In instances, where Black students were able to trust their White faculty member, it was due to the extra efforts that the White faculty member made to learn about the students' background and interests.

Caplan and Ford (2014) conducted a study at four PWIs where they explored the experiences of students of color and women. The goal was to determine what made the participants feel welcomed, accepted, supported, and encouraged. Caplan and Ford (2014)
discovered that an aspect of microaggression that affected both students of color and women was the lack of diversity in the course material taught by White professors. Majority of the texts used in class were written by White men. This interferes with the ability of Black students and women to be able to identify or relate with their professors, because their experiences are excluded from the curriculum (Caplan & Ford, 2014).

The same issue was mentioned in this study where students led a protest to the library to argue for more diverse reading material. In regards to faculty-student relationships, Caplan and Ford (2014) also found that Black students: 1) fear speaking up in class because they are uncomfortable, 2) have difficulty addressing racist comments made in class by White faculty, and 3) are not satisfied with how faculty address racist comments made by other students. Participants in this study also faced these types of issues. These are all issues that must be addressed in order to improve the campus environment.

Black students thrive better in an environment when there are more faculty of color present and when there are other faculty members that are culturally competent and sensitive to their needs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Payne and Suddler (2014) state that Black faculty are able to develop stronger relationships with students when they feel supported at their institution. Often Black faculty are also under pressure and experience stress at PWIs because of their work load. Black faculty become overwhelmed when they are expected to mentor several Back students due to the low number of other Black faculty available at PWIs (Payne and Suddler, 2014). Having other faculty that are culturally sensitive can help ease the burden.

Satisfactory relationships with faculty as students, impact their feelings as alumni. Gaier (2005) notes that the most significant variable affecting alumni engagement is their relationship
with faculty and staff. In addition to strong faculty relationships, other factors affect student achievement such as financial aid and academic support which is discussed below.

**Challenges of and Appreciation for Attending Cornell University**

Although some of the Black alumni in this study state that they had a challenging undergraduate experience due to academics or finances, they still appreciate their Cornell experience. They believe that the challenges were worth it since there are clear benefits to attending the institution, such as building social capital. The extant literature confirms the findings from this study.

The participants in this study discussed how being financially disadvantaged prevented them from being able to buy food, pay for course materials or event relate to their more affluent classmates. Some even stated that without full financial aid, they would not have been able to attend the institutional all. This caused a level of stress that prevented them from working to their full potential. Participants also mentioned that being financially disadvantaged dictates what you do with free time out of class. Some of the participants sought RA positions to help cover the cost of their housing and food. Others attended events or visited friends in other dorms, hoping to get free food or had to borrow money to cover expenses.

Financial need on college campuses is more dire that most people recognize. An anonymous author wrote an article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, that highlights the fact that college students are turning to food banks because they cannot afford to eat (2008, August). Not much has changed in 2016. There is currently an initiative at Cornell being spearheaded by the associate dean of students/director of intercultural programs to partner with a community grocer to create a campus-based store that will help with food insecurity for financially disadvantaged students on campus.
According to Trombitas (2012), financial stress affects academic success. Low income students need increased financial support from the university to reduce stress and address academic inequities. In a study conducted by Hu (2010) on high achieving, low income students of color, he found that students who received enough financial aid to meet their needs after the family contribution were able to attend more selective schools. It also increased their ability to be more socially engaged on campus and increased their chances of academic success (Hu, 2010). Financially disadvantaged students often feel isolated because they can't relate to other students. Park, Denson, and Bowman (2013) noted that in order for universities to maximize the educational benefits of diversity, they must include student engagement around the discussion of socioeconomic diversity in addition to race in order to create a sense of belonging for low-income students. It is important to acknowledge how race and class intersect and shape the campus climate in relation to diversity (Park et al., 2013).

