PRESSURE TO ASSIMILATE: STUDENTS OF COLOR MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AT A HISTORICALLY WHITE COLLEGE

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the experiences students of color have at a historically white college campus in the Northeast. The participants studied a variety of academic disciplines and comprised a broad spectrum of ethnicities. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was employed to investigate the participants’ lived experiences. The data was analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory. The study revealed that students of color experienced racism in many forms, students utilized protective factors such as assimilation to remain resilient against barriers and stressors experienced in educational and social settings. This study confirmed that students of color experience racism at historically white institutions and must acquire strategies to be successful. Moreover, this study found that inclusive classroom pedagogy and skills are necessary for faculty so that students of color can avert discrimination and feelings of isolation both in and out of the classroom. The study found that students of color struggle with friendships at historically white institutions and this issue is one that needs further examination. The participants were actively involved on campus and found their roles in clubs and offices a large factor in creating a sense of belonging on campus. In this study, students felt strongly that they had to adapt to the environment in order to be successful. There is a need for future studies in peer mentoring, how mentors and mentees are matched and the impact peer mentoring has on enhancing the experiences of students of color at historically white institutions.

Keywords: Assimilation, Racism, Historically White Campus, Students of Color
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Statement of the Problem

College campuses can be unwelcoming, sometimes even hostile environments for many students of color. Currently, historically white campuses are recruiting more students of color without considering the implications for those students at their institutions. Students of color have challenging experiences on campus and peer mentoring is one way to address the issues students of color are facing. Colleges are not prepared for the challenges students of color are confronting on their campuses with students of color reporting feeling isolated and unwelcome (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper, 2012). The examination of students of color experiences specific to race will allow greater understanding to develop strategies to address the challenges students of color are facing. For the past 30 years, research on issues confronting students of color in college and university environments has varied little thematically (Harper 2013). Willie and Cunnigen (1981) reviewed 130 data sets spanning from 1965-1980 and mapping themes, identified that exclusion and isolation are persistent for students of color attending historically white institutions. This study, while dated, provides valuable insights for current times.

More recent research from scholars such as Harper (2013), Hurtado & Ruiz (2015) and Strayhorn (2015) found similar findings of isolation and exclusion. In the Fall semester of 2015, student protestors nationally reiterated these same broad concerns on campuses across the United States, demanding that colleges increase the diversity of faculty and students and provide resources to improve the education of campus community members around issues related to racism. They asked specifically that comprehensive support systems be put in place to ensure academic success for students of color. If one were to examine the goals of peer mentoring programs, it would be noted that many of the goals are quite similar. Research has documented that, in general, universities have been consistently reported to be inadequately addressing the
underlying issues of racism that directly impact students of color (Harper, 2013). Meanwhile, many campus leaders have identified a pressing need to engage their communities in difficult conversations about racism to influence change on campus.

A major problem for students of color is delayed rates of graduation that augment the financial burdens historically under supported populations face. A 2014 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), reviewing the period from 1996 to 2007, found that, nationally, only 20.8% of all African-American students enrolled in college starting in 2007 finished their degree in four years. Conversely 43.3% of white college students completed their college degrees in four years for the 2007 cohort (NCES, 2014). Comparatively, there were also minimal gains between the 1996 and the 2007 group wherein 1996, only 19.6% of all Black students enrolled in college graduated in four years (NCES, 2014). Black males had the lowest four-year graduation rates at 15.7% on average over the same period while in 1996 only 13.9% of Black men had graduated in four years. Creating campus communities that value and support students of color are crucial to transforming their present experience of academic and social struggle to one of success and expediency in completing their studies, which could lead to enhanced economic, social and cultural empowerment (Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Students who do not feel a sense of belonging or who directly and indirectly experience racism on campuses struggle to fit in socially and to achieve academically (Strayhorn, 2012). The easy answer is to blame the students and not look closely at the barriers in place from systemic issues of racism (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

In the fall of 2015, student protests across the nation put demands on institutions to better support students of color (Campus demands, 2015). Campuses continue to increase their recruitment efforts to enroll more students of color, however, colleges have not done a good job
identifying barriers for success specific to students of color (Harper, 2013). Students of color report feeling isolated and unwelcome because universities are failing to address the underlying issues of racism that directly impact students of color (Harper, 2012, Harper, 2013). Engaging in difficult conversations about racism is crucial in influencing change on campus. Developing proactive strategies to break down barriers so students of color thrive on historically white institutions is critical at this juncture.

From 2010-2015, Hurtado and Avarado (2015) found that 20.5% of Black students and 14.5 % of Latina/o students reported incidents of bias to college officials on campuses across the United States.. Nationally, only 12.6% of students of color say they actually reported incidents to campus administrators (Hurtado & Avarado, 2015). The researchers found on campuses with lower numbers of underrepresented (less than 20%) students enrolled that 62.3 % of Latina/o students experienced verbal assaults with 44.3% feeling excluded and 32.3 % reported visually offensive images on campus. Even at campuses with a moderate number (21-35%) of underrepresented students 55.2 % of Latina/o student’s experienced offensive verbal comments. Although many think that the country is in a better place with race relations, the incidents reported by students of color on historically white institutions is alarming. Creating campus communities that understand issues of racism, while valuing and supporting students of color, is vital to change the current narrative and to create an environment where students of color feel included and safe.

**Topic**

Peer mentoring presents opportunities for current students to assist students of color in navigating historically white institutions. Institutions of higher education struggle with unpacking the underlying issues of racism that are embedded and negatively impact students of color in campus systems (Harper, 2013; Kezar, 2008). Peer mentoring offers opportunities for
students to address these issues and develop leadership skills, engage with faculty and staff and develop friendships, which provide opportunities to break down practical and conceptual manifestations of racism. Astin (1993) posited, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Peer mentoring is shown to build a community for students of color, amongst themselves and with their white peers; it also positively impacts student’s grades point averages and their outlook about the institution (Jacobi, 1991). In an ideal case, peer mentoring can also change the culture of the campus towards greater inclusion of students of color. However, scholars and university leaders have had difficulty establishing a precise definition of the role of a peer mentor. The definition for this study is, “a student who can serve as a resource, a helping hand, a sounding board, and a referral service” (Harper 2013; Jacobi, 1991; Strayhorn, 2012). The job of the peer mentors is to provide support, encouragement, and information to their mentees as the latter negotiates difficult transitions and paths to success at institutions that have been known to either benignly or actively contribute to a climate of isolation (Harper, 2013; Jacobi, 1991; Strayhorn, 2012).

An overarching goal of peer-mentoring programs, specifically relating to students of color, is to assist this group as they transition to a new environment and to support them in making academic and social adjustments (Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). Recent social media campaigns such as, “I too Am Harvard” show that regardless of the stature of the institution, students of color are experiencing similar acts of racism on predominantly white campuses (Bean, 2014). Peer mentoring establishes ways to publicly recognize and highlight students of color for their achievements in school settings, which assists them in confronting stereotypes and bias present in these systems (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Mentoring is a valuable
tool for creating relationships that are mutually beneficial (Christie, 2014). Peer mentoring has the potential to not only bolster individual achievement, self-confidence, and build community within the program, but it can also have a powerful influence on the system itself changing how the campus views and embraces students of color.

**Research Problem**

Students at historically white institutions report feeling isolated and unwelcomed in a number of spaces on campus such as classrooms, residence halls and student unions. Many campuses are in the midst of determining best practices to better support and include students of color. Critical to this study is developing an understanding how students of color involved in a peer-mentoring program at a rural, northeastern university make sense of their experiences. The researcher hopes to understand if participation with a mentor builds community and leads to a change in feelings of isolation. It is crucial for campuses to question the perceived benefits and outcomes that many assume programs offer in regards to developing a greater sense of belonging specific to students of color. Unpacking the problem and addressing systemic issues while not putting Band-Aids on symptoms, is an important component of any program a campus is implementing. Mentorship offers students the opportunity to build community both within the community of peers involved in the program as well as campus-wide, to impact the overall climate to transform the structures of an institution to benefit students of color (Strayhorn, 2012). Thoughtful examination of the experiences students of color have in a peer mentoring program during their time at a historically white institution while documenting their overall feelings of inclusion, belonging and acceptance – or lack thereof -- on campus, is vital to changing a campus culture. Also, critical is the process of providing insights into ways the university might address these
issues so that students not only survive on campus, but thrive (Harper, Museus, Roper, Rue, Pendakur, Macias & Kruger, 2015).

Deficiencies in Evidence

Despite the positive findings in the literature around peer mentoring programs, minimal is known about how they function. Few studies examine the breadth and depth of their effectiveness. Specifics on how best to run a peer-mentoring program are unclear. Deciding how best to match mentors and mentees can be a challenge. For example, Lee (1999) found that mentees in his study felt having a mentor who matched their race was less important than matching their career interests. Many students in the mentor program at the college (in the study) request a mentor who has the same major. It can be difficult to have mentors with all the necessary majors to match the mentee request. However, Leon, Dougherty, & Maitland, (1997) found that Black women preferred being matched with other Black women because they felt that they better understood their struggle. Informally, students have mentioned feeling more connected to mentors who had a similar background or identity. Understanding where a student comes from or what their culture is can create an immediate bond. Research has documented some benefits for students matched with white mentors in obtaining higher GPAs and in connecting more effectively to the broader campus community (Lee, 1999). Other studies revealed that having a mentor who identifies similarly also brings substantial benefits academically and socially (Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). The matching of mentors is complicated. Overall, however, students involved in mentoring relationships had higher grade point averages than those not participating and a greater sense of support within the mentor community as well as a more positive outlook about the institution (Bowman, 2013; Harper,
2013; Lee, 1999; Patton, 2003). Much of the research has found academic, social and leadership gains also accrued for mentors (Bowman, 2013; Lee, 1999).

Harper (2013) stated that students find value in mentoring situations where students of color can educate each other in the “secret code” for success on a historically white campus. College administrators are often uncomfortable with the idea of providing a, “secret code” or survival skills to students of color but it is a necessary component of the program. Recognizing that college campuses have a culture of their own that can be extremely white-centric and that for students of color to be successful, they need to know what the culture and expectations are of the community to thrive academically and socially (Strayhorn, 2012). Campuses must recognize and address the underlying expectation that students of color must assimilate to be successful (Weiston-Serdan, & Daneshzadeh, 2016). Students must be able to live authentically on their college campuses. Having spaces on campus meant for students of color to be able to express their cultures and feel safe are critical for racial equity of campus communities (Museus, 2010). Using a mentorship program to create a sense of belonging and inclusion for students of color in all spaces on campus is a goal of the program. Mentorship offers a space to share strategies and insight so that students can be successful from the start (Museus, 2010, Strayhorn, 2012).

**Justification of the Research Problem**

The College in the study has a troubled past. In 1995, a woman was attacked in the surrounding community, and she reported a "Black male with a cut on his hand" tried to attack her. The State Police asked the College for a list of all the Black men on campus. The Vice President of Finance gave the State Police the requested list. Black men were stopped across the campus and asked to show their hands. The criminal case was never solved, but the police probe sparked protests, lawsuits and intense discussions about racial profiling,
stereotyping, racism, and civil rights. Over two decades later, the college still struggles to assure students that changes have been made to ensure that something like this will never happen again.

At the time of the incident, the institution only officially supported students of color who were part of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) on campus. Students who qualify for the program show academic potential in light of personal and financial hardship. The program provides support from a counselor, tutors, a summer bridge program and a cohort of students who develop strong bonds and a sense of community. There was and remains a significant number of students who are not part of the access program but identify as students of color. As of the Fall 2015 semester, there were only 55 students who were part of EOP from a pool of 315 students who self-identified as a person of color. There are 418 new students of color on campus for the Fall 2016 semester; with 93 of them participating in EOP. The students of color not in EOP struggle in similar ways that the EOP students do with issues of racism and bias on campus. There is an acute demand for students of color who are not part of EOP to receive support. In 2002, the college created a position to have an office to assist students of color who were not part of EOP. The EOP program continues to support students accepted to the college through that access program. The first director of the program developed a peer mentor program for the Fall 2002 semester in response to issues related to retention and feedback from students of color. From the beginning, the purpose of the peer-mentoring program has been to support students socially and academically for success. In 2015, the third director of the program, noticing a lack of financial assistance for the mentors, applied for an internal grant to offer compensation for mentors as well as to build a stronger leadership
development component and create avenues for academic support for both mentors and mentees.

Even though the program has existed for two decades, students of color at the university in the study are graduating at a rate 10% below white students. In seeing this, the program expanded the program to include study hours where mentors are available to interact with mentees, greater contact with faculty outside of the classroom, and more one-on-one contact for students with the director and mentors. Engaging with students of color, whether a peer, faculty or staff member, has shown to improve a retention and graduation rates which were a critical outcome of the grant (Strayhorn, 2012). As of July 2016, the biggest challenge was the expectation that 20 mentors were expected to provide support for 418 students while simultaneously getting students to participate before problems were to arise. Students entering the program expressed that they previously believed they could handle their transition and negotiate issues of academic performance and race on their own (Bynum, Personal conversation, March 2014). Over the two decades that the peer mentor program has existed, informal online surveys have been administered to all new students of color on campus with a response rate of approximately 30%. Results show a sense of community within the mentor program but a lack of belonging outside of the program within the greater campus community.

Another initiative implemented on the campus in 2010 was the Bias Acts Response Team (BART), which was created to offer support for students experiencing racial profiling, bias, stereotyping, micro-aggressions as well as acts of hate. This team provides support for the victim and education for the individual’s accused. People on campus had students coming to their offices to report incidents with no structure in place to move complaints forward, so the Division of Student Affairs created clear guidelines, and the President’s cabinet supported the
creation of the team. In 2015, BART reported there were two cases where a person on campus yelled a racial slur towards a student of color (Reported to Chair of BART, Fall 2014, & Spring 2014). Students also have reported curriculum that lacks any context that represents their identities (Reported to Chair of BART, fall 2014, and spring 2015). Since the start of the team, there have been approximately 40 reports filed a year, although the team believes many students are reluctant to file complaints. These types of interactions are occurring more broadly on campuses throughout the United States (Harper et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012).

In September 2015, the College completed a Campus Climate Survey to gain perspective of the community in relation to how they were experiencing the campus. The survey results showed the school to be sexist, racist, and classist, explicitly based on the analysis of the data compiled through the campus-wide survey. The study found 22% of students identifying as Black and Latino (a) reported feeling uncomfortable on campus, and 17% reported not feeling comfortable in classrooms. Students responding to the survey also reported that they had thought about leaving the college because they have difficulty finding a friend group (Rankin, 2016). The study found that 56% of all students of color thought about leaving campus because they lacked a sense of belonging (Rankin, 2016). A disturbing piece of the research was that although there are a number of mechanisms in place to report issues of bias, students who completed the survey said they were not reporting these situations (Rankin, 2016). The results of the study created an imperative need for action speaking to the necessity of programs such as peer mentoring to provide resources to students and support for building a sense of belonging and community.
Relating the Discussion to Audiences

The study has the potential to provide the campus in question, the community and other educational systems with the necessary information for meeting the needs of students of color at predominantly white institutions. The findings could potentially change how faculty, staff, majority students and administrators perceive students of color on campus. The national conversation around issues students of color experience on historically white institutions needs to be considered and the outcomes of the study may provide answers to student concerns as college administrators plan for change. The study will benefit the students on campus who participate in the mentor program, as well as offer data to encourage those who choose not to participate. Mentorship offers students an opportunity to building community while gaining access to support for leadership roles and academic success. Giving voice to students of color will allow a greater sense of ownership and empowerment to be a change agent. The opportunity to give voice to students often excluded is vital to changing the current climate on campus.

Significance of Research Problem

This study is significant because it will contribute to understanding the effect of a peer-mentoring program as an aspect of the support provided to students of color at a historically white college. By examining the experience of students of color as they negotiate their time on a historically white campus, this study offers the opportunity to better understand the role a peer-mentoring program has in assisting in the ongoing transition students of color make throughout their college careers. It can also begin to document whether or not – and in what ways, programs like these effectively help students of color negotiate what has, at times, been reported as a hostile environment. Families of new students have a keen interest in the support
their student will receive when attending a historically white college. A qualitative study can provide documentation of the level of effectiveness the support systems at the college afford to historically underrepresented and underserved students, their parents and other interested parties. Student’s voices can assist colleges in better understanding the experience of a person of color on a historically white campus. Students of color and white students will mutually benefit from the study by developing a greater understanding of the issues presented on campus. Data acquired may also help the college that is the focus of this study as well as others, to develop strategies to create environments that support students of color socially and academically for their enhanced success (Woldoff et al. 2011).

A broader outcome from showcasing the students involved in the peer mentor program is to have faculty, administrators, and majority students see students of color significantly immersed in the campus community; this can help in breaking down stereotypes and bias. The study will also present strategies beyond the institution to guide other college campuses in developing peer-mentoring programs that have the greatest possible positive campus impact, giving administrators a framework to plan for future campus-wide efforts. The study offers an opportunity to influence the College’s current peer mentor program and the campus community in relation to diversity initiatives. Since mentors and mentees interviewed will include diverse representation of race, ethnicity, class, gender, disabilities, and sexuality, as well as class year, the scope of this study can make a significant theoretical contribution by documenting “otherness” across categories of positionality.

As a campus diversity trainer, the researcher has interacted extensively with students, faculty, and administrators who consistently express that the wellbeing of students of color is an ongoing concern. Students have reported that they are experiencing micro-aggressions and
explicit racist acts in a variety of spaces on campus. Examples include a faculty member asking a student from Colombia to speak to their experience with the drug cartel or a white student in a class making an inappropriate racist comment with no one standing up for the only Black student in the room. Microaggressions, as defined by Sue and colleagues (2009), include “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). The majority group typically disregards these situations as “not a big deal” (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Harper (2012) defined racism as the belief that one’s race is superior to another and that this idea perpetuates an extensive system of ignorance, exploitation and power used to oppress marginalized groups of people. Students of color face a number of issues related to microaggressions on college campuses; students have spoken specifically of incidents occurring in the classroom. Students who encounter microaggressions tend to face negative impacts academically and socially on campus, which ultimately affects their entire college experience (Soloranzo, 2000). For example, students speak of faculty members assuming the tall, Black male student plays basketball or questioning a Black student about a well-written paper assuming the student has cheated (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Soloranzo, 2000). Microaggressions and racism have adverse impacts on college campuses, and it is imperative that colleges establish best practices for breaking down systems that perpetuate racism while supporting students of color (Soloranzo, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). Research has documented that situations like this make students feel unsafe and demoralized on campuses where the expectation is one of protection (Bernal, 2011; Soloranzo et al., 2000).
On a national and state level, there is a crisis for students of color in relation to the achievement gap and graduation rates (NCES, 2014). The demographic of Northeast State is becoming more diverse; it is imperative that college campuses begin to rethink the perspective and programming efforts supporting students of color (Harper 2013; Fries-Britt, 1997; Museus 2008). When college campuses increase recruitment efforts to bring in students of color, it is crucial that when students arrive on predominantly white campuses, they feel welcome and part of the community or that mechanisms are put in place to move in this direction (Harper, 2013; Museus, 2010). Cuyjet (1997) described the misconceived identity of Brown and Black men as “threatening, unfriendly and less intelligent than any other distinguishable segment of the American population” (p. 8). These misconceived identities of Brown and Black men create tremendous barriers to academic and social success on historically white institutions. The experience of students of color varies, but far too many are reporting acts of bias and racism in their classrooms and public spaces on campus (Harper, 2013).

The proposed study has the potential to provide a rural Northeast campus and community, as well as a Regional Education System, with the necessary information for meeting the needs of students of color at historically white institutions. The findings could potentially change how faculty, staff, majority students and administrators perceive students of color on campus and offer insights as to how best to approach the work of creating an inclusive environment. There is also the hope that this research will give voice to students who often express feeling excluded and not believed because of the default way many people perceive people of color. This change in mindset is imperative if the ultimate goal is to change the current climate on the campus.
The research clearly shows that there are serious concerns for students of color on historically white campuses, regardless of type, size or location of the institution (Britt-Fries, 1997; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002; Museus, 2010). Creating programs such as peer mentoring is not enough, but it is a good beginning. Campuses must continuously evaluate programs and the outcomes of the efforts (Smith & Parker, 2005). College leaders must send clear, consistent messages to the entire campus community about the expectations and commitment to students of color (Kezar, Eckel, Contreras-McGavin, & Quaye, 2008). Faculty must look at curriculum and biases to create an inclusive classroom experience (hooks, 1994; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The goal of work related to equity and inclusion is generally to educate based on research and assist in creating strategies to impact change. Building a campus where all students feel welcomed, included and valued is the ultimate goal of the proposed study.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of students of color at a rural, upstate Northeast College. By examining the role a peer-mentoring program plays in how students of color describe their experiences on campus, the central research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- *How do students of color make sense of their experiences on a historically white college campus in the Northeast?*
  - *How do students of color experience racism on the college campus?*
  - *What role does the peer mentoring program play in supporting students of color when facing issues of racism at the institution?*
Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theorists recognize the embedded nature of racism systemically in society; they posit that Brown and Black people experience racism every day (Delgado & Sefancic, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2000). Critical Race Theory (CRT) relies on the voice of marginalized people and aims to create space for counter-narratives as a key way to begin to break down systemic racism. Critical Race Theorists base their arguments on the premise that race is a social construct that perpetuates whiteness as a norm. Many researchers have built on Derrick Bell’s (1992) initial work involving critical race through the lens of the law. Bell is known as the “Father of Critical Race Theory” (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Bell coined the concept of interest convergence where the interest of equality for people of color only advances when individuals in power are interested in achieving the same (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In short, when people see the benefits for the majority and underrepresented people, then the movement is made towards change.

Theorists in education have evolved to view pedagogy through a CRT lens, a movement that has created discussion and a realization that racism is embedded in school systems today (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Soloranzo, 2000). Looking at the experience of students of color on college campuses using a Critical Race lens has allowed researchers to analyze and document the ways in which students of color experience isolation, marginalization, and exclusion at historically white institutions (Harper, 2013; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

The work of W.E.B. Dubois is crucial to understanding and utilizing a Critical Race perspective. Dubois (1995) outlined a historical perspective of race and education naming racism as well as calling for change. Dubois (1995) coined the idea of, “double consciousness” where people of color are forced to have more than one social identity. This is due to the overarching pressure to view their identity simultaneously through their distinct culture of
marginalization while also through the dominant white culture. On historically white campuses, the constant pressure to negotiate this double consciousness of primarily being in white spaces and adjusting to white normative structures can be incredibly exhausting and frustrating for students of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Indeed, Morrison has documented that the stress many students of color experience attending a historically white college where the majority race sees themselves – overtly or subconsciously -- as superior can be “overwhelming” (Morrison, 2010).

Creating opportunities for educators to interact with students of color in formal and informal settings that allow for growth and understanding around bias and stereotypes with the goal of moving towards dialogues that address whiteness is crucial to building an equitable and inclusive college community environment (Bowman, 2013; Smith, Yosso & Soloranzo, 2007). Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2008) stressed the importance of developing a Critical Race lens to evaluate the educational system. Bell (1992) had posited earlier that racism is a permanent fixture of American life; similarly, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), the educational system is embedded historically in racism, which creates barriers for all students to receive equitable instruction. For this reason, it is crucial to expose racism in all forms and structures of the educational environment.

To this end, using CRT by engaging storytelling in breaking down stereotypes and bias has proven a powerful tool to assist in changing racist practices and structures (Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Storytelling impacts the majority culture by changing hearts (Kotter, 2002). Kotter (2002) asserted that personal stories could transform organizations by developing a thorough understanding of how all members were experiencing the environment. Marginalized communities find storytelling a powerful tool in discovering common ground with
members of the dominant group that offers greater opportunity to move people jointly towards action (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Delpit (1988) also helped develop CRT and insisted that deconstructing the “culture of power” is necessary to impact change that will positively transform the experiences of Black, Brown and poor students. Solórzano et al., (2000) used CRT for education to address issues related to micro-aggressions and campus racial climate. CRT speaks to the everyday occurrences of racist incidents demonstrated through the experiences shared by students. Research has documented that students of color commonly talk about feeling, “invisible” in the classroom setting as well as feeling isolated and “out of place” (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Morrison, 2010). The research verifies students’ feelings of exclusion from groups in classrooms, and they believe this is due to people believing stereotypes that, “Black people are dumb.” Morrison (2010) shows students reporting that African Americans were omitted, distorted and stereotyped in the curriculum presented by the faculty member. Students felt that the faculty had low expectations, and one student reported a faculty member accusing her of cheating after doing well on the exam (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). More importantly, when people of color point out micro-aggressions, whites tend to deny and think the person of color is “over sensitive” or “misunderstanding the situation” (Ancis & Sedlacek & Mohr, 2000; Minikel Lacocque, 2013; Sue et al, 2009). Understanding the daily assaults students of color experience using CRT can assist in moving communities to unpack the barriers in place for success.

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Scholars have outlined five main tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), including: (a) permanence of racism; (b) counter-storytelling; (c) whiteness as a property; (d) interest
convergence; and (e) the critique of liberalism (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Critical Race theorists, as documented in the Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education (Lynn & Dixson, 2013) generally assert that racism is a permanent fixture in society and that people of color experience racism on a daily basis often multiple times in a variety of spaces (Harper, 2013; Soloranzo, 2000). Counter storytelling gives the study the opportunity to use student voices to share their stories that create a picture that counters the stereotypes most are familiar with (Delpit, 1998; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). CRT recognizes that, “whiteness” is a race and that it frames norms and campus communities that create spaces that are not inclusive of others. Unpacking issues of whiteness creates dialogues for understanding the culture and how it impacts all of us (Delpit, 1998; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Interest convergence makes it clear that unless there are benefits to all people there will not be change for people of color (Bell, 1995). People must gain something personally in order to move to transform systems. Breaking down what liberalism means and how it has done some harm to transforming change systemically is a critical component of CRT. Relying on being a “liberal” will not change an institution (Bell, 1995). CRT confronts dominant ideology by challenging the claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society. CRT postulates that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and an integral part of analyzing and understanding racial inequality. CRT takes an interdisciplinary perspective when focusing most analyses; it insists that race and racism be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods. CRT is a framework that is committed to a social justice agenda with a goal of eliminating all forms of subordination of people (Lynn & Dixon, p. 1-126).
Inequities in policing and schools are clear examples of the permanence of racism that exists in the United States (Harper, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; hooks, 1994). CRT functions to challenge “the experience of White European Americans as the normative standard” (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn & Arrona, 2006, p. 251). For far too long, the educational systems have approached students of color from a deficit model of thinking, placing blame for academic failure on families and/or a student’s lack of intelligence; rarely do schools systems look to the educator as the problem (hooks, 1994; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Ladson- Billings, 2001; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). CRT gives educators a lens to work towards breaking down deficit thinking to ensure the success of students of color (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). Soloranzo and colleagues explain CRT as “simultaneously attempting to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color” (Soloranzo et al., 2000, p. 63). Recognizing that racism is a systemic issue that has perpetuated for centuries allows the researcher to begin the study from that perspective.

Ikemoto (1995) emphasizes the significance of including the voice of people of color to develop a greater understanding of “whiteness” as property. Ikemoto (1995) believes that if people of color interpret their experience through a white lens, they will only reinforce their subordination. Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) speak of systems such as policies and culture that benefit and maintain white privilege. They see whiteness as a social construct that maintains white privilege while seeing people outside a racial identity of white as subordinate. Scholars assert that white people have separated themselves from their race so that it is invisible to them and only them (Leonardo, 2002). Deconstructing whiteness to break down the superiority, lack
of understanding, and valuing the lived experiences of families of color is imperative to the educational system and CRT (Delpit, 1988).

According to Delgado and Strefancic (2001), CRT “embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress and questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law and education” (p. 1). CRT analytically examines the liberal perspective that has supported benefits such as Affirmative Action, which has ultimately served to benefit white women (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Education must, therefore, focus on whiteness and the impacts on our educational system (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In short, the authors recognize that change often occurs due to the benefits the majority group receives from the transaction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). On college campuses, the 2015-2016 protests created situations that bring interest convergence to the forefront for those who are using a Critical Race lens. Colleges have newly accepted that they have much to gain from creating a campus where students of color feel valued and included (Kezar, 2007). These tenets of CRT apply directly to this study, which examines the role of peer mentors for students of color at a historically white institution because, in order to change how students of color are experiencing white schools, there must be an unpacking of the systemic issues that keeps racism alive and well. The tenets of CRT will guide the researcher in building understanding from the students’ perspectives on how they understand their experience at a historically white institution. Recognizing the embedded nature of racism in the structures on campus and listening to the voice of the students to understand the struggle can bring to the forefront the powerful storytelling experience that, as CRT has identified, can enable effective recognition and transformation of structural racism more broadly. The study relies on CRT to move forward a social justice
agenda to change the narrative students on campus are currently facing. CRT as a framework is vital to the study as it enables a greater understanding of the perspectives of students of color and the need to design an effective call to action supporting a historically white institution in its intentions to change (Lynn & Dixson, 2013).

**Conclusion**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a framework to support beliefs and understanding through student perspective and reflection of their experiences. The ability to frame the study using CRT allows the researcher to approach the study with a thorough knowledge of the systemic issues of racism that students are experiencing at historically white institutions. A qualitative study allows the researcher to bring the students’ perspective and sense making to the problems faced on campus as well as the role mentorship plays in changing the current narrative. A study that delves deep into the issue of racism from the perspective of students of color during a time the nation is struggling with understanding the issues is most important. The recognition that students of color experience racism on a daily basis allows the study to unpack the barriers and dig deeper to develop a greater understanding of the root causes as the students of color describe their perspective and stories. Using a peer mentor program through a CRT lens allows the researcher to establish an opportunity to support students of color and develop suggestions for other colleges to move their institutions toward change. The time has come where universities must act so that students of color thrive on predominantly white campuses.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

College campuses can be intimidating environments for students of color. Peer Mentoring Programs are one way to support and change the narrative for students of color. As predominantly white institutions (PWI) recruit more students of color, it is imperative that the implications for Brown and Black students’ sense of belonging and inclusion be considered (Harper, 2013). Scholars report students of color feeling marginalized, silenced and targeted in educational spaces, residence halls and social settings (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Quaye et al. 2015). These researchers concur colleges need to address the concerns of students of color as well as educate faculty and students on issues related specifically to bias and microaggressions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kezar et al., 2008; Quaye et al., 2015). The experience of bias marginalized students encounter on college campuses has implications around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. The research has documented that peer mentoring has a positive impact on the experience students of color have at historically white institutions (Quaye et al., 2015) and that students of color in mentoring relationships tend to have more positive overall feelings about the institution they attend (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006). Positive connotations about the college offer potential to impact campus climate, alumni relations as well as change the attitudes of majority students involved with mentoring (Sanchez et al., 2006). Researchers posit the necessity to determine the best practices to have the outcomes mentioned above (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991).

This chapter will examine literature related to peer mentoring for students of color at a historically white institution. The literature reviewed will explore issues related to racism, and programs for supporting students of color through the following lenses (1) issues impacting students of color throughout the student’s academic career (2) students of color and
campus climate issues and (3) the role of peer mentoring in altering the current narrative for students of color including definition, supporting needs, impact of program, mentor-mentee pairing and culture in respect to students and campuses.

To develop a picture of what the educational system presents for students of color, the literature review will examine the issues students of color face throughout the student’s academic career specifically referencing the role of the teacher. The reviewed literature will examine white culture and explore the lack of understanding around whiteness as it pertains to the educational system and specifically addresses its impact related to the students of color throughout their academic careers. In addition, the literature will examine the role peer mentoring plays in changing the narrative for students of color, specifically on historically white college campuses. The intent of the review is to inspect the issues in the educational system through a critical lens.