Several participants in this study mentioned that their experiences were impacted by academic difficulties. Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr (2000) state that being exposed to a hostile educational environment on a regular basis through racial tension and stereotyping, can negatively affect the academic success and psychological well-being of students of color. Payne and Suddler (2014) state that Black students have difficulty adjusting both academically and socially at PWI due to feelings of isolation. They argue that PWIs are unable to provide the adequate academic and financial support for Black students which can negatively impact their success. Fries-Britt & Turner (2002) state that HBCUs are better equipped to support Black students than PWIs. Black students at HBCUs felt that the staff went above and beyond to support their students, while Black students at PWIs felt like the campus actually created barriers
to their success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). A major barrier included persistent stereotyping by White faculty and White peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Seeking help from a counselor is critical in managing these academic challenges. Jones and Williams (2006) note in their study that Black students were more comfortable with African American counselors because they were able to serve as role models and mentors. They also could relate to the impact of racism on academic achievement (Jones and Williams, 2006). Guiffrida (2010) states that Black counselors are best because they can anticipate the expectations and disappointments of Black students faced with racism at PWIs and can identify their feelings before they have an impact on their academic achievement. Although Black students face these challenges, they are still grateful for their experiences as discussed below.

In this study, several of the participants, especially the Black males, were concerned with attending a prestigious college because they saw the benefits that could be gained from earning a degree at a top college. It appears that Black males are under more pressure to succeed and graduate from an elite school because it will help them increase their social capital and help to compensate for the racial inequities that they face when seeking full time employment.

In a study conducted by Harper (2008), he found that high achieving Black male students saw the benefits of social capital. They made connections with high ranking administrators and assumed those connections would continue after graduation. In Harper's (2008) study, Black males mentioned that since they were few in number on campus, they received more attention as campus leaders and were often invited to exclusive events or received awards and glowing recommendations. Black males felt that they needed this social capital to advance in society (Harper, 2008). Upon graduation, several of these students mentioned that they were able to gain access to high paying careers.
Stewart (2011) notes that based on the tenets of social capital theory, the regulation of social norms prevents oppressed groups from accessing social capital. She also states that in order to achieve upward mobility in a capitalistic system, Black students need access to mainstream social connections and relationships (Stewart, 2011). This is something that can be attained by graduating from a PWI. Even though Black students can benefit from social capital, the likelihood of them being involved with the campus as alumni is very low. In the next finding, several factors will be discussed that affect alumni engagement.

**Limited Alumni Engagement Due to Campus Experience**

Very few studies focus on the limited engagement of Black alumni who graduate from PWIs. Even fewer offer suggestions as to how to increase this engagement. Black alumni are more likely to be engaged with the university when they have had positive undergraduate experiences (Gaier, 2005). These positive experiences are due to the relationships that were developed while they were students on campus. Newman and Petrosko (2011) describe it as a positive emotional attachment, which generates alumni loyalty. This study expands on the current literature by demonstrating what factors influence whether or not Black alumni choose to be involved with the campus.

Many Black alumni who graduated from this PWI, don't feel connected to the campus. They only choose to be engaged when there are other engaged Black alumni with whom they had a relationship or when their engagement helps current Black students. McDearmon (2013) posits that alumni who have a perceived role of behavior (e.g. it is my duty to support the university through volunteering) are more likely to be involved with their institution after graduation. Amos (1995) states that if Black alumni have any connection with the PWI they graduated from
it is usually through a Black alumni affinity group created by Black alumni themselves. The extant literature confirms the findings from this study.

The participants in this study expressed the importance of attending alumni events where there was a critical mass of Black alumni. It was also important that the event sponsored activities that were in line with their cultural interests. The participants felt obligated to volunteer when they knew that Black students would benefit directly from their service. That was one of the main motivating factors for Black alumni to be engaged at a PWI. There was limited interest in participating in class activities unless there was a direct benefit such as career networking.

Participants did not have strong relationships with their classmates so they were not as interested in returning to campus for class reunion activities. The outliers in this study, who were both from the 2000s generation, chose to participate in their class reunion unlike the other participants, but it was based on whether other Black alumni chose to attend. This is an indication that Black alumni want to be feel part of the larger university without giving up their cultural identity. Older alumni from the 60s to the 90s preferred engaging through the affinity group that was created by Black alumni since it was created through an act of social justice in the 70s. Alumni from those decades also enjoyed intergenerational engagement, which the Black alumni association provided.