**Issues Impacting Students of Color Throughout the Student’s Academic Career**

According to the most recent data from the Department of Education, Black preschoolers are disciplined at a rate three times as great as white classmates (Rich, 2014). The Department of Education data shows 48% of preschool suspensions were among Black students who only make up 18% of all pupils attending preschool (Rich, 2014). Similar issues continue for students of color as they move through the K-12 educational system. Scholars have asserted that these staggering statistics must change if students of color are to succeed. The statistics indicate issues related to race with educators believing that students of color come to schools with a deficit in their ability to succeed. Racism is real, and something must be done to deconstruct the oppressive systems in place throughout the education systems (hooks, 1994;
Ladson-Billings 2001; Michael, 2015). From pre-school through college, students of color face barriers due to a deficit approach in pedagogy and this matter must be addressed.

**Pedagogical Racism: The Deficit Model**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) reported that Black students continue to trail white students with respect to educational access, achievement, and degree attainment throughout the educational system. Research on the effectiveness of teachers of Black students emphasizes that the teachers’ beliefs about the Black students’ potential significantly affects they way teachers approach students of color specifically and has impacts on how students learn (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Michael, 2015). Research indicates that educators tend to teach Black students’ from a deficit perspective. This perspective assumes the student is lacking in ability or family support, leading teachers to believe students of color will not have the same success as their white classmates. The deficit model of instruction attempts to force students into the existing system of teaching and learning and does not consider cultural characteristics or preferences in learning (Delpit, 2002; hooks, 1994; Michael, 2015). When students of color are not having academic success, schools tend to focus on the external factors to the school such as family support (Cooper, 2003; Delpit, 2002; Michael, 2015). Schools rarely look at the effectiveness of the white teacher in relation to students of color. Scholars believe that in depth consideration of how white educators enter into teaching with preconceptions about students of color needs to be examined further.

**The Impact of White Culture**

The literature overwhelmingly shows an education field dominated by white educators (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Michael, 2015; Miller, 2010). White educators need to examine best practices to recognize implicit bias and to change the way they see themselves in
relation to students of color to influence change (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Michael (2015) recommends that in order to change practices such as the deficit model mentioned above, white teachers need to do self-work to examine whiteness and how implicit bias affects students of color. Education must focus on whiteness and the impacts it has on the educational system. Without this self-examination, white teachers will not move past the idea of the “White Savior” (Miller, 2010). Ladson-Billings (2006) believes it is crucial that educational systems examine and deconstruct whiteness. The research has focused on issues and problems faced by people of color instead of considering the source of these situations that on many levels may be white people.

The literature shows that exploring whiteness to gain a greater sense of white culture as the norm creates avenues for educators to deconstruct the classroom, so it becomes a place for learning that embraces all cultures (Delpit, 1988). When teachers work with families to understand the cultures represented in their classes, students are found to have greater success. Through the lens of supremacy, it appears to be a “Black issue,” when in reality it is a white problem of not understanding the systems and norms that benefit white people and disregarding the perspective of others (Delpit, 1988). With the majority of educators being white, it becomes a systemic issue with faculty educating pre-service teachers in ways that support deficit thinking.

The faculty member has the power, and the student’s grade became the consequence of the disobedience (Bourdieu, 1989; Delpit, 1988). Creating an environment that is open to discussing these situations is vital to impacting change. Instructors need to evaluate practices in relation to beliefs, as well as recognize and assess the position of power held in classrooms (Cooper, 2003). Deconstructing whiteness to break down the superiority, lack of understanding
and valuing the lived experiences of students of color is imperative to change the educational system (Delpit, 1988). Colleges need to reach out to communities to form partnerships to break the cycle that continues to generate negativity on all indicators such as education and health for people of color.

**Academic and Social Implications**

Students who feel threatened may suffer from a decline in academic performance as well as affect their well-being (Cureton, 2003). Students of color face situations that challenge their self-concepts and often force them to assimilate. Harper (2012) believes colleges focus on “helping” students rather than addressing the toxic environment that leads to dissatisfaction and psychological distress. Educational institutions look for new initiatives that will solve the “problem” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The idea of having dialogues around potentially challenging issues receives push back on some campuses. One way to break down stereotypes and bias is to showcase students of color achievements and success in public ways on campus. Another strategy is to educate faculty and other members of the college campus as to how they can best support students of color in each of their roles. When all members of the campus community are engaged in creating an inclusive environment, campuses can work towards changing the current narrative specific to students of color.

Analyzing students’ grade point averages, retention, and graduation rates provide some perspective of the experience of students of color, but it does not impart a complete picture (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). When these numbers are positive, there is a “pat on the back,” touting the positive programs and supportive staff having an impact (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). The reality is that some students have no choice but to stay and have to weigh the benefits of a college degree with the treatment they endure on some college campuses. Many students of
color leave predominantly white institutions because of an issue with adjusting socially, not necessarily academically (Woldoff et al., 2011). When students of color have difficulty finding community and friends, it reinforces the sense of exclusion and isolation. Campuses must be intentional in their efforts to reach out specifically to students of color to create opportunities for students to make connections with other students and faculty. Students who engage in campus programs feel far more connected and included. The research shows some students of color have overcome tremendous hardship to get to college and continue to face barriers on campus to make it to graduation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Classroom experiences create a complex framework for students of color that needs further investigation. Changing the focus in schools to have teachers look inward at bias in relation to white culture will take time (Leonardo, 2002). The current situation in schools for students of color must change. Teachers are a critical piece of this complicated puzzle (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Understanding the issues and self-examination are critical first steps to better supporting students of color in a variety of spaces on college campuses and specifically in classrooms settings (Delpit, 1988). When teachers fail to recognize the implicit bias in their classrooms, students of color can suffer academically and socially. The ability to examine the role of the educator in the educational experience is crucial for change. The negative impacts on communities of color have been too high (Delpit, 1988). Schools cannot continue to sit back while students of color are not having the same success as white classmates (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Educators have the ability to change the trajectory for students of color by working towards a greater understanding of their implicit bias. The exploration will continue by reviewing literature that addresses issues that affect students of color at predominantly white colleges.
**Students of Color and Campus Climate Issues**

After successfully navigating a school system historically embedded in racism, students of color that attend historically white institutions encounter new but similar barriers. Although many organizations speak of diversity, equity and inclusion in their brochures and websites contain photos of students of color, students wonder where all the Brown and Black people on the website have gone once students arrive on campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Harper (2013) explains that family and friends forewarn students of color of the situations they will encounter on predominantly white campuses. Even with the warnings, students are not prepared for what they face on campus. Colleges have increased recruitment efforts for students of color but have not done enough work to create an atmosphere where students of color feel safe and included in the community. Students of color feel an overwhelming responsibility to educate majority students about the situations students of color face daily, which can be extremely frustrating (Morrison, 2010). Majority students tend to think they are not racist and are not forced to examine their behaviors in relation to Brown and Black students. Advertising and hiring peer mentors from a diverse group of students where other students learn and grow together creates an opportunity for majority students to change perspectives in relation to students of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

**Microaggressions and Stereotype Threat**

Students of color report “Onlyness” that Harper (2013) defines as the emotional burden of tactically negotiating racially divided situations with few role models of the same race. Black student leaders on campus reported the pressure to be exceptional, as well as act a spokesperson for an entire race. “Onlyness” is particularly challenging when students are the only person of color in classes. Faculty members call on Brown and Black students to speak for their entire race...
during class discussions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Students feel singled out and in some cases feel the immense pressure to prove the professor and classmates wrong (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Students’ report issues involving microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle insults directed toward people of color, often unconsciously done by the other person (Harper, 2009; Sue et al., 2009; Torres-Harding & Andrade & Diaz, 2012). An example of a microaggression would be a Black man walks into an elevator, and a white woman steps back and clutches purse (Sue et al., 2009).

Solórzano & Ceja and Yosso (2000) discuss the issues related to stereotype threat that creates situations where students worry about self-fulfilling some stereotype related to their identity or being treated by others based on a stereotype. Harper (2009) terms this “Ni**erring” which deals primarily with the way research has portrayed the Black male student. The portrayal of Black men in the media reinforcing stereotypes such as underperformers and criminals creates situations where educators have low expectations for Black male students. Additionally, students of color state that majority students believe the only reason they are on campus is due to affirmative action. These beliefs are areas of misinformation that perpetuate the stereotype that students of color have lower intelligence (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Solórzano et al. (2000) research addresses issues related to micro-aggressions and campus racial climate. In this study, students spoke of feeling invisible in the classroom setting. Students report feeling isolated and “out of place” (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Morrison, 2010). Students’ state feelings of exclusion from groups in classrooms and believe the exclusion is due to people believing stereotypes that Black people are less intelligent. Students also report that faculty members omit, distort and stereotype African Americans in the curriculum presented in college classrooms. Students felt that the faculty had low expectations, and one student reported
a faculty member accusing the student of color of cheating after doing well on the exam (Sue et al., 2009). More importantly, when people of color point out micro-aggressions whites tend to deny and think the person of color is over sensitive or misunderstanding the situation (Ancis et al., Sue et al., 2009).

Identity Development

Issues around self and identity researched in relation to historically disadvantaged social groups found that people perceived the implicit bias against self differently than the explicit bias inflicted on the group (Carney, Banaji and Krieger, 2009). The study found that women and Black Americans have internalized or suppressed personal experiences with discrimination. On campuses, this proves to be a challenge as students investigate their identities and begin to unpack the incidents of racism, sexism, classism, able-ism, heterosexism, and the impact on students of color particularly. Morrison (2010) discusses the stages of identity development and students progressing from assimilation to educator. Students, much like the people in the study, seem to distance themselves from the discrimination especially when they have successfully assimilated into the campus community (Morrison, 2010). As students move through course work where they begin to unpack their identities students seem to develop deeper understanding of issues of oppression and assimilation. By senior year, students on the campus in the study begin to work towards educating others. Some researchers find people of color who have successfully assimilated and many white people approach the topic of racism from a color-blind perspective offering a counterargument.

Counterargument

There is some support for a color-blind perspective to diversity in higher education (Connerly, 2007). The idea of color-blind refers to the idea that race should not and does not
matter (Connerly, 2007). Seeing all people as human beings is an example used by some people to show that they are not racist. For quite some time, the color-blind approach was seen as the best way to move past racism although many have come out stating that not “seeing” race devalues people (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Recognizing the historical implications of race and naming it is essential in unpacking the barriers that keep people where they are. Color-blindness speaks to liberalism and white people not understanding issues of racism but wanting to do the right thing (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). The attitude that all that is needed is hard work to be successful is an issue that continues to create systems that force people to remain in a, “holding pattern,” not solving the systemic issues that obstruct barriers to change.

Connerly (2007) stated that even though there are increases in discrimination against Black people, there is no need for Affirmative Action or preferential treatment for people of color. A study conducted by Hart, Loewy, Navarro & Worthington (2008) using the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) found that whites perceived the campus climate more positively than students of color. On campuses, white students are less likely to see the relevance of personal culture in relation to the community. The perspective of many whites is due to the systemic structures designed for white students. The study cautions educators and policymakers from adopting a color-blind perspective in their quest to develop a more welcoming and inclusive environment. The lived experiences of many people of color shows a counter-narrative to support Critical Race Theorists in their understanding of racism as an embedded structure in all systems.

**Underlying Issue of Racism**

Meanwhile, Harper (2012) contends that researchers addressing issues on college campuses are failing to address the underlying issue of the experience of students of color.
Harper includes some personal research in this category. Harper (2012) analyzed how racism appears in higher education academic journals. The strategy was to examine the use of the words “racism” and “racist” within the literature of the top seven journals in higher education. It was found within the research that students are encountering hostile, unwelcoming, isolating, harmful, and unfriendly, discriminatory, exclusionary, and unsupportive environments. Harper (2012) thinks researchers are failing to address the underlying issues of racism on college campuses that directly impact the students of color and their experiences. The inability of researchers to name racism as an underlying issue speaks volumes to the avoidance on historically white campuses to have the necessary conversations about racism and truly impact change on campus. Harper (2012) believes that it is imperative to have the research address the issues concerning racism and racist behaviors.

The literature shows serious implications for students of color in relation to the campus climate at historically white institutions (Harper, 2013). It is imperative that colleges look closely at the policies, procedures and behaviors in the community to create a more welcoming Environment. bell hooks (1994) states that racism is a permanent fixture of American life. The time has come to recognize the systems in place so change can occur. The ability to intentionally insert opportunities on college campuses to discuss situations students of color experience being mindful of including diverse voices is imperative for change. Next, the role of peer mentoring in altering the narrative on the experience of students of color is reviewed.
The Role of Peer Mentoring on a Historically White Campus

Definitions and Role

Mentoring is found to be a significant component for historically underrepresented student success on college campuses (Patton & Harper, 2003). Students of color on historically white campuses find mentors critical in their learning about the campus culture and assisting in their transition to what, in some cases, are an environment very different from where they were raised. A peer mentor is a student who can serve as a resource, a helping hand, a sounding board, active liaison to campus offices and a referral service (Jacobi, 1991). The job of peer mentors is to provide support, encouragement, and information to their mentee. Mentors assist in building community and networks for the students of color. Some challenges found in defining the role of the mentor and mentee play out in the power structures of the relationships (Crisp, 2009).

Having clear expectations and definitions of roles is an important component of the mentoring relationship for both mentors and mentees. Mentees who thought mentors were going to act in a parenting role were hesitant to participate. Mentors play a critical role in a difficult transition from high school to college for students (Bernier, Larose & Soucy, 2005). The role of the mentee or protégé primarily will be to work closely with the assigned mentor. It is crucial that the mentees ask questions and listens to the advice of the mentors. Mentors must receive extensive training so that the role is clear and that the expectations are understood (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, & Carbon, 2011). Trainings should occur prior to starting in the role as a mentor and continue during the academic year as professional development. Mentors have the ability to grow as professionals and leaders. Mentors must know the boundaries of their role and the necessary referrals to other campus support if required.
(Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Mentees and Mentors must be comfortable letting the Director of the Program know if there are any concerns or issues. In addition, both parties must be honest if the relationship is not ideal and that a new mentor or mentee is appreciated. Explicitly defining the roles of both mentor and mentee is an important component to ensure the success of the program.

**Pairing Mentors and Mentees**

Mentoring is considered one of the positive factors in academic and career achievement on college campuses (Patton, 2003). Relationships established through mentoring are crucial to the success of the program (Lee, 1999). Patton (2003) found that men tend to have mentors more than women and that women of color preferred having mentors who identified similarly to themselves (Leon et al., 1997). Women of color felt that other women with similar identities would understand the issues related to the intersecting identities as well as be someone who was in the struggle. Other studies revealed that having a mentor who identifies similarly also brings substantial benefits academically and socially (Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Pairing students on historically white campuses with similar identities can be a challenge. Myers (2002) believes that it is crucial that a mentor who does not match by race or gender have a deep understanding of the politics around difference. Majority students who mentor marginalized students must comprehend the challenges that emerge for people of color. Although interracial friendships can be difficult to form and maintain, a recent study found that students of color earn higher grade point averages when roommates are white (Shook & Fazio, 2008). Relationships across identities bring students together in ways that break down stereotypes and bias as well.
Crucial for the mentoring relationship is establishing effective communication and trust (Lee, 1999). Additional research shows that students of color found race less important for matching. The students in the study felt that having a mentor in the career field of interest was of greater value. The idea of having a mentor who has similar career aspirations would help in obtaining a degree and possible career support (Lee, 1999). Students stated the opportunity to find connections culturally and racially were obtainable outside the institution or within clubs and organizations on campus. Students also felt that having a mentor from the majority culture would assist in greater understanding of the dominant culture (Lee, 1999). Students of color learn from peers how to negotiate dual identities to survive in a bi-culture environment (Fries-Britt, 2002). Fries-Brit (1997) found that high-achieving students of color reported that the support from peers was what kept them at the institution and was crucial to their success.

**Training for Peer Mentors**

The research stresses the importance of mentor training. Mentors must explicitly understand the role and expectations of the position (Jacobi, 1991; Mavrinac, 2005). The ability to establish a strong relationship with the mentee is crucial to the success of the interactions (Mavrinac, 2005). Developing a learning culture has the potential to create transformational change for mentor and mentee throughout their college career. Mentor programs need to develop and clearly state vision, mission, and goals as well as presenting these so that mentors and mentees understand the significance of the role held (Mavrinac, 2005).