In a study by Robinson and Williams (2010), Black alumni from the 1950s-1980s express difficulty releasing negative feelings from their undergraduate experiences that makes them feel detached from their alma mater. Burley et al. (2007) also acknowledged that Black alumni who attended during those decades felt less connected to the university because of the hostility and overt racism that they faced. These alumni reconnect with the university in a different way.
Stuart (2009) states that alumni from those decades need a reason and a purpose to return to campus. Williams, Bonner, Monts, Louis & Robinson (2014) state that Black alumni associations are beneficial because they encourage Black alumni volunteer engagement, increase Black alumni involvement on university boards and promote increased donations from Black alumni, primarily towards scholarships. Many of these same alumni refuse to attend their class reunion because of the negative feelings from the undergraduate years.

Gaier (2005) mentions that interpersonal relationships while in college are the most significant variable for determining alumni participation. Since many of the participants stated that they did not have a relationship with their classmates, it makes sense that they would choose not to be engaged with the university based on Gaier's statement. This also explains why alumni choose to participate in affinity group activities. The participants who are engaged through affinity groups talked extensively about their interpersonal relationships with other Black alumni while they were students on campus and wanted to relive these positive memories. According to Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010), ethnic minorities feel less comfortable in their educational environment than their classmates from the dominant culture, which would explain why Black students would not spend time at their class reunion. Alumni that are engaged tend to do it for the benefit of the students which is discussed below.

Black alumni are more likely to be engaged in university service-based activities that improve the experiences of Black students and other students of color even if they had negative undergraduate experiences. Rissmeyer (2010) mentions that alumni may take an interest in cosponsoring activities that are appealing to undergraduate students. Singer and Hughey (2002) highlight the importance of alumni to participate in the recruitment, admissions process and selection of new students as well as participation in new student orientation. Other areas where
alumni can assist students include: job placement, internships/externships, lecture series, and hosting visiting students (Singer & Hughey, 2002).

The participants in this study who were engaged as alumni felt obligated to give back to students in different ways. Some joined the university council in order to help influence policies around recruitment, financial aid and housing. Others alumni served as mentors to students in their field or returned to campus to participate in student-sponsored conferences. Engaged alumni also assisted students in securing internships and externships during school breaks.

If Black alumni made a concerted effort to provide these types of services for Black students at PWIs, chances are that the experiences of Black students can become more positive. This may create a reciprocal effect when they become alumni. Singer & Hughey (2002) mention the creation of student alumni associations that can provide service to the community. Using social media to create relationships between students and alumni can also enhance the campus experience (Rissmeyer, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The research question that this study answered was: how do Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI? Based on the data collected for this study, it appears that Black alumni interpret their undergraduate experiences based on: 1) the strength of the relationships that were developed with their peers and faculty and 2) the support services and organizations that were made available to diverse populations, which encouraged personal satisfaction and academic success. This is consistent with studies conducted by Gaier (2005) and McDearmon (2013). McDearmon (2013) states that it is important to consider the personal relationships that alumni
have with their alma mater and to recognize that those relationships greatly impact the individual and the institution.

According to the literature, in order to enhance the experiences of Black students and to increase alumni engagement, there are several factors that must be considered. It is important to improve the campus climate, revamp the campus culture, continue to support diversity institutions that exist and continue to survey the population to determine satisfaction. It is not enough to create special diversity programs and ethnic theme houses. These should be considered supplemental resources. Hurtado (1992) states that diversity must be a key component in the institutional mission and strategic plan in order to improve campus racial climate. This includes the admissions process, financial aid distribution, and campus resources (Hurtado, 1992). Campus activities such as homecoming and reunion must be revamped to include activities of interest to all students and alumni.

Harper and Quaye (2007) stated that faculty must incorporate multicultural perspectives in the classroom and diversify the assigned materials for their courses. The onus must be placed on the faculty not the students to find culturally relevant information. Dialogue that allows for multiple perspectives should be encouraged in the classroom and throughout the campus. This allows students to challenge their preconceived notions about their peers. Woodard and Simms (2000) state the programmatic process must include organizational assessment, shared responsibility on multiple levels within the organization, and ongoing feedback in order to effectively impact campus climate change. Although the focus of this study was Black alumni and their undergraduate experiences at Cornell University, other PWIs can benefit from the recommendations in this study.