Peer mentors must have extensive knowledge of the support systems in place on the college campus. Peer mentors need to understand the referral processes on campus as well as their role in referring students and not keeping serious issues private (Jacobi, 1991). Majority students involved in the mentoring program must have an understanding of the issues students of
color experience and recognize that as white people it may not always be easy to understand the students of color’s experiences or perspectives (Harper, 2013). Mentors must believe and encourage mentees as well as reach out to the appropriate offices for reporting and supporting students of color in the process (Bernier et al., 2005).

**Supporting Mentor Program through Other Campus Initiatives**

College campuses tend to offer diversity programs open to all students with the intention of changing perspectives. However, a lack of assessment leaves people unsure of the impacts. Somewhat unexpected, McClelland and Linnander (2006) found that programs were not just “preaching to the choir” but that their positive effects impacted all who attended. Programs that educate about race take pressure off the students of color to educate peers. Creating a program that specifically works with white student allies (that end up working together with students of color for intergroup dialogues) might be a program that could create opportunities for friendships to develop (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Personal relationships and stories influence beliefs around stereotypes in a positive way. Creating opportunities for students of color to interact with majority students is vital in changing the perception of historically underrepresented students on campus. A fundamental component of the relationship is to not rely on the person of color to educate the white person. It is crucial that diversity programs are assessing outcomes and examining data to determine if programs are accomplishing the intended goals (Arredondo & Perez, 2003).

On campus, a peer-mentoring program begins the semester with a “Survival Skills” for navigating the college campus (Harper, 2013). Giving students of color insider information about faculty members who are supportive as well as the ones to avoid can be critical for a student’s transition to the campus and academic success. Unfortunately, many of the answers to
change the negative situations students of color encounter fall back on the student (Morrison, 2010). Some people express shock by the term, “survival,” which shows the lack of understanding of how marginalized students feel on historically white campuses (Harper, 2013). Campus communities need to understand that students of color are not necessarily experiencing their campuses in the same ways white students are and that having people acting as guides to the campus can have positive results. Peer mentoring offers students the support and necessary information to have success in a space that does not always feel welcoming (Quaye et al., 2015). Peer mentors offer an opportunity to build community and develop friendships with students feeling more connected on campus. Holding students of color to the highest expectation, explaining the culture of the campus, valuing their voice and supporting them through their journey is critical to success (Smith, 2014).

McClelland & Linnander (2006) stress the importance of learning about “in and out-groups,” where both students of color and majority students can benefit from understanding another individual’s perspectives as well as recognizing the necessary behavior changes between groups. The ultimate goal is for group members to work together to generate affective ties between “in and out groups.” Allowing space for students of color to be with people like them is crucial for developing a community of support and understanding that can only be found within a group. Bringing together students of color and majority students can create a new “in-group.” Reappraising the “in-group” identity and role in the community has the potential to break down the negative experiences of the “out-group.” Intergroup friendships optimize the complex interaction between students. Harper & Hurtado (2007) also found that colleges needed to create spaces and opportunities with the intention of having a cross-racial engagement. Cross-race interactions are especially important during a student’s
first year on campus. Friendships support attitudinal change. Although the study showed greater impact when students formed friendships themselves, intentionally offering space for conversations might assist in building friendships.

**Diversifying Faculty to Support Students**

Perewardy and Frey (2002) recommend increasing faculty of color on campus. Students of color gravitate towards faculty of color as well as people the students consider allies for support and guidance in navigating the college campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Faculty of color influences the diversity in the curriculum as well as change the classroom experience for all students. Colleges need to develop ways to increase cultural awareness and commitment to encouraging diversity and inclusion on college campuses. Some universities are utilizing cluster hires around projects to employ more diverse faculty. Advertising in more diverse publications and relying on networking to bring in a broad representation of identities when hiring new faculty is a strategy to diversify the candidate pool (Kezar et al., 2008). Creating opportunities for students involved in the mentor program to meet faculty members who represent diverse communities and allies is an important component to incorporate (Lee, 1999). The ability to introduce students of color to people on campus who will be supportive is an additional way to build community.

**Cultural Clubs and Centers**

Another essential component in creating a more inclusive school climate is the availability of ethnic and cultural student organizations on campus, as well as spaces such as Black Student Unions or Multicultural Centers. Museus (2008) finds it crucial to provide spaces where students can connect with other students who identify similarly to support each other and work together to overcome challenges encountered on campus. Students need areas to form
coalitions and spaces to work with allies. Harper & Hurtado (2007) state that even with a Black Cultural Center, the climate will not change if stereotypes perpetuate in curriculum and classrooms. In addition, leadership must acknowledge the groups and engage people in intentional dialogues to aid in the education of the majority group. Students need spaces that allow for authenticity without fear of judgments (Museus, 2008).

**Impact of Mentor Program**

Students participating in mentoring programs report greater overall satisfaction with their institutions (Sanchez et al., 2006). As previously mentioned, students of color have additional barriers to finding a welcoming climate on campus. Knowing the situation will allow intentionality in breaking down barriers offering an opportunity to provide a sense of community, at least among the participants, while increasing the overall satisfaction of their college experience. Mentoring programs show benefits to both the mentor and mentee. In one study, mentors had increased academic success (Good & Halpin, 2000). The researchers believe the academic success stemmed from the motivation to be a strong role model for the mentee (Good & Halpin, 2000; Miller, 2002). Further research is necessary to understand all the benefits mentors receive.

Crisp and Cruz (2009) found that students of color were twice as likely to persist on a college campus compared to the non-mentored peers as well as have earned higher grade point averages. Students of color educating each other formally and informally through mentorship are essential. Mentorship programs offer new students a support person to assist in navigating a new space that may be drastically different from the students’ home. Students often reach out to other students of color informally to educate new students about issues that may present themselves on campus. Students will share information about the campus and invite mentees to events and
programs to help new student’s adjustment to campus life.

**Leadership Programs to Change Experience**

Some researchers have used mentoring programs as leadership development to assist students in transitioning from high school to college (Orr et al., 2007). The ability to create a sense of belonging among the mentor community allows students a space on campus where they can feel connected and accepted (Museus, 2008). Showcasing students of color in leadership positions on campus offers opportunities to share a counter-narrative that has implications in breaking down stereotypes and bias faced on campus (Harper, 2009). Building student leaders who represent a diverse community assist in breaking down stereotypes as well as change the school culture (Orr et al., 2007). The ability to have students of color in key leadership positions is vital to changing the campus climate. Faculty, staff and other students on campus see students of color in leadership roles more positively.

**Impacting Campus Culture and Perspective of Students of Color**

A substantial impact of being involved in the peer-mentoring program is the change in attitudes about a university (Sanchez et al., 2006). The opportunity to change the way students of color feel about a historically white campus has tremendous implications. Sanchez et al. (2006) believe that universities implementing structured peer mentoring programs have the ability to positively change a student's feeling about the institution. Collings et al., (2014) found students involved in peer mentoring showed greater acceptance into the university community and were less likely to leave the institution. It was also found that first-year students indicated that the mentor had assisted in a smooth transition to campus life (Collings et al. 2014). Peer mentoring needs to be intentional, organized and thoughtful in planning program goals and purpose. In a brief survey administered at the campus in the study, students expressed feeling a
sense of community within the current mentoring program but still felt disconnected and not welcomed within the greater campus community (Campus Survey, December 2014). Building a mentor program that creates community within the group as well as outside the group is a crucial component when working to impact campus culture (McClelland & Linnander, 2006).

Students of color come to historically white institutions with varying cultural identities that impact perceptions around language, religion and customs (Lee, 1999). Students of color have different experiences and backgrounds that create a framework for their understanding and perspective of the culture of the institution. Campuses rarely address students’ personal cultures when planning new initiatives to support students. Lee (1999) believes institutions have clear cultures that do not always match students of color. Historically, this has resulted in the isolation of underrepresented students. Peer mentors have the ability to develop relationships that educate students of color about the unwritten rules and culture of an institution.

**Summation**

Overwhelmingly, historically white institutions have campus climates that are unwelcoming and silencing for students of color (Kezar et al., 2008). When students of color experience negative interactions on historically white campuses, they are often impacted in ways that adversely influence their overall success and well-being. The research shows the positive role peer mentoring has on mentees, mentors, and universities (Bernier et al., 2005). The ability of historically white institutions to create a peer-mentoring program that can change the experience of students of color should be a top priority. Peer mentoring offers opportunities for students to have the support that aids in the transition both academically and socially (Crisp, 2009). The analysis of the problem of practice related to campus climate and diversity shows
students are experiencing racism in a variety of forms and it has negative implications for success. Many predominantly white colleges have the best intentions without much success in transforming their climate to have students of color feel included and respected. The challenges are abundant, but change is necessary. Peer mentoring may be a way to support students of color to begin breaking down barriers to success. Peer mentoring offers an avenue to influence how students of color feel about an institution. Improving how people on campus view students through leadership programs and opportunities to lead will begin to break down bias that majority group members hold. Additionally, having spaces where students of color can feel supported and have the ability to be themselves all build an environment where students of color feel a sense of belonging, valued and included (Strayhorn, 2012). Campuses need to incorporate the kind of change that is deep, pervasive and intentional. Harper & Hurtado (2007) explain that type of change, as one that reflects a profound change in values, impacts daily operations, and is prevalent so that the entire community feels the change.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Introduction

Students of color often face hostile environments on historically white college campuses. The negative experiences students of color are having on historically white institutions have received national attention during the academic year 2015-2016. Students on many college campuses across the nation have protested and demanded more from their institutions. Students are demanding increased diversity of students and faculty on their campuses, greater efforts towards educating the campus communities, support for students to thrive on campus and expectations for curriculum to be representative of the diverse communities at the institutions (Campus Demands, 2015). The study of the role peer mentoring plays in the life of students of color on a rural Northeast campus will offer a lens into how students understand their experiences on a historically white institution. Greater understanding of the student perspective guided the study using Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) to understand how students made sense of their time on campus and the role peer mentoring had in their experience. This perspective is critical to work towards strategies to change the current narrative of isolation.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the role a peer-mentoring program can play in changing the current narrative for students of color at historically white institutions where they often reported experiencing racism both implicitly and explicitly in a variety of spaces on campus. The student protests across the nation have put demands on institutions to better support students of color. Campuses continue to increase their recruitment efforts and have not investigated the systems that create barriers specific to students of color.
Students of color reported feeling isolated and unwelcome because universities are failing to address the underlying issues of racism that directly impact students of color. Developing proactive strategies to break down barriers so students of color thrive on predominantly white institutions was critical at this juncture. Understanding the outcomes for students of color who participate in a mentoring relationship could create insight and opportunities for colleges to begin to break down the systemic issues students face on historically white institutions.

The guiding research questions for the study were:

- How do students of color make sense of their experiences on a historically white college campus in the Northeast?

- How do students of color experience racism on the college campus?

- What role does the peer mentoring program play in supporting students of color facing issues of racism at the institution?

These questions allowed the researcher to examine the role peer mentoring plays in student feeling welcome and included and, on a broader level, analyze issues expressed in research on racism and peer mentoring, as well as the demands that surfaced during recent protests, to provide a comprehensive overview of the obstacles students of color are facing at a historically white institution in the Northeast.

**Positionality Statement**

People rarely ask me how I came to develop such passion and thorough understanding of the injustices surrounding equity and inclusion. My identity as a white, straight, cisgender woman, first-generation college student, married, mother of three boys, able-bodied, who grew
up working class who is now upper middle class, who happens to be a diversity advocate on a college campus, through which I viewed and interpreted my research. I attended a white privilege workshop as part of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity twenty years ago, which started my journey into a process of self-examination around issues of bias and privilege. Before my exposure through education, there were some instances in my life that helped me begin to understand issues of race that surrounded me.

Issues of class were apparent to me at a young age. My parents divorced when I was six, and my father remarried. There were drastic differences between the house I lived in and the house I visited on weekends. It struck me when my children were younger that my “friends” would never have let their children play with me. Having children forced me to look at my bias around class because I was concerned about who my kids would call, “friends.” I also had some difficult conversations with people I had considered, “friends.” Being a parent offered me an opportunity to challenge my beliefs around what it means to be from a “good family.”

A strong work ethic was an underlying value for my family; when I was 16, my mother took me to work with her 40 hours a week across from the projects in Far Rockaway, NY. One of the summers, I worked in an employment agency. Women would come in looking for jobs. We did not have jobs available for them, but there I sat with a full-time job at the age of 16. I was acutely aware that this was wrong. Though I did not thoroughly understand all the issues at the time, I knew that I could not go back to work there after that summer. Now I recognize that my privilege around whiteness and class had put me in that position.

As a white, educated, abled bodied, straight woman who is upper-middle class, I find myself in situations where I benefit from my privilege. It is evident to me that the way my white colleagues treat me is different than the way they treat my co-workers of color. White
colleagues make comments to me that they would never say to people of color. Having worked on campus for twenty-five years, I have a certain level of seniority and job security that affords me the privilege to speak up when others cannot. I feel it is my responsibility to use this privilege to influence change whenever possible. In situations where colleagues make comments that I am not comfortable with, I try to use my best strategies to lead them to look at the situation through a different lens.

Working as a diversity educator for the past 19 years, I have been provided with educational opportunities that have helped me develop a keen understanding of the complexity of the issues around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and the inter-sectionality of these constructs. Ultimately, examining my whiteness, the places I hold power and how privilege plays out in both my personal and professional life had led me to this point. It is a continual process where I may misstep, but I must seek to understand and continue to create change. The experience of leading workshops on diversity and inclusion, where it was necessary to examine my bias and intentionally encourage voices of students who do not necessarily understand or agree with the importance of creating an inclusive environment, has helped to broaden my perspective. The process of establishing a safe space for discussion enabled greater growth for me and for others than if I had forced my personal opinions. As stated by Jupp and Slattery (2010), moving people from deficit thinking and race resistance is essential to changing perspectives and behaviors, and it was essential in these workshops. Therefore, it is imperative to encourage and facilitate, wherever possible, discussions and examinations of whiteness and of the privileges and power that exist in a given context (Briscoe, 2005; Jupp & Slattery, 2010). Briscoe (2005) discussed the idea of "other," which on a historically white campus is crucial to include voices of "other" and diminish the white savior perspective.
Creating a peer mentor program that holds students to the highest expectations and supports students to thrive on campus is essential to the success of the program (Smith, 2014). My ability to develop relationships with students of color on campus was crucial to the success of my project. If students of color did not trust me, I could not get honest answers concerning their college experiences, and acquiring an honest understanding of their experiences is essential to the design and success of the program. I believe my history of supporting students of color on campus was an asset to the project. Recently, a freshman student of color came to meet with me because she kept seeing me with people of color on campus and thought I was someone she should know. This student became active in the mentoring program and as a sophomore will be a mentor. Additionally, while leading workshops regarding equity and inclusion, it was essential to model inclusivity by making sure the voices of everyone in the space were heard. Moving majority students along in their understanding will impact the campus climate for students of color. Intentionality and awareness of implicit bias are necessary to avoid missteps in college environments. Moreover, when missteps occur admitting mistakes and apologizing is vital.

The personal experiences that influence a particular understanding around these problems arose from the relationships I developed with students of color on campus. The stories students shared began an exploration of the issues. The Bias Acts Response Team's (BART) role involves students' submitting bias complaints and the team determines the course of action based on the severity of the complaint. My role on BART has been chair and lead student advocate. The team investigates complaints and serves as a support for the victim; on occasion, someone from BART acts as the lead person in the dialogue with the perpetrator. The number of allegations against actively teaching faculty and other students sparked my interest to
look at the issue of institutionalized racism and mechanisms underway to address, for example, peer mentoring, more closely. Research has documented that this is a widespread problem on a national level at historically white institutions, but it is unclear what works best to improve the situation. Because of this, working on developing a peer-mentoring program with explicit goals related to students of color encounters with racism on campus has become a focal point. The relationships I build with students provide me with critical information about how students are experiencing the campus community.

Currently, my beliefs, biases, and opinions are rather robust on this issue. Acknowledging whiteness within the context of the research is crucial. Understanding, how my whiteness, beliefs, opinions and experiences create a particular bias related to studying the "other" is imperative (Briscoe, 2005). As a scholar-practitioner, I have aligned myself with the oppressed group and I am consistent in my role as an advocate to end oppression on our campus (Briscoe, 2005). My expectation that people examine bias to create an inclusive environment may present a challenge as well. As a white woman, it is critical that I work on relationship building both within my race and across racial lines. The impact on individuals of my race is vital to changing the campus culture. I believe educators have the responsibility to create a learning environment free of bias where all students can be successful. Leading diversity workshops enables me to work on better understanding different perspectives and to give people time to process and grow to reach new understandings. The intentionality of prioritizing the voices of students of color is critical to the validity of this research.

**Research Design**

Given the intention of the study, the researcher determined that a critical-interpretative paradigm and a qualitative inquiry approach was the most appropriate method for this
investigation. As a Critical Race Theorist, understanding the everyday issues students face around racism was critical to understanding the data collected through a qualitative approach. The key to qualitative research lies in socially constructed meanings learned from individuals through their interactions with their environment. Pascal et al., (2010) provided a description of qualitative inquiry as a method involving an interpretive approach to the subject matter. The researcher planned to study the participants and attempted to make sense of phenomena developing in the data. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) posited that phenomenology is the primary philosophical tool for the study of experience. The researcher believed that phenomenological approach was necessary to develop a deeper understanding of students of color experience in a peer mentor program on a historically white campus.

**Research Tradition**

The researcher found Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to be the most appropriate choice for this study. Similar to Phenomenology Inquiry, IPA concerns itself with how persons make sense of lived experiences. However, IPA involves a more detailed examination of the participants’ life and experience in the world from their particular understanding. Phenomenological Inquiry is a relatively new research tradition, established in 1996 by Professor Jonathan Smith of the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. IPA advocates concern themselves with the human dilemma and the understanding as well as the personal perception of their particular situation. IPA is used primarily in the field of psychology, however, this method of research design is now used in many social science disciplines (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA shares a discipline-specific relationship with cognitive psychology and the study of social cognition (Breakwell, Smith, &Wright, 2012). Fade (2004) recognized IPA as a theory
embedded in critical realism and the social cognition paradigm. Critical realism is described as a stable and persistent reality that exists independently of individual perspective. The social cognition model interprets differences in individual meanings related to experiences are represented as different components of the individual’s reality.

IPA allowed an approach that the intersection between the students’ perspectives and the role the researcher plays in the study was vital to developing an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the students (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 1996). Creswell (2007) states that the role qualitative researchers hold in the context they are examining brings both intrinsic value and potential bias to a study. The author believed that the role the researcher played in the study was vital to developing a greater understanding of the phenomenon to impact change for students of color at historically white institutions. The researcher, was, however, well aware of the need to obtain trustworthiness and credibility by being aware of and tempering bias.

IPA builds from the work of Husserl and Heidegger creating a sense of consciousness allowed researchers to look inward at the personal perceptions held by both the participant and the investigator (Smith, 1996). Idiography is a theoretical foundation of IPA allowing a small, purposeful sample of participants where analysis occurs as data is collected to build on the individual cases for deeper understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Double hermeneutics is the role the researcher plays in interpreting the phenomenon as explained by the participant (Smith, 1996). Smith (1996) discusses the significance of understanding the insider’s perspective.

Souza (2008) critiqued IPA as being a weak method of study. Others debate whether the tenets of phenomenology hold true to its original school of thought from philosophers, such as Husserl, and later, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, are some of the critics (Smith et al.,
2009; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Heidegger tried to move away from the abstractness of Husserl’s theory to a more practical approach (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Heidegger’s concern is “with the practical activities and relationships which are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful” (Smith et al., 2009, p.17). Heidegger was most concerned with individual psychological processes, related specifically to the perception of awareness and consciousness (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre believes in the importance of the interconnectivity of people and the world. For him, the self is an “ongoing project to be unfurled” (p.19). He states that our perception of the world is shaped by our interaction with others in it.

Meanwhile, Shinebourne (2011) believes IPA is closely in line with traditional phenomenological research connecting it to the existential research methods found in the field of psychology. IPA, in summary, investigates how an individual creates meaning related to particular events (Smith, 1996). It is crucial to recognize that the interpretations of the data might be confined by the participants’ abilities to articulate their thoughts and experiences adequately as well as the researcher’s ability to reflect and analyze the information shared (Brocki, & Wearden, 2006).

Initially, IPA explored the experiences of people with diseases to develop a greater understanding of the distinctive experience individuals had within the realm of a situation of illness (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a phenomenological approach that seeks to understand the “essence” of an experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 77). Using IPA allowed this researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the issues related to the experience of students of color at historically white institutions while developing strategies to support and impact change. IPA provided the investigator the ability to form perceptions based on the participants’ beliefs to create an
understanding of shared experiences (Smith, 1996). The analysis of the shared experience allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding that may lead to change.

The theoretical underpinnings of IPA stem from the work of Husserl regarding phenomenology. Husserl constructed a philosophical approach to consciousness using hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, to understand the meanings individuals make from their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA recognizes the researcher’s involvement in the data as an interpretative element, which is critical to the study and which stands directly in contrast to other qualitative methods such as the case study or phenomenology. IPA explores how people attribute meaning to their experiences and how they interact with their surroundings (Smith, 1996). Meanwhile, other methods, examine the particular language a participant may use or are specifically evaluating the case or situation a person is involved.

**Phenomenology**

IPA research design utilizes a phenomenological inquiry that relies on the individual’s perspective and sense making of events in their lives. IPA values the voice and understanding of the individual. The inquiry is divided into two areas: descriptive (Husserl) and interpretive (Heidegger), although there is overlap between both examinations (Fade, 2004; Shosha, 2012).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered the central figure in developing phenomenology as a philosophical movement. Husserl’s work focused on understanding participants’ lived experiences. The foundation of a descriptive phenomenology is that the experiences of the individual should be examined as they occur. Husserl discarded the idea that empirical science is the only way to understand the world around us. Using a phenomenological account of the world as it is experienced and understood by the individual is an essential foundation to scientific inquiry (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Shosha, 2012; Smith
et al., 2009). Placing value on an individual perspective of their lived experiences is a critical component of the proposed study.

**Hermeneutics**

The second key underpinning of IPA research design originated from hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation. Heidegger introduced hermeneutic inquiry to phenomenological philosophy as an explicitly interpretative activity (Smith et al., 2009; Wilcke, 2002). The Hermeneutic approach allows the individual to makes sense of their experiences as well as recognizing the significance of the perspective of the researcher in making sense of the data presented in relation to their experiences. Therefore, the researcher’s analysis unpacked the underlying phenomena. IPA applies hermeneutics to understand the sense making groups of people with similar identities attach to their lived experiences (Fade, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Wilcke, 2002).

The researcher applied a reflective interpretation of data gathered through in-depth interviews in order to gain deep, rich data. Moustakas (1994) believed that the reflective interpretive process offered both a description of the experience as well as an interpretation of the underlying issues related to the situations. Hermeneutics allowed the researcher to be personally involved in the data. This approach fits well with the completed study due to the relationships the researcher had with students involved with the mentoring program.

**Idiography**

The third influence of IPA research design is its commitment to idiography, which focuses on the particular based on the participant's perspective. Using an IPA methodology requires a double-step analysis at two levels (Smith et al., 2009). At the primary level, in-depth details are necessary and acquired through a thorough study of each participant’s
experience, while at the next level, the researcher analyzes how the events and relationships are perceived by the participants concerning their experiences on a historically white campus.

The IPA idiographic required the researcher to use a smaller, purposeful sample that was examined in great detail. The completed study used a sample size of four to six participants, allowing for a deeper, more involved, interview process. Breakwell et al. (2012) believe that an IPA study allowed the researcher to uncover details about both themes specific to the individuals as well as overarching themes that speaks to the experience of others. According to Brocki and Wearden (2006), Fade (2004) and Shosha (2012), it was critical to the IPA idiographic process that the researcher upholds the integrity of the participant’s account of the experience. The researcher hoped to connect with the participants to gain deep rich data while upholding the validity of the process.

**Participants**

The researcher identified participants for this study who had self-identified as persons of color through the admissions process. The researcher intentionally recruited students who were or had participated in the peer-mentoring program. In addition, the researcher was open to including students who had not participated in the program to examine how student experiences had or had not differed based on participation with their mentors. The researcher recruited an equal number of men and women with diverse backgrounds. The researcher planned to use the broad group of students of color instead of targeting one racial group to better understand the issues facing a diverse group. The researcher was interested in finding the commonalities as well as the differences in how students of color experience the campus. With a small number of students representing each identity on campus, it seemed a better approach for change by including a broad representation of students of color. Students involved with the mentoring program were identified
in a variety of ways so interviewing students who represented the overall participants in the study would be from the mentor program. The researcher obtained participants through emails using addresses acquired through the admissions process for students who self-identify as a person of color. The researcher incorporated a snowball approach: if the initial contact did not bring a large enough pool forward to procure the abovementioned diversity. The rationale for interviewing four to six students was to meet with students three times each so that richer data could be acquired (Seidman, 2013). Interviewing four to six students may have limited the variation of the group and created complications in transferring for a larger group, although that was not the purpose of the study.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher submitted applications to the Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB) and to the IRB for the College that was the focus of the study to conduct this proposed research project. The sampling for IPA research is typically purposeful and homogenous, allowing that a small sample size is justifiable because the depth of the interviews can provide adequate perspective in contextualizing the situation (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also used the social media groups established for the mentoring program to advertise the study. Broughton, Foley, Ledermaier and Cox (2013) posited that online social networking sites had revolutionized communication methods for recruitment in research and for other purposes. These online groups provide space for students to interact and gather information from each other. The researcher reached out to colleagues to promote participation in the study if initial email did not gather enough participants.

The plan was to conduct three, 45-minute interviews with each participant. The researcher asked participants to read, sign and return the Northeastern University IRB approved
consent form as well as the Research Site College IRB approved consent form. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were assigned a pseudonym. The data was collected with an audio recorder and immediately transcribed using Rev Works Professional Services. A confidentiality agreement was created with Rev Works.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

As required by Northeastern University, the researcher received consent to conduct the research described by the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University and at the institution in the study. The researcher ensured the well-being of all participants. The researcher had already completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) training course entitled, “Protecting Human Research Participants.” Participants were advised of their right to end their participation in the study at any point and signed a consent form outlining the scope and commitment of their participation prior to beginning research. Finally, all responses and information shared by participants was confidential and pseudonyms were used to guarantee anonymity.

**Data collection**

The study incorporated semi-structured in depth interviews with four to six students who participated in the peer mentor program at a college in a rural setting in the Northeast. Participants were asked to keep journals to help triangulate the data for more trustworthiness. The researcher also maintained a journal during the interview process. Maintaining confidentiality was critical throughout the study. Using double hermeneutics to interpret the phenomenon presented by the participant gave the researcher the opportunity to make sense of the participants’ experiences and stories. Bracketing information was not required but may offer the researcher a way to dig deeper into the data (Creswell, 2013).
Idiography speaks to the necessity of the detail and in-depth analysis for the study. Interviews are critical with IPA. Participants need to have the space to think, speak and be heard. IPA speaks to having a loose agenda while interviewing which may offer the flexibility required to create a space where the interviewee feels more comfortable to share the personal and often painful experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher believed IPA created the space to acquire the deeper data necessary for the study. The researcher’s ability to establish rapport with participants was helpful although the researcher needed to be clear that the interviews were to be one-sided in nature and that the researcher was focused on listening.

Through the use of interviews with students in relation to their lived experiences on campus and the role, mentorship played in their transition, the researcher investigated the students’ sense of inclusion in school and community within the mentoring program and campus-wide. Questions were asked to develop a sense of trust and openness between interviewer and interviewee. Interview questions were open-ended to allow the participant voice to emerge through questions such as: Tell me about your experience coming to X campus. Additional prompts were available if students did not share necessary data (Appendix C).

Students who enrolled as mentors or mentees in the peer mentor program were interviewed during the academic year to examine the role the mentor program had in assisting in students of color in developing a sense of belonging at a historically white institution. Critical Race Theory enabled the researcher to recognize that students of color encountered racism on campus, so it was crucial that questions were direct and gave students opportunity to voice the issues presenting themselves on campus as well as provide a counter-narrative through storytelling. Students were asked to keep journals to reflect on interviews and their day-to-day
life in between time spent with researcher. The researcher kept a journal to reflect on the interviews and what was happening on campus from their perspective. The researcher also noted the interviewees’ demeanor, body language, eye contact etc. during the interviews so that meaning could be made from these interactions as well. Journaling was a way to support triangulation of data to support statements made by interviewees.

**Data storage**

Creswell (2012) maintained that it is critical to store data safely and instructs that all data collected and study-related materials should be managed carefully. The researcher preserved the reliability of all data by protecting it from damage, loss, or theft. Such measures allowed the researcher to carefully manage this project and establish a data management system. The researcher applied names and dates to file documents and audiotapes. The researcher followed Grunewald’s (2004) advice that each interview audiotape should be assigned a separate code with participant pseudonyms and interview dates. The researcher took precautions and save all field notes, audiotapes, and data transcriptions to two external drives. The data was stored in the researcher’s private office in a locked file cabinet. The researcher was to be the only person who had continuous access to the data. The academic advisor would also have access if requested. All data and corresponding materials related to this study were secured and stored for five years. Once the five-year period had passed, the data and corresponding materials would be permanently deleted.

**Data Analysis**

To begin the data analysis process, the researcher would audiotape interviews and professionally transcribe the data by using Rev Corporation. The researcher listened to the audiotapes and compared them to the transcripts to ensure quality. Once the audiotapes and
transcriptions were reviewed, the researcher began the data analysis process. IPA requires the researcher to conduct six steps of analysis that included:

1. Reading and re-reading

2. Initial noting of codes

3. Developing emergent themes

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes

5. Moving to the next case and

6. Looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82-107).

The six-step analysis allowed the researcher to use a systematic procedure that identified essential features, experiences and perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). The analytical steps required the researcher to read and re-read the transcriptions and take detailed notes. The researcher examined semantic content and language. The analysis focused on generating coding themes that emerged from the detailed annotation and memo-ing of the transcript. These coding themes captured the essential qualities expressed in sections of the transcript and were a mix of in-vivo, processes and pattern coding themes. The emergent coding themes were then clustered together and verified against the words and phrases present in the transcript through the constructions of tables.

The researcher kept an open mind while engaging with the process and took descriptive and conceptual notes from the data transcription. Then, the researcher organized, analyzed and clustered emergent themes. MAXQDA software was used as an additional tool to investigate the transcript and re-analyze the coded themes. The researcher coded and recoded the data to
look for themes that tied together the participants’ experiences. The analysis process required an engaged, unbiased role in unpacking all participant perspectives. Fade (2004) believes that IPA researchers must suspend predispositions during the data analysis process, yet still understand the complexity of making meaning from the experience. The journals were used as a form of triangulation to support data provided by the interview process. The researcher used inter-rater reliability by having a faculty colleague code interviews to cross check the reliability of researcher coding. The researcher created tables and concept maps to gain deeper understanding of the relationships between the in vivo codes, process codes, and pattern codes in the data generated from the participant’s experience.

Member checking incorporated the participants review in their interview transcripts for accuracy. The review of the transcript was done during the interview times. An additional member checking to address counter narratives as expected through Critical Race Theory would have participants review themes discovered through analysis to give feedback as to accuracy of the researcher in representing their story. Supporting student voice is a vital piece of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

As the professional who formerly oversaw the peer mentor program in the study, my bias related to the proximity and relationships could influence my interpretation of the data collected through student interviews. The new role the researcher had taken limited the contact with students in the mentor program, which could only add to the trustworthiness of the study. The ability to build trust between researcher and participant was essential to the overall value of the study. The researcher’s familiarity with students involved in the mentor program proved valuable in developing trust and openness in gathering interview data. The validation of this
study occurred through several different methods, including prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and pilot interviews.