**University Mission and Vision Statements**
PWIs can support their students by revising their mission and vision statements to include more concrete language about diversity and inclusion. A study conducted by Wilson, Meyer and McNeal (2011) noted that 35% of the 80 schools studied did not have a diversity statement and did not mention diversity in their mission. Of the schools that did mention diversity, only 19% addressed racial or ethnic diversity. Wilson et al. (2011) concluded that institutions that include diversity statements in their mission send a message to underrepresented faculty, staff and students that they are supported. In addition to having a diversity statement, Wilson et al. (2011) also note that universities should include underrepresented groups in the decision making process and activities of the university in order to change a homogenous campus culture. Bernhard (2016) noted that just like the university mission statement, athletic departments should include diversity in their mission statements given the increase in the number of athletes of color joining the teams.

As a land grant institution founded in 1865 after the civil war and directly as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862, Cornell is in a unique position to address diversity on its campus. Its founder, Ezra Cornell declared that he "would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study" (Motto, n.d.). The core values stated within the four fundamental pillars of the university's mission include: providing student access, embracing difference and diversity, promoting cross-cultural and cross-national understanding, being a collaborative, collegial, and caring community, and being accessible and affordable to all who meet high academic standards (University Mission, n.d.). The *Towards New Destinations* (2013) diversity planning framework developed in 2013 focused on four core principles: composition, engagement, inclusion, and achievement.
Although there is a clear diversity statement, there are no concrete examples of how to meet the stated goals. The following recommendations are based on the research conducted in this study and the supporting literature for each theme, which can assist in meeting the aforementioned goals. Some of these recommendations will require an active funding campaign for support. Earmarking financial support toward diversity goals will show true commitment to creating a more inviting campus environment for all students.

Recommendations for Practice

There are many ways to improve the experience of Black students on campus and increase their future alumni engagement. Below are recommendations based on the results of this study. The researcher plans to share these recommendations with the Office of the Provost, the Office of Student and Academic Services, the Office of Alumni Affairs and Development and any other offices or departments that can benefit from this information. The researcher will also present the findings of this study during various conferences sponsored by organizations similar to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). The researcher would also like to present these findings at Cornell sponsored conferences where this information would be beneficial. Finally, these results will be shared with alumni affinity groups and student organizations to assist with the process of diversifying the campus culture. As an active alumna, the researcher can use her leadership roles to assist the university with the cultivation of projects that will assist in moving these diversity initiatives forward.

Create new campus-wide traditions. All students can benefit from new campus-wide traditions that incorporate the cultures of non-majority students. With assistance from the Office of Student Life, various student organizations on campus should be encouraged to help diversify campus traditions and events so that everyone can feel connected to the campus. This can also
apply to athletic departments. Coaches can encourage new traditions for their teams that are more inclusive. Alumni can also play a role in this process. During homecoming, affinity groups can develop new traditions in which students can participate.

**Support for cultural institutions.** Ethnic studies programs, ethnic theme housing, and cultural student centers are also important for students of color to feel supported at PWIs. These institutions can continue to support various programs for Black students and other students of color while educating all students. Offices like the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives are crucial in providing academic support and resources for Black students and other students of color. Institutions such as Ujamaa Residential College, Wanawake Wa Wari Cooperative and the Africana Studies and Research Center are essential in providing safe spaces for living, dialogue, and/or study. All students can benefit from these environments.

**Create cultural programming.** Affinity alumni groups can create and support cultural programming for homecoming and the class reunions in order to encourage Black alumni and others to return to campus. Homecoming is critical because this is an opportunity for alumni to spend time with students on campus. Black students can benefit from networking with Black alumni. The class reunion is an opportunity for alumni to return to campus and reminisce about their experiences as undergraduates. Providing culturally relevant programming during class reunions, not just affinity reunions, may encourage Black alumni to return to campus and be more engaged with the university.

**Increase efforts to recruit Black students from all backgrounds.** Black students often feel isolated on predominantly White campus because there are so few of them. The university should make a concerted effort to mirror the national population. According to the US Census (2015), Black people make up 13.3% of the nation's population. At Cornell, Black students are
only 6% of the student population (Common Data Set, 2015). Recruitment activities and promotion should be conducted at various schools around the country, not only at elite prep schools, but also at inner city high schools. The Cornell Alumni Admissions Ambassador Network (CAAAN) can train Black alumni to recruit at their former high schools and other high schools that may have a large population of underrepresented students. These alumni can persuade qualified, potential applicants to consider Cornell over other institutions.

**Increase scholarships for financially disadvantaged students.** In order to relieve disadvantaged students of the financial burden that affects their ability to focus on their academics, it would be helpful to increase the amount of need-based scholarship that is available. Professionals from the Office of Alumni Affairs and Development can make a direct solicitation for more need-based scholarships from alumni. Affinity alumni groups can help with this initiative. Creating fundraising solicitation documents that include powerful stories of students who persevered through financial challenges may encourage more alumni to give, especially if they can relate to the stories. Students should also be made aware of any funding that may be available for emergency situations by the Office of Financial Aid.

**Provide culturally-sensitive counselors.** Black students can benefit from professional psychologists at the Gannett Health Services center that are sensitive to the needs of Black and other students of color on campus. It is important to have a professional who can relate to issues that are unique to this population. Culturally competent counselors and counselors of color can help to manage the stress of being a minority on campus. This recommendation will require assistance from the Office of Human Resources and the Office of Administration and Finance.

**Increase the number of tenured Black faculty.** Students can benefit from an increase in the number of tenured Black faculty throughout the disciplines. In order to do so, it may be
necessary to create a faculty mentoring program through the Office of Faculty Development and Diversity to provide support for Black faculty who need assistance in navigating the tenure track process. In disciplines where there are no or very few Black faculty, it may be necessary to create a more aggressive hiring campaign to attract more Black faculty to the university. Recruiting from the pool of Black alumni may be an option. The Office of Human Resources can work directly with the affinity alumni associations to identify qualifies candidates for potential openings. In addition to competitive salaries, providing incentives such as student loan assistance may attract Black alumni back to the campus to teach as full time faculty.

**Provide cultural competency training.** Everyone can benefit from cultural competency training, facilitated by trained professionals. Training can be provided to all current faculty, administrators and staff and supervised by the Office of Human Resources. These trainings can be incorporated into the orientation process for all new hires. All students can benefit from a mandatory course on cultural competency. This course can be made available during freshman year and facilitated by the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives (OADI) and the Center for Intercultural Dialogue. This course can benefit students in any major. True diversity goes beyond compositional diversity, there must be a change in the campus culture so that it is more inclusive. Faculty should be encouraged by their deans and supported by the executive administration to include more diverse reading materials in their curricula, regardless of subject matter.

**Implementation and Evaluation**

The entire student body should be involved with improving the campus culture. The best approach is a holistic approach. Karkouti (2016) states that in order to transform the campus culture and create "racially inclusive learning environments", it is necessary to take a proactive
review of the racial climate on campus (p. 68). When creating new traditions and initiatives, it is important to solicit suggestions directly from the student body. Create an environment where student groups can work together to develop new traditions and programming. Include a diverse body of students in the search process for new faculty and staff.