In an effort to curtail this risk and increase the validity of the study, conducting a thorough analysis of the data collected, as well as opportunities for students to include journal reflections will use triangulation. The researcher used a reflective journal to note student demeanor, eye contact, body language and general comfort levels during the interview process. The researcher may have had opportunities to observing students in some settings offered through the mentor community and greater campus programs (Maxwell, 1996; Miles and Huberman, 1994). If the researcher observed students outside of the interview process they included details of the interaction in the journal reflections. The researcher and participants met in an agreed upon location that offered comfort and privacy. Interview transcriptions were shared with the students for member checking to be certain that the information accurately reflected the interaction during the interview phase. The researcher relied on feedback from critical friends as well as the dissertation chair. The validity and trustworthiness of the study were of the utmost importance; it supported the researcher’s ability to act as a change agent in implementing actions that respond effectively to the documented findings. Prolonged engagement is when the researcher spends significant time understanding the phenomenon by understanding the culture. The researcher has spent the last 20 years of their career working closely with historically underrepresented students on the campus in the study. The researchers commitment and authenticity to advocate for historically underrepresented students was well known and proven through actions that students are aware of from students who have come before them. This experience allowed the researcher to both understand the campus culture and to build positive relationships with students, faculty and staff. This personal and professional knowledge provided
validity to the study. The researcher planned to use a reflective journal to note facial expressions and impressions, for example, throughout each interview as additional sources of information.

A pilot interview was conducted before the actual study interviews began to practice the technique of interviewing and to gather feedback from the questions the researcher was planning to ask. The researcher was looking for feedback that included information concerning clarity of questions as well as determining if data gathered matched the information the researcher was anticipating. The participant in the pilot interview was someone who met the criteria for the study although they were not part of the actual study. The researcher made this clear to the participant. The feedback received from the pilot interview assisted in the improvement of the overall questions and interview process.

**Limitations**

This study provided a limited view of the experiences of students of color participating in a mentor program at a historically white institution. The participants were from diverse backgrounds and identified in ways that match, on a smaller scale, the campus diversity. This study was conducted using students who participated in a mentor community, so the information gathered may not have reflected the reality of other students of color or other colleges in different locations throughout the country. The openness and honesty of the participants could not be controlled.

The researcher in this study was formerly the director overseeing the mentor program that may have introduced a level of bias. The researcher had recently taken a new role on campus where they were not in direct contact with students in the mentor program. This may have
assisted in creating greater trustworthiness. In an attempt to limit bias, no student in the study worked directly for the researcher in a capacity that included supervisory interactions.
Chapter 4 Summary of Findings

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of students of color who had been involved in a peer-mentoring program at a historically white institution. Six students were interviewed to develop a greater understanding of the issues of racism students of color face. The researcher worked to examine if a peer mentoring program played a role in supporting students who experience racism. The role of mentor and mentee was examined through the interview process. The findings offered insight and provided a framework for future studies.

The study utilized an Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) to understand how students and the researcher made sense of the experiences of students of color at a historically white campus. Students of color who had been on campus for at least one year were interviewed three times with each interview moving towards deeper questions related to the racism the students may be experiencing. IPA offered the students and the researcher opportunity to reflect on the experience in more meaningful ways. IPA was necessary in providing a methodology for the student and researcher. As a Critical Race Theorist, the researcher believed the student voice and feedback was vital for the study.

The following themes emerged from the interviews: (1) the Campus Climate and Issues with Racism with students speaking to issues with culture shock and the pressure to assimilate, (2) Academic and Social Implications presenting issues for students in classrooms, with friendships and microaggressions, bias and stereotype threat (3) Support Systems including the role of peer mentoring. The students expressed an initial experience with culture shock, the pressure to adapt or assimilate to the campus culture, issues with friendships and classroom
experiences. Students faced difficulties establishing friendships with pressure for students of color to initiate or change behaviors so that white people felt comfortable with them. Students felt that they faced racism in classrooms, residence halls and other spaces on the historically white campus. Students felt pressure to do well academically and serve as a role model for their family members and communities. The researcher believes that the pressure to assimilate impacts how students are experiencing all areas on campus. Peer mentors played a role in supporting students but did not necessarily change how students of color experienced the historically white institution. Students felt that mentors were critical, particularly for students of color to have a person who could help them meet people and know what supports were in place for them on campus.

The students interviewed struggled with the question of making sense of their experiences because they felt that it was, “how it is” and what are they going to do about it as seen in what Mary had to say:

I don't know. Everything that happens, to me I don't know, it happened.

I don't know. To me, obviously when I'm having conversations with my friends I'm like, ‘Racism is still alive in its own form’. Whatever type of form it is. It's not, obviously out there out there. To me, I'm very aware because I know that it's still alive. I don't want to say not as much, but it's the modern day racism I guess you can say. I don't know, to make sense of it? I guess I not really, necessarily, accept it. It's just what can we do? I honestly don't know.

Most thought it was important to not dwell on the negative and keep moving forward to their end goal. It became apparent to the researcher that students of color in some cases needed
to separate themselves from the incidents of bias and isolation in order to survive historically white institutions. Mentoring played a role in supporting students and creating community within the program. According to some students interviewed, this did not change the campus climate. The students felt that taking on leadership roles like being a mentor changed how they felt about the campus and how people saw them. All of the participants spoke to having to adapt or assimilate to the campus environment in order to be successful. The pressure to assimilate creates negative implications for students in classrooms, residence halls and with their overall well-being. The study has provided insight to the student of color experience and the role mentoring can play in supporting them at historically white institutions. The study offers insight and guidance for future studies to continue the work in unpacking racism on historically white campuses.

**Research Questions**

- How do students of color make sense of their experiences on a historically white college campus in the Northeast?
  - How do students of color experience racism on the college campus?
  - What role does the peer mentoring program play in supporting students of color when facing issues of racism at the institution?

**Site and Participants**

The study was held at a historically white college in the rural Northeast. The campus is a mid-size public institution. The campus touts itself as having a strong commitment to equity and inclusion. There were six students who participated in the interview process for this study. Students were contacted via email and personal conversations. Overall, ten students expressed
interest in participating in the study, with the researcher deciding to include students who had been on campus for more than one year and in order of responding to the request to have six participants total.

The six students represented a broad range of identities. There were three men and three women in the study. Some identify as Asian American, International, Latino, Latina, Black American, African American, Indian and the LGBTQ community. Interesting to the researcher were the common themes students of color experienced on campus across identities. Students interviewed almost all had had experience as a mentee and all were mentors. All students were involved with the campus community and held leadership positions. Four of the students interviewed were part of one or two access programs on campus. One student was admitted through the International Education program and one was admitted through a standard process.

Data Collection and Results

Recruitment of Participants and Interview Protocol

The research utilized a rural historically white college in the Northeast where the researcher is employed. The researcher obtained IRB approval for use of the site and through Northeastern University. A Call for Participants was sent to all students who self- identified as a student of color through the admissions process. The researcher received ten responses to the Call for Participants. Upon receipt of the email, the researcher arranged a time to meet with the students interested to discuss the focus of the study and to ensure the participant met the established criteria set forth in the Call for Participants. Due to the large response, the researcher decided to interview only students who had been on campus for a year or more. The study involved a total of six participants. Participants were assigned a pseudonym according to their
identity (Mary, Mike, Kenneth, Betty, Omar, and Deepa).

Students who had spent at least one year on campus and had been enrolled as mentors or mentees in the peer mentor program were interviewed during the academic year. The study examined the experiences students of color had at a historically white institution and the role the mentor program played in supporting students who experienced racism on a historically white institution. Critical Race Theory enabled the researcher to recognize that students of color would encounter racism on campus, so it was crucial that questions were direct and gave students opportunities to voice the issues presenting themselves on campus. Critical Race Theory also provided a counter-narrative through storytelling. Students were asked to keep journals to reflect on interviews and their day-to-day life in between time spent with researcher. The researcher kept a journal to reflect on the interviews and what was happening on campus from their perspective. The researcher noted the interviewees’ demeanor, body language, eye contact etc. during the interviews so that meaning could be made from these interactions. Journaling supported triangulation of data to support statements made by interviewees.

**Description of Participants**

**Mary.** Mary was a junior Communications major. She was part of an access program on campus. Mary had work-study in a campus office. She enjoyed working in that office and is considering that for a career. She identified as a Latina and grew up in the Bronx. Mary visited campus with her mother before attending. She was the first in her family to go to college and felt strongly about being a role model. She was proud that her sibling was following her footsteps by going to college in the fall.

**Mike.** Mike was a junior Communications major on campus. His mother went to college
for two years but did not finish and his father did not finish high school. Mike did not consider himself to be a first generation student because of the support he received from uncles who had college degrees. Mike spent most of his time growing up in the Bronx. Mike identifies as Asian-American. He is mixed raced but felt more connected to his Asian family. Mike’s mother emigrated from Asia as a refugee. Mike never visited the campus, but had a cousin who attended who was a tremendous support for him.

**Omar.** Omar was a junior Criminal Justice major on campus. Omar was a first generation student who was admitted through an access program on campus. He moved to the United States in Elementary School from an English speaking country in the Caribbean. It was important to Omar to make his mother proud. After moving to the United States, Omar lived in Brooklyn. Omar had struggled in school but with the support of an Individual Education Plan (IEP), he was successful. Omar visited campus as a junior in high school.

**Betty.** Betty was a junior Mass Communications and Sociology major with a Women and Gender Studies minor on campus. Betty had siblings who had gone to college but felt that a counselor from the access program was the most influential person in getting her to attend college. Betty visited campus on a planned trip through the admissions office. Betty identified as an African American but had become interested in connecting to her West African heritage. Betty had become very religious. She was admitted to the college through an access program. Betty has spent her whole life living in the Bronx, although her parents emigrated from West Africa.

**Deepa.** Deepa was a senior international student from a South Asian country. Deepa’s parents did not attend college but she did have a grandparent who attended college. She lived
with her extended family in her country. Coming to college was the first time Deepa had been to the United States. She was a Psychology major and she worked on campus, which she felt had connected her to the campus community in positive ways.

**Kenneth.** Kenneth was a senior Science major on campus who comes from a rural town not far from the college campus although he never visited campus before attending. Kenneth was a first generation student who was admitted through an access program. He identified as Latino from a South American country. He had family back in his country but he was born here and lived with his mother and grandparents.

**Participant Confidentiality**

The goal of the researcher was to keep all information confidential. Interviews were transcribed through an online transcription service called Rev.com. The researcher received a non-disclosure agreement from Rev.com to ensure confidentiality. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the students and provided broad categories to describe identities. Audio files of the interviews were recorded on a locked and password protected device, and after the interviews were transcribed, the files were deleted. All hand written notes, reflective memos and journals associated with this research were kept in a locked drawer in a locked office both at home and at work. All material related to this research will remain locked and be will destroyed after five years.

**The Data Analysis Process**

The researcher began the data analysis process by audiotaping the interviews and having them professionally transcribed by Rev Corporation. The researcher required a verbatim account of the questions and answers taken from the one-hour interviews. The
researcher also requested that the company provide a confidentiality statement, which was kept on file. The researcher listened to the audiotapes and compared them to the transcripts to ensure both quality and accuracy. Once the audiotapes and transcriptions were evaluated, the researcher commenced a lengthy data analysis process. IPA required the researcher to conduct six steps of analysis as a systematic procedure that identified essential features, experiences, and perceptions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Furthermore, the researcher maintained an open mind to engage with the process and took descriptive and conceptual notes from the data transcription. The analytical steps required the researcher to read and reread the transcriptions and take copious notes. Then, the researcher organized, analyzed, and clustered emergent themes. The researcher used an Excel spreadsheet in Google docs to note and organize emergent themes as well as organize significant statements made by interviewees. MAXQDA software was also used as an additional tool to investigate the transcript and re-analyze the coded themes. The researcher coded and recoded the data three times, looking for themes that united the participants’ experiences. The researcher incorporated inter-rated reliability by having a faculty colleague read three, random interviews and code to check for agreement and reliability.

The researcher found the IPA data analysis to be a circular series of iterative and inductive processes. The researcher became aware of the transition from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretive (Fade, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). This process required an active, unbiased role in comprehending all participant perceptions as students of color on a historically white institution. Fade concurred that IPA researchers must interrupt predispositions during the data analysis process, while still grasping the complexity of meaning from the experience (2004).
Discussion of Themes and Sub-Categories

The themes and codes identified were based on the interviews with participants who described their experiences with racism as a student of color at a historically white institution and the role peer mentoring played in supporting them through these experiences. Students attempted to make sense of their experiences with the campus community. Researcher observations from interviews and research memos were also included in the creation of codes and themes. The overarching themes are (1) Campus Climate and Issues of Racism, (2) Academic and Social Implications, (3) Support Systems. The themes addressed issues related to culture shock, pressure to assimilate, classroom experiences, friendships, microaggressions, bias and stereotype threat and peer mentoring. Each of these themes are described in greater detail below.

Campus Climate and Issues of Racism

Culture Shock

Participants in the study immediately referenced their experiences with culture shock when arriving on campus, realizing the lack of people looking like them. Mary shared, I came here saying—Listen, this is culture shock. You’re going to see people like a whole predominantly white people in my head They are going to treat you a certain way. It was shocking, and it was weird not seeing a lot of people like me around the campus.

Students developed strategies to cope with the campus environment in order to successfully navigate through the community and coursework to graduate. Mary’s advice to new students was to recognize that they would interact with many white people so they must mentally prepare for that type of experience. She thought that not preparing herself for the new culture of
majority white people was what made her first year on campus difficult. Interviewees from cities, rural communities and other countries all spoke to the initial reaction to the campus community. Deepa found,

The campus is very different. Other than that there has been some sort of culture shock so to say. It's just it's different. It's really different. If you understand psychology I come from a collective culture and this is more of an individualistic culture. You feel it. I still feel it sometimes. After living here for four years and I think I've adapted myself pretty well, but it's still every now and then it comes back to you and you realize that it's different. It's different from where I come.

As students reacted to the culture shock, they developed strategies to assimilate to the majority culture to have success on campus. Students spoke about the things they did to change to help the majority group feel at ease with them.

Omar thought,

I'd say that one of my biggest successes is getting acquainted to the culture and learning the American ways, and everything like that. Being able to fit in was one of my successes parts. There are less people of color, so that's different for me, being from a community of mostly Blacks and Hispanics, so I'll say that was different for me, for sure. Had to get accustomed to it. That was different for me, the racial aspect.

Kenneth found that adjusting to lack of diversity to be difficult. He explains,

Just being a minority, the minority student population here is very low. Sometimes that can be a little frustrating just because you don't have people to connect with from the same culture, from the same race you are. That can be hard because you feel alone. You
start feeling alone and that can often times lead to a lot of anxiety or depression. It just makes somebody want to go back home. They'll transfer back home or they'll just end up withdrawing from college. That's something you don't want because college was supposed to be a learning experience; something that you really grow from.

Mike worries that new students coming in will think the campus is more diverse than it really is. And that can be difficult.

I don't want incoming students who are looking for that diversity to think that we have that kind of paradigm and then they come in, they realize that it's not what it was advertised.

Peer mentor programs can serve the role of speaking to the issues the students presented by being honest about how some students experience the campus and also providing the information about the supports in place to support students. Ignoring what students said about their experiences will only perpetuate the underlying issues of racism.

**Pressure to Adapt or Assimilate to White Culture**

Students seemed to feel the need to change who they were to appear to be more approachable to majority members of the campus community. These statements spoke to the need for campuses to improve education opportunities for majority students, faculty and staff around issues of inclusivity, diversity and equity. Mary felt,

I remind myself to smile so I appear approachable I adapted to the environment quickly because I knew what I needed to do -this is what it is and this is how its going to be.

Now junior year its not like that no more. I don't know why. I just thought the other day ‘maybe it was all in my head.’
As students adapted to the campus community, they began to think that perhaps their initial experiences were not as bad as they initially believed them to be. This spoke to where white people tend to explain away people of color’s experiences. Explaining away the interaction or occurrence of racism was a common manifestation that occurred between white people and people of color. One student said, “I have to be uncomfortable to eventually feel comfortable I've assimilated.” Two of the interviewees spoke specifically of having to be uncomfortable in order to become comfortable. They saw this as a necessary step to have success on campus. They expressed that to be successful, it was necessary to assimilate to the campus culture and expectations the majority group values. Kenneth shared, “I have to be uncomfortable and have pressure to act like all is ok.” Deepa shared,

If you want to be part of the community, if you want to feel that you are part of the community, you have to behave as if you’re part of the community. You have to behave as if you belong there, or as if you're trying to belong there. It just doesn't happen overnight.

Students seemed acutely aware of the pressure to not share parts of their identities as described in the concept of double consciousness (Bell, 1995). Students did not specifically name the concept but spoke to who they were at home and with friends who identify similarly to them in comparison to who they were on campus. Mary told the researcher, “Obviously when I'm on campus, I don't want to get judged or anything like that so I just go to class, do what I got to do, speak a certain way. It's different in that way.” Betty stated,

I feel like on campus I'm more professional, I'm more student-wise I'm more leader-wise. When I'm home I'm more … Not that I'm not friendly here, if you come up to me I'll be
friendly to you, but my vibe is different. I feel free, weight off my shoulders, of any worry. I'm more friendlier, I'm more livelier. I go out more.

Mike compared, double consciousness (Bell, 1995) to a theory he had learned about in class,

When you have certain identities in relation to certain different situations. Because of all of these different identities that you have, and relationships to situations, you kind of lose yourself and don't know what your real identity is. I definitely think that when I'm here I act a different kind of way. I'm still myself. I still hold my same beliefs set in what I do.

He believed this was because there were so many white students and they were his friends so he must act differently. Mike also found that, people get lost and try to find who they really are in that identity because they feel like they can't act like themselves.

Although some of the interviewees expressed an observation that they themselves had not been victims of racism, all of the interviewees shared stories of having to adapt to the culture and clear examples of difficulties that the researcher would identify as racism. It soon became clear to the researcher that in order for students to survive on the campus, they needed to incorporate strategies that separated their experiences from racism, labeling it something that was easier to cope with such as, “adapting to the environment.” Omar spoke to the idea of appreciating when people moved past the color of his skin and treated him like a human being. The research pertaining to color blindness relates directly to this comment. The researcher found the student’s experiences related directly to the research and that the educational system had taught us all the same things that perpetuate bias and stereotypes. Creating a need for students to separate themselves from “others” who fit those negative ideas.

The researcher found value in using the three-part interview structure. As they moved
through the interviews, students became more relaxed and began to share stories that reflected a racist environment (although most still did not want to call it racism). The researcher respected the students’ choice of vernacular, which was reflective of how many people of color had come to “survive” systemic issues of racism in most of the nations institutions.

**Academic and Social Implications**

**Classrooms**

Classrooms proved to be both an opportunity and a problem for many of the students in the study. The opportunities seemed to be if faculty members were intentional in embedding curriculum and acting in ways that students felt included and valued in the classrooms. Faculty of color were particularly impactful for students of color. Mary thought,

> To me, I'm mostly comfortable if the faculty was someone of color and if people in my class is someone of color. We all relate and we all want the same thing. I'm just speaking to people who will understand instead of look at you like, What are you talking about...

Students’ felt connected and that the faculty member would be there for them both in and out of the classroom. Students spoke to the classroom discussions being more robust when there were more students of color in the classroom. They also spoke to the idea of white faculty sharing more about themselves or taking a stand around diversity, making them feel more comfortable in the classroom. Students reflected on their experiences with the concept of Onliness (Harper, 2013) where they found themselves being the only student of color in a classroom and how that impacted their learning and feelings of safety in the space. Kenneth mentioned the stress of comparing himself to white students and feeling like he had to do more than white students to stand out in the classroom. Students felt the pressure of constantly having
to prove themselves beyond what white students had to do. Betty states,

Sometimes it feels kind of awkward being in those situations, because there are not a lot of African Americans in the classes. You feel like almost all eyes are on you when they're talking about these situations.

Students spoke to not speaking up in class to avoid drama or conflict. Many felt that what the instructors were teaching contradicted their lived experiences. Students found themselves having to decide whether it was worth it to speak up. Mary found,

Not always. In classes, no. I would like to feel comfortable saying, but it's just when I start to talk about it, I just feel myself getting adrenaline rush because I know everyone's looking at me. I'm just like, ‘No, I'm not going to say that.’ I'll say it in my head. Even me thinking about saying it, I'll just like, ‘No, I'm not going to say it.’

Betty added, “I just sit, yeah. Just like, let me get my A. It's never going to go anywhere.”

Faculty members spoke in a recent dialogue on campus about students of color not participating in class on campus. Creating opportunities for greater understanding of the student perspective in the classroom is critical. Working to build community in the classroom could create an environment where all students felt comfortable in participating is critical. Omar stated,

In some cases, at some points I think I should respond, but I just keep to myself and not say anything, because being the only African American in the class, some things you feel like you need to defend or some things you need to say.

Betty found,

I mean most of the classes I'm in now, they do represent me in some part, but sometimes
when we have class discussions, like for example in my sociology of ... sociology and gender class? I'm the only person of color, so sometimes they'll discuss certain things and I'll just look at them like, ‘Right.’ I don't want to speak up because they're going to look at me like, ‘This chick is crazy, mate.’ You know what I mean, so I'm just like, ‘Hmm.’ I just sit there and I kind of observe what they're saying, but it just like ... The kind of thing like you need to be a little open minded. Me, I don't want to say I'm a doubter or a negative person. I'm just like, ‘Their mindset is never going to change,’ so what's the point of me talking?

Students also spoke to the difficulties they encountered with other students in their classes, particularly when faculty had them partner up for discussions or when doing group work. Participants spoke of strategies they used to counter classroom experiences. Mary sat in the front of the classroom so that she did not see the reactions of her classmates when she chose to speak up. She had also tried to take classes with other students of color that she knew so that she would not be the only one in her class. Mary experienced,

I feel like I'll be the one to initiate the conversation first because in my head, I know they probably won't. Let's say if they say, ‘Turn to your neighbor and speak about this’, I'll turn to my neighbor so that they wouldn't feel ... I don't know how they would feel, but I wouldn't want them to feel like, ‘Oh, she doesn't want to talk.’ Plus I have this face already of like, Don't talk to me.

Students found themselves having to make the first move in order for white students to engage with them in conversations, group work or even friendships. Mary found,

Yeah, because sometimes I don't really want to talk. I want someone to come up to me
and say, ‘Hey, do you want to be in my group?’ I'm just like, ‘I got to get through this. I got to do it.’

At times, the conversation was more than a student can handle. It was important that faculty not remain silent around difficult topics but also was aware of how the classroom discussion might impact students. Again, taking the time to create community within a classroom is critical to supporting students in engaging in difficult and sometimes painful conversations. Mary stated,

In my freshman year, I had to walk out of the classroom. Definitely is a hard space to be, because I can't take sides. I can argue for both sides, where they're coming from, which is the good part, but I still have to be somehow neutral because they was talking about I think the shooting with Eric Garner. This one kid was like ... I think he was like that he deserved it or something. I was like, ‘Oh no, I got to ...’ I just left. I couldn't. I was getting anxious.

Faculty must be skillful in handling difficult dialogues that support the students who may experience the most harm. Classrooms must be spaces that students feel safe and supported so that they cannot only survive but no harm is caused. Creating a classroom where students of color thrive is the ultimate goal. Faculty need to think about their curriculum and if it is representing diverse communities. The students in the interview seemed to not even expect that curriculum and theorists presented in class would represent who they were. Kenneth reflected,

When I'm in classes learning stuff I just take the information. I don't really think about if they're of color or not. I would say you don't really see that just because most scientists are white, and are male. People of color, especially women of color, feel under
represented just because they don't see women really ... They don't hear the name. There might be women doing a lot of things that are important, but you don't hear their name, at all. Sometimes you have to go that extra mile just to research them, and really find what they did or how they contributed to all the theories we know now. I think it's not very well represented, or try to at least vocalize it. We need to change that.

As educators, we have a responsibility to actively develop our courses and curriculum so students of color feel included, safe to speak, and represented in positive ways. Colleges need to recognize the challenges students are facing in classrooms and offer opportunities for education for faculty members to embed curriculum in diversity and develop inclusive pedagogy and classroom strategies. The classroom environment can, “make or break” a student’s experience, therefore, creating a safe inclusive space is vital for the success of students of color.

**Friends**

Developing friendships is an interesting, yet not surprising struggle for students of color on a historically white campus. The most difficult being friendships with white students. Interestingly, the college in the study’s campus climate survey reports students leaving the institution because of the difficulties in developing friend groups (Rankin, 2016). Students throughout the interviews spoke of having to initiate conversations and do things to make white students feel at ease with them. As the interviews progressed it became apparent that most friendships with other white students were mostly superficial. There were some acceptations but those were mostly with white students who showed interest in diversity and social justice ideals. Mary stated,

I don't mean it. It's just my face. I would initially initiate any conversation. To me, I feel like they feel more comfortable when really I ... you would think that you should make
me feel comfortable, but instead I'm just going to initiate it and I'm going to make you feel comfortable talking to me so that I feel comfortable talking to you. Like that.

Students expressed difficulty connecting and establishing new friendships without a common interest. Mike found,

I had a difficult time making close friends that I could hangout with not sure if it was the demographic being so different or my taking a bit longer to accept people before hanging out with them really not until 2nd semester when I found my niche mostly because of a club.

All the students spoke to the significance of participating in a club that connected them to people like themselves. They found comfort in knowing they could go and share their experiences with people who would understand and offer support by listening, as well as sharing similar interactions.

Betty spoke frankly about not having any friends left on campus. She had people she connected with who had graduated but no one presently on campus who she felt had the same beliefs or background as she did.

I do think if I was Caucasian I do feel like I would have more friends here, to be honest. That's my opinion because I do feel like when they see me they see me as maybe I'm loud, maybe I'm crazy, maybe I have a different lifestyle than theirs that they won't understand. I dress differently, I do things differently. They wouldn't know how to handle being around me kind of thing. They would have to watch what they said kind of thing. I feel like when they see me they automatically stereotype me as maybe she's loud, maybe she's ghetto, maybe she has different kind of ... We wouldn't be able to be friends
so they automatically block me from even trying to see how I respond to them.

Deepa spoke to the fact that she made friends easily but did not end up maintaining the friendships for extended periods of time. Deepa blamed herself for the friendships not lasting.

I usually do, at the moment I usually do have good set of friends that I can rely on. How long they stick around that's variable. How long they're going to stick around is always the question. If people are out of my life now, instead of me just being sad about it that why did they stop talking to me, I just move on because I don't have enough energy to think about it. I have papers to write and I would rather write those papers than think about, ‘I miss her.’ Or ‘I miss him.’ Or whatever. To start playing that. They're out, they're out. I can't do much about it and if we ended up on bad terms it's really hard to remedy that, you know what I'm saying?

The researcher tried to make sense of these two, distinct situations and wondered what the implications were around race and difficulties in connecting with other people on campus. Mike spoke to his worry about his roommates, who were white in the current political climate,

Again, in regards to my roommates who, these are people I live with, people that ... These are guys I love and I enjoy being around, so to hear that ... Even though it hasn't affected our relationship at all, I keep it now in the back of my head because maybe I don't know them as well I thought. Not to say that it's going to affect the way I view them now, but it's just shocking to realize.

Navigating friendships with white students who may not understand how their comments or stances on issues may impact them directly may prove to be extremely difficult as we move forward in the current political climate. Educating a campus community around issues of
inclusivity and diversity could be a way to change how students of color are experiencing friendships on college campuses. Developing friendships is complicated and difficult to force so establishing spaces to offer opportunities for cross-cultural interactions may create chances for understanding that could lead to friendships happening organically. Not having friendships leads to students of color feeling isolated on historically white campuses (Harper, 2013). Friendships across identities enable students to break down ideas related to bias and stereotypes. Campuses need to think more critically on how best to build opportunities for friendships to develop.

**Microaggressions, Bias and Stereotype Threat**

The interviewees all mentioned the racism they may encounter when enrolling in a historically white institution. As students grew more comfortable on campus, most of them moved beyond this fear. Omar spoke to his worry when first coming to campus,

My first time coming here, that was a fear of mine. First coming to the school it's like, what if I was to face racism? And I thought about the worst thing possible, like what if my roommate is racist? Or, what was I to do if I saw like, a Confederate flag or something like that. Those were fears of mine because of this small type of area, like, I think last year, while I was on campus I saw a guy driving his van with a big Confederate flag flying high and it was kind of worrisome for me, because I'm like, what if he had saw me? Would he had said something to me?

If students are arriving on campus worried that something racist is going to happen, it is crucial for campuses to recognize how students may be feeling, have clear expectations of the community and support systems in place that students are made aware of in the event a situation were to arise.
Some students interviewed wound up coming to campus and found community that helped diminish their fears. Others faced situations of bias, experienced microaggressions or felt the impacts of stereotype threats. Mary explained a situation from a residence hall,

I remember when I was a freshman and even if you identify as Latina and you have white skin, you're light skin. I feel like people feel more comfortable too speaking to you. When I used to go into my residence hall as a freshman, they would never say hi when I go in, but I came in with a friend who is light skinned, and they were like ‘Hey ladies’ and I was just like ‘They only say hi when you come in.’ We tested it one day with our friend who has even darker skin then me and no one said a word to us until our friend with light skin was with us. Things like that.

Betty spoke to a situation from an office she worked in on campus,

I'm just like I don't feel like I connect to the staff, I feel like I'm the only person of color, I just feel like they look at me weird in terms of strange things I do. Especially my boss too, not very understanding. Always personally, always attacking me. It was just ... I didn't like it. He's (my mentor) just like, you know what fake it until you make it. Do you think I'm always happy with certain things, but you just have to put on that face like ... I can't do that. That's not the type of person I am. If I don't like something and I don't like certain things, you'll see it in my face. I'm very hard at hiding how I feel.

Omar, who identified as a Black Latino male, was asked on a regular basis if he played basketball. Deepa had people comment about how much they loved the food from her country. Kenneth had people making assumptions about what languages he speaks. The students tried to brush off comments like this, saying that they thought people were trying to connect to them and
have a conversation. Mike was once mistaken as a delivery guy, which was extremely upsetting to him. The students also spoke to people asking them, “where they were from,” insinuating they were not American. Mike has had people say, “You know, you're not like other Asians I've seen” or "you're the only Asian I've ever met who has talked to me." “It's real. It's fact. It's really real.” Students also shared stories of interactions with campus police where they felt that the officers overreacted because it was a student of color. Mary shared,

The way they handled that situation and then everything they were saying, which sometimes I feel like they take it to the extreme where the charges they're trying to press and things like that. He got out. Did he get out of the situation? Yeah, he got out of the situation, but he needed his lawyer and he needed ... All that for this little scratch on a car. I don't understand. They came in, banged on the door and they were like ... His pants, his pants were up. He was like a gentleman and then they're treating him like he wasn't. They're like, ‘Take your phone out of your pocket.’, screaming at him in the hallway. All for what? He was complying too. I was scared. I didn't want to go out. I was just listening. I really don't like none of that stuff.

Mary and Betty both referenced an incident at a concert where students were pushing each other because it was so crowded and another student called their friend a derogatory term.

I was at a concert with one of my friends or with a lot of my friends. They were pushing. I guess they were so excited, so everyone was pushing and then there's this guy ... What happened ... I think my friend, she's like, ‘Oh, stop. Stop pushing. Oh my God.’ He said something about, ‘Shut up, you Black Bxxxx’. We were like, ‘What?’ I don't even know. One of my other friends jumped in for him like, ‘Oh, why you had to say that?’ I don't
know, that was just ... It was all in the beginning too, my first semester. I'm like, ‘How is this happening? Why is this even happening?’ That experience was like, I was just like, ‘I want to go.’ There was times when I'm like, ‘I want to transfer. I'm looking at a different school, different colleges. This is not for me.’ Then I somehow adapted to my environment because I wanted to be here. If I left, then who wins? So I'm going to stay and I'm going to face it. That's one way I grew a lot.