Just as it is important to create new initiatives and goals to improve campus culture, it is just as important to evaluate the success of these initiatives. How will administrators know if the initiatives are working? One way is to conduct regular campus climate evaluations, including direct questions related to the initiatives. Another way is to collect data on the satisfaction and retention of diverse student populations to see if the percentage has increased.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study only looked at a small sample size from a qualitative, phenomenological perspective. It would be interesting to conduct 2 quantitative surveys with a much larger sample size of Black alumni and Black students to gather information regarding their experiences and satisfaction with the institution. Data from the student survey can inform us of ways to improve campus climate and to determine the likelihood of Black students becoming actively engaged alumni. Ongoing feedback is critical to the success of the university. Although the university did conduct a campus climate survey in 2014, Black students could benefit from regular opportunities to provide feedback. The alumni survey can inform us of strategies we can use to encourage current Black alumni who are not engaged with the university to become engaged. Using chapter 3 as a guide, this study can be replicated at other PWIs to investigate the experiences of Black students and alumni at those institutions.
Appendix A

Letter of Intent

Subject Line: Anika Daniels-Osaze requests your participation

Dear Alumnus/a (Name),

My name is Anika Daniels-Osaze and I am the immediate past president of the Cornell Black Alumni Association. I am also a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral dissertation and would like for you to serve as a participant in my study.

My research study focuses on how Black alumni interpret their undergraduate experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI) with a particular interest in how these interpretations may inform us about your alumni involvement. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how you interpret your own undergraduate experiences in your own words.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be interviewing you about your undergraduate experiences and alumni involvement. The expected time commitment is between two and three hours over the course of three interactions (either in person or via phone). Your participation is completely voluntary and you can exit the study at any time. All information gathered during the interview will be confidential and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. All interview data will be destroyed once the study is complete.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at daniels-osaze.a@husky.neu.edu and include the information listed below. I will provide you with additional details about the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred days and times to meet (including weekends):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Anika Daniels-Osaze
Appendix B

Informed Consent Document

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Higher Education Administration

Name of Investigator(s): Joseph McNabb, PhD., Anika Daniels-Osaze, MA

Title of Project: Black Alumni from Cornell University: Exploring Undergraduate Experiences and Alumni Engagement.

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?

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are a Black alumnus/a who graduated from Cornell University and you participated in the CBAA reunion, but not your class reunion.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to explore through a series of 3 interviews, your thoughts about your undergraduate experiences as a Black alumnus/a who attended a predominantly White institution and to discuss your current involvement with Cornell as an alumnus/a.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in 3 interviews. The goal of this first interview is to describe the study that I am conducting and to relay to you all of the precautions and safety measures that I will take to ensure confidentiality and protection of your rights as a participant, which was included in my letter of intent. This interview will last 20-30 minutes. The second interview will last 60-90 minutes and will include questions that will help me to learn more about how you interpret your undergraduate experiences. The third interview will last 20-30 and will allow you to review a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy. Nothing else is required of you for this research project.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

These interviews can be conducted over the phone or in person based on your comfort and availability. If the interview is conducted in person, you will be interviewed in your own home or at a time and place that is convenient for you. The first interview will last 20-30 minutes. The second interview will last 60-90 minutes. The third interview will last 20-30 minutes
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort in conducting this study i.e. physical, psychological, social, financial or otherwise. If at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question during the interview process, you may choose to skip the question or to end the interview at any time. All responses will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name.

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 to us to better understand your undergraduate experiences as a Black alumnus/a who graduated from a predominantly White institution.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be 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.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the option to end your participation at any time. Your identity will remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms throughout the study and in any published document that uses the information collected. Any quotes that are used in the study will not have any identifying information. You will be notified of how the data will be used, where the data will be used and why. You will also have access to any published document using this data.

To protect the participants’ information, all data collected from each interview will be saved on a password-protected personal computer and the files will be backed up in a digital cloud with a secure password. Written notes of critical information will also be taken, scanned into the computer and uploaded to the backup folder in password-protected in a digital cloud. Signed consent forms will be scanned and saved in a password-protected digital cloud. Original consent forms will be locked in a file cabinet at the student researcher’s home, where there is only one key available for access. The key will be kept in a secure place.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You may choose to leave this study at any time for any reason with no questions asked.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort in conducting this study i.e. physical, psychological, social, financial or otherwise. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.
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 alumnus/a of Cornell University.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Joseph McNabb, the Principal Investigator and the person mainly responsible for this research at j.mcnabb@neu.edu or (857) 205-9598.

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, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There will be no compensation for your participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There will be no direct costs to you during your participation in this study. Depending on your phone service, regular phone charges may apply.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part  Date

___________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

___________________________________________
Printed name of person above


Appendix C

Interview Protocol

**Research question:** How do Black alumni from Cornell University, who choose to attend their affinity reunion, make sense of their undergraduate experiences at a PWI?

**Alumni Interview Protocol**

Interviewee (Pseudonym): ________________________________

Gender: ________________________________________________

Year of graduation ______________________________________

College attended ________________________________________

**Part I: Introductory Interview (20-30 minutes):**
Objective: To build rapport, describe the study, describe elements included in the informed consent document, answer any questions.

Primary Interview Protocol
Thank you for being available to speak with me today. You have been selected to participate in this research study because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experience as a Black alumnus/a who graduated from Cornell University. If you agree, you will participate in a total of three (3) interviews. Nothing else is required of you for this research project. The goal of this first interview is to describe the study that I am conducting and to relay to you all of the precautions and safety measures that I will take to ensure confidentiality and protection of your rights as a participant, which was included in my letter of intent. We will also spend time reviewing the informed consent document. If you agree with all of the terms of this study, you will be asked to sign the document. This interview will last 20-30 minutes.

The second interview will last 60-90 minutes and will include questions that will help me to learn more about how you interpret your undergraduate experiences. The third interview will last 20-30 and will allow you to review a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy.

My research project focuses on how Black alumni interpret their undergraduate experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI) with a particular interest in how these interpretations may inform us about your alumni involvement. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how you interpret your own undergraduate experiences in your own words.

If you any questions about this process or about the consent form, please let me know. If you choose not to sign the consent form, this will in no way affect you rights and privileges as an alumnus/a. Thank you for your time and consideration.
Part II: Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions (60-90 minutes)

Objective 1: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participants’ general experience. This section will be brief since it is not the focus of the study.

Objective 2: To allow the participant to share his/her story and gather their interpretations of his/her undergraduate experiences and to gather information regarding alumni engagement.

Secondary Interview Protocol

I have planned this interview to last no longer than about 60-90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. Therefore, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to record our conversation today using Freeconferencecall.com. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

[if yes, I will thank the participant and begin the recording/ if no, I will thank the participant and politely end the interview].

I will also be taking written notes. All responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. My dissertation advisor and I will be the only persons with access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the completion of the study. Only a pseudonym will be used to label the transcripts. Do you have any questions at this time?

In order to ensure the experiences that you share during this interview are not in any way influenced by my own personal experiences as an alum, I will refrain from discussing my background and personal experiences, identifying with or corroborating any of the experiences you share or making any statement that indicates an opinion about your experiences. This may seem awkward, but it is important for me to make sure that the interview focuses on you and your story. Do you understand?

Participant Background Questions (establishing rapport)

1. What city are you originally from?
2. Were you the first in your family to attend college?
3. What was your major while at Cornell?
4. Tell me about your current field.
5. Tell me about the factors that led you to choose Cornell?

Interview Questions

1) How would you describe your undergraduate experience?
2) Can you describe the extracurricular activities you were engaged in while at Cornell?
2) Tell me about any events that you participated in while at Cornell. (i.e Slope Day, homecoming)
4) What led you to join those particular organizations or participate in those events? or What led to your decision not to participate in these events?

5) a) How would describe the relationships that you developed with other students at Cornell?  
    b) How would describe the relationships that you developed with faculty at Cornell?  
    c) How would describe the relationships that you developed with administrators and staff at Cornell?

6) Describe what experiences made you feel connected to Cornell.

7) In what way did your housing preferences at Cornell affect your undergraduate experience?

8) What led to your decision to attend a CBAA reunion, but not your class reunion?

9) a) In what ways are you involved with the university as an alumna/alumnus?  
    b) How was that decision influenced? Possible Probe: What would have changed your decision?

10) Is there anything else you would like to share about your undergraduate experience at Cornell?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I will email a copy of your transcript to you within the next week so that you can review it by [date and time]. Afterward, I would like to schedule our third and final interview to review the information.

**Part III: Member Checking Interview (20-30 minutes)**  
Objective: To review transcripts and notes with participant and check for accuracy

**Tertiary interview protocol**  
The purpose of this interview is to conduct a debriefing session. This will allow you an opportunity to review the copy of the interview transcript that I previously emailed you and all handwritten notes to check for accuracy. It will also allow you an opportunity to clarify anything that was previous stated during your second interview. This should take no more that 20-30 minutes.

**After review**  
Thank you very much for assistance in this process and the time you took to participate in this study. I look forward to sharing the final product with you once it is completed.
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1) How would you describe your undergraduate experience?

2) Can you describe the extracurricular activities you were engaged in while at Cornell?

3) Tell me about any events that you participated in while at Cornell. (i.e Slope Day, homecoming)

4) What led you to join those particular organizations or participate in those events? or What led to your decision not to participate in these events?

5) a) How would describe the relationships that you developed with other students at Cornell?
   b) How would describe the relationships that you developed with faculty at Cornell?
   c) How would describe the relationships that you developed with administrators and staff at Cornell?

6) Describe what experiences made you feel connected to Cornell.

7) In what way did your housing preferences at Cornell affect your undergraduate experience?

8) What led to your decision to attend a CBAA reunion, but not your class reunion?

9) a) In what ways are you involved with the university as an alumna/alumnus?
    b) How was that decision influenced? Possible Probe: What would have changed your decision?

10) Is there anything else you would like to share about your undergraduate experience at Cornell?
Appendix E

Word Cloud

The following word cloud represents the descriptive words given by the participants in this study when asked how they would describe their Cornell experience. As you can see, there is no one word that captures the true essence of the undergraduate experiences of Black alumni.
Appendix F

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
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<td>HARRIET</td>
<td>JOCELYN</td>
<td>ROBERT</td>
<td>KIRK</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>ARTS</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>HumEc/CALS</td>
<td>ARTS</td>
<td>ARTS</td>
<td>AAP</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
<td>Nutrition/ Human Development</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Society</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
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<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Queens, NY</td>
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<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
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<td>Glenwood, MD</td>
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<td>Tenafly, NJ</td>
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* did not meet requirements for study but provided valuable information

**LEGEND:** ARTS-Arts and Sciences; AAP-Architecture, Art and Planning; CALS-College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; ENG- Engineering; HOTEL-School of Hotel Administration; HumEc- Human Ecology
Appendix G

Internal Audit

Kirk: Oh, I did participate in Cornelliana Night... Pamoja-Ni all sat together. We kind of stood there snickering. We’re singing the alma mater and looking at the other groups coming off as warm and convivial. Even with all of that we just couldn’t get into it, we could not relate. We could never relate.

Did not relate at all with university-wide events like Cornelliana.

Lack of interest in campus-wide traditions.

Kirk: Oh, I did participate in Cornelliana Night... Pamoja-Ni all sat together. We kind of stood there snickering. We’re singing the alma mater and looking at the other groups coming off as warm and convivial. Even with all of that we just couldn’t get into it, we could not relate. We could never relate.

Provided security, connectedness and community. Helped with the coping process at a challenging institution. Helped her cope with perceived external threats.

Living in or spending significant time in ethnic theme housing for safety and/or reassurance.

Malcolm: He had a very progressive attitude as it came to race relations. As we spoke through the evening, I discovered that he was unlike whom I had any preconceptions of being dissociated from Black people. He seemed to be engaged.

Through genuine communication and openness, racial barriers were removed and preconceptions were altered, allowing a bond to create.

Significant relationships and/or positive interactions with Black or White faculty.

I definitely always avail myself to work with specifically African-American students who are pre-vet, animal science majors or otherwise, but who specifically have the intention to go to vet school because I just don’t think there's enough support for those students.

Wants to be the support she couldn't get while she was a student, primarily in her college. Also chooses to participant in programs that she can identify with.

Only engaged to improve the experiences of other like-minded individuals.
References


Stewart, K. D. (2011). The role of social capital for black students at predominantly White institution. *Sociation Today, 9*(1). Retrieved from:
http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v91/student.htm