The students reported the incident to the Bias Acts Response Team but the student could not be identified. Situations like these made some of the students contemplate transferring.

Students also reported situations where they felt the impacts of a stereotype threat. Mary shared this story,

I found a wallet on the bus. When I was approaching the wallet there were people looking at me. I was like, ‘Should I touch this wallet?’ I don't know. I grabbed it and I felt so weird grabbing it because I felt like people would think I'm going to keep it. I'm going to look through it and keep it. I felt like everyone was staring at me. I'm like, ‘Why wouldn't you guys grab the wallet?’ I'm like, ‘Oh my god, I feel so weird.’ I'm looking at the name and trying to let them see that I'm typing in her name so I can email her. I felt so weird doing that, because it was me and I have this big curly hair; I'm obviously someone of color. I felt so weird. Yeah, in some situations ... I was like, ‘Should I avoid this or should I not?’ I wanted to be a good citizen, Samaritan, and do the right thing. I ended up doing the right ...For me, I was like, ‘I know that this is what I'm going to do, and if they're going to think some other way then let them think that.’ In the beginning I was scared to even touch the wallet, just thinking of what they think of me.”
The situations students of color face on historically white institutions it becomes clear why students protested on many campuses during the fall of 2015. Perhaps, these protests created interest convergence for some institutions feeling the necessity to make changes to protect themselves. Campuses across the country are adding Chief Diversity Officer positions to combat the issues of racism students are facing. Giving voice to students in the study allowed the researcher to gain deeper understanding of the specific incidents students of color are experiencing and how they move forward to the end goal of graduating.

**Students Making Sense of Their Experiences**

All the students struggled with the question concerning how they made sense of their experiences on campus. Throughout the interviews, their answers spoke to how the researcher perceived their making sense of their experiences, but the students themselves struggled to answer the question specifically. As they thought more about the question, most ended up feeling as if they had a responsibility to focus on their academics and that was their priority. This implied that other issues had to be overlooked (for the most part) so that they could focus on their studies and keep their eye on the “prize” of graduation. Betty contemplated,

That's a hard question. Yeah, how do I make sense of it? I would say that they've been life lessons learned, not just for college but for after I graduate. I would say that I make sense of it not immediately when the situation happens but sometimes I sit back and it'll cross my mind and I'll think about how far I've come. Recently I sat back and I thought, ‘Oh wow, like I'm a junior already, like freshman year, sophomore year like went so quick, like what happened?’ and I just reflected on things I've learned about myself, things I've learned about others and things I've learned about just being away, stepping out of my comfort zone was one thing I learned.
Many of the students interviewed were driven by the idea of making their families proud and recognizing that their families had struggled and sacrificed so that they could go to college. Students also spoke to the issues of racism nationally and that the campus was mimicking what they saw happening all over. Those interviewed believed that it was not something they could change so “it is what it is” and that they had a goal that they must stay focused on achieving.

Mary stated,

I don't know. Everything that happens, to me I don't know, it happened. I don't know. To me, obviously when I'm having conversations with my friends I'm like, ‘Racism is still alive in its own form.’ Whatever type of form it is. It's not, obviously out there out there. To me, I'm very aware because I know that it's still alive. I don't want to say not as much, but it's the modern day racism I guess you can say. I don't know, to make sense of it? I guess I not really, necessarily, accept it. It's just what can we do? I honestly don't know.

Kenneth explained how he has made sense of his time on campus.

I would say freshman year I was just very nervous and just shy in general. I came from a school that was really small, a hundred people graduated in my class. Here, just not knowing people and being scared of oh, are they going to judge me, what are they going to say about me? Things like that. That usually held me back from pursuing any opportunities that I wanted. Then reflecting on it, I would say, if it wasn't for those experiences that I went through, I don't think I would be so determined to do everything I want to do or know what I'm capable of doing at the same time. Because I feel one has to be uncomfortable and not ... you can't be comfortable with what you're doing, because then you're just settling for the bare minimums that your comfortable.
Omar found,

Furthermore, I never thought I would see myself actually going to college, and like, to actually be here right now, going through the steps of finally being to college, it's still surprising that I'm actually here, you know? And being on a predominantly white campus is different for me, but I'm used to it and people are really nice here and like, I don't have any problems but, it's been a struggle, yeah, in terms of learning to adjust, you know, getting used to the curriculum because, like I said, I did way better in high school than I did in college, so it was different for me, you know, going from being an, basically an honor roll student in high school to being like, average here, you know, because I feel like everyone is like always ahead of you. Everyone's on top of their work. Just everyone's a step ahead of you, basically, kind of thing, so it's different in that terms.

The students seemed to make sense of their experiences by staying focused on their end goals. For them, the college degree is of the utmost importance and it was critical to not lose sight of that no matter what they were experiencing on campus. The researcher believes that the educational systems need to do better than this. Mike said,

I never would have thought that three 45-minute interviews to an hour interviews could have made me think about certain things in such different ways. When I thought just simply coming to college, I am learning having all of these different experiences made me think I've seen it all. When in these interviews, I don't see anything. I think about everything. I critically analyze everything that I've experienced so far, and I see them in such a different light. It's really shocking. It's shocking, but it's a sign of relief, though. At least somebody starts to think about it this way. Maybe others can start to think about it in those kind of ways too.
The researcher made sense of the students’ experiences by understanding how difficult the campus environment can be but knowing that there are people students’ counts on to ensure they make it to graduation. The researcher believes students count of people who continue to advocate for them and see themselves as changing the campus for those who come after them. Some students focused on others experiences and not their own. Others stated that the things people said or joked about did not bother them, as this was the coping mechanism they employed to survive in a racist environment. Students recognized the importance of receiving a college degree and were willing to put issues of racism aside to continue to stay focused. The researcher believed the students who volunteered to be in the study were student leaders who were extremely involved on campus, which influenced how they experienced the campus environment. As a college administrator, the researcher felt that it was critical that colleges develop strategies that created environments for students to thrive and feel safe.

Support Systems

Peer Mentoring

All but one of the interviewees was able to speak to both their role as a mentor and their experience as a mentee. Many became mentors based on their experiences as a mentee. Students expressed wanting to be a mentor because others helped them make a smooth transition to campus. Some mentors and mentees became friends, which seemed to be an important component to students being able to support someone who was dealing with a racist incident. Students felt that unless a relationship was established, most students would not come to them if something racist happened. Mary believes,

I think it's mostly academic and I think it's that way because ... I don't know. Maybe when you're a freshman and you just get handed this person and it's like ‘Oh you can tell
me anything’ and it's like ‘What are you talking about? I just met you. I can't just tell you anything.’ Maybe it's more of my mentee's form last semester that became my friends. Do you know that this happened? Things like that but I would say ‘Oh, let me know if you're comfortable.’ Especially for a freshman because they are probably feeling vulnerable and things like that. Especially if it happened to you just say ‘Oh this happened to me. Just want to make sure it's not happening to you.’ To get them to open up and things like that if you want to know more of their personal side.

Mentors said that they would go to family members, close friends and clubs that had membership that matched their identities if something they perceived as racist happened to them. They thought that being part of the mentor program gave them the resources of support the campus provided if something racist happened. This made them feel more comfortable on campus and they shared this information with their mentees.

The mentors had a wide range of thoughts of how best to match mentors and mentees. Mary felt that matching by major and identity would be important. Omar had a white mentor when he was a freshman and felt that race was not a factor for him. Although he did point out that his mentor was very active in social justice on campus. Kenneth said, “Some things I take from it is just their culture; learning about where they come from, maybe a little bit about their struggles as to how they got here or how close they are to their families. That really creates a bond between not just being a mentee or a mentor, just a friendship.” Betty shared,

I will be honest, I feel like if he was from a different race I don't think we would've spoken initially to be honest. Like, ‘Oh my god, you're from X? I'm from X, too. That's when we automatically clicked. I'm like, You're from the Bronx, I'm from the Bronx too!’ Automatically clicked. We kept knowing mutual friends back home so that kept clicking
and stuff, but I feel like that's important too, having someone you can connect with, same background, stuff like that is a main thing. A lot of people like to connect with people who are similar than them, rather than somebody that are different than them. I noticed. me personally I'm the same way too.

Omar took what he learned from his mentor and shared information with his mentees. He felt being a mentor kept him focused and always aware of his status as a role model.

Betty found her mentor to be a huge influence and support for her during her freshman year. She still remains in contact with him. She said,

I feel like yes. I feel like if I didn't meet Paul who was my mentor my first semester I feel like I would've transferred out. I feel like he helped me in terms of things I need to do, introducing me to people, making me feel comfortable. Introducing me to his friends that he made also come here, so that was a very big help. I looked up to him and I was like and I want to be that, the female version of him. I want people to see that I'm very educated, I'm very independent, I'm very serious about my work, and stuff like that. I was able to learn about the resources and opportunities available here. Not just about the opportunities here but opportunities elsewhere, and how I can grow as a person. I feel like my mentor was preparing me for things that he had already gone through and wanted to prepare me ... To be ready for challenges that I may face. Obstacles that I may face.

Joys that I may face.

Deepa was grateful to have a mentor who was from the same country she was and spoke her heritage language. She said,

Oh yeah definitely. Oh my God I miss him so much. He was definitely really helpful. It was easy to transition. Also, because he was also the only person on campus at that point
who could speak my heritage language. He was also the only person from my country so it was nice to see someone on campus every two or three weeks and just talk in our shared language it would take me back when like if I'm talking to my parents.

When mentor and mentee relationships are strong and each person feels connected, students play a critical role in supporting students who may experience racism on campus. Interviewees mentioned the importance of having cultural centers and clubs that reflected their identities for support. Mary found support through a cultural club,

Let me tell you this story. They'll get all not excited but it's like ‘Oh my god. That happens to me too. I thought I was the only one.’ On Monday there's the X Club. That's on Mondays and it's a great club to me and it's really fun. Its' really a sense of community and you can say what happened to a group of 25 students that you identify with and everyone just telling their story of the week. Especially this past election. We were talking about the protest and it's just a comfortable area to be able to speak about what happened personally with you because everyone's going through the same thing, just different problem.

The interviewees who had been admitted through an access program also felt significant connections with faculty, staff and other students within the program. In addition, they found their Summer Bridge Program was a valuable experience. The key for mentorship to work was that a relationship existed beyond just asking questions about the campus. Mentees must feel safe to reach out to the mentor regardless of the situation. Mentors felt that they did an excellent job explaining the support systems in place to their mentees so even if they had not developed a strong bond, they still knew where to go if something happened.
Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of students of color on historically white college campuses. Students shared stories that reflected the following themes (1) Campus Climate and Issues of Racism, (2) Academic and Social Implications, (3) Support Systems. The themes included issues related to culture shock, the pressure to assimilate, classroom experiences, friendships, microaggressions, bias and stereotype threat and peer mentoring. The stories shared by students in the study closely matched the research showing that students of color are experiencing racism on historically white college campuses. Students spoke to their experiences in classrooms not seeing themselves in the curriculum and feeling isolated and not able to speak up. Students told stories of feeling like they had to do something to change who they were so that white people would be comfortable with them. A few students spoke of having to be uncomfortable in order to become comfortable. Students felt that in order to be successful on campus they had to adapt or assimilate to the campus culture. Students had difficulty making sense of their experiences saying that it was the way it was, so what could they do about it. It was most important for them to focus on their studies. The students interviewed were very active on campus and they all felt that helped them to connect better to the campus community. These themes will be discussed further in Chapter 5 where the researcher looked at how the literature, research questions and theoretical framework informed the study.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice

Problem and Purpose of Study

College campuses can be unwelcoming, sometimes even hostile environments for many students of color. Participants were glad to see more students of color attending college on their campus. Although they expressed concern over how new students would feel when they realized there were less people of color than they might have thought when they applied. The students in the study thought that the peer mentor program offered support and guidance for new students acclimating to the campus. Students of color have challenging experiences on campus and peer mentoring is one way to address the issues they are facing. Colleges have not been prepared for the challenges students of color are confronting on their campuses with students of color reporting feeling isolated and unwelcome (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper, 2012). The study utilized student voice to create greater understanding of their experiences. The examination of students of color experiences (specific to race) allowed for increased opportunity to develop strategies to address the challenges students of color are facing. This study examined issues of racism students of color face at a historically white institution and the role peer mentoring may have played in supporting them.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of students of color at a rural, upstate Northeast College by examining the role a peer mentoring program played in how students of color described their experiences on campus. Therefore the central research question that guided this study was as follows:

• How do students of color make sense of their experiences on a historically white college campus in the Northeast?
How do students of color experience racism on the college campus?

What role does the peer mentoring program play in supporting students of color when facing issues of racism at the institution?

**Research Design**

Given the intention of the study, the researcher determined that a critical-interpretative paradigm and a qualitative inquiry approach would be the most appropriate method for this investigation. As a Critical Race Theorist, the researcher understood the everyday issues students faced around racism were significant to understanding the data collected through a qualitative approach. The key to qualitative research relied on the participants’ voice to tell the story of their experiences on campus and with the peer mentor program. Each interviewee had their own socially constructed meaning that they had learned through their interactions with their environment. The researcher studied the participants and attempted to make sense of phenomena developing in the data. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) posited that phenomenology is the primary philosophical tool for the study of experience. The researcher believed that a phenomenological approach was necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of students of color in a peer mentor program on a historically white campus.

**Limitations of the Study**

There were a number of limitations to this study: sample size, limited research specific to the role peer mentoring played for students of color specifically, the identity and role on campus of the researcher and the relationship the researcher had with the participants. Interviewing six students provided rich data, although a larger sample size could have provided for a more in depth study. Another limitation was the inability to speak to the individual identities and how
the student’s experiences were similar or different. Doing this would have broken the participant anonymity. The researcher’s role as an administrator on campus could be a limitation for students. Another limitation was the researcher’s identity as a white woman. Although the students who participated knew the researcher, there may have been some limitations in how comfortable students felt sharing details of their experiences because of the researcher’s identity as a white woman and administrator on campus.

Overview and Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The findings from the study showed students faced issues of racism in a variety of spaces on college campuses. Students seemed to develop strategies to adapt to the campus climate in order to have success in what could be a difficult environment. The participants were still in the process of examining who they were and how they navigated a campus that was not always welcoming. The interviewee’s stories matched the research related to the experiences of students of color at other historically white institutions across the country. Participants found mentorship to be an important component for students to connect and feel part of a community on campus. The stories participants shared were powerful and important. Hopefully, historically white campuses can learn from these stories and develop strategies to support students for success.

Critical Race Theory

As a Critical Race Theorist, the researcher was not surprised by the themes that emerged through the interview process. Students spoke of the experiences they had with everyday racism and their comments told a story of having to, “Let this go” and assimilated to the environment so that they could ensure successful completion of their studies. The stories shared
by participants spoke to the tenets of Critical Race Theory. The theory recognized (a) the permanence of racism; (b) counter-storytelling; (c) whiteness as a property; (d) interest convergence; and (e) the critique of liberalism (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). The interviewees recognized the permanence of racism, particularly when they tried to make sense of their experiences. They felt that there was not much they could do about what was happening to them and others on campus. Their stories served as counter-narratives and reflected the, “white norms” they were up against on college campuses. The issues students presented in the data speak specifically to the issues of whiteness and the pressure students feel to adapt to white norms in educational settings. The researcher thought the 2015 protest may have created some interest convergence for campuses to protect themselves from demands and calls for resignations. Colleges across the nation became proactive in developing positions and strategies to develop more inclusive institutions. The researcher believed that sharing these narratives could further build interest convergence so that institutions could invest in changing the racist systems embedded in the educational system. As the researcher made sense of the student’s stories, it was imperative that there is a critique the issues related to liberalism that allowed campuses to think that they were addressing the issues students of color faced. Nationally there were critiques of liberalism that may foster dialogues on campuses to further analyze systemic issues facing students of color.

Participants shared stories of having to be professional and uphold a particular image on the college campus, which was very different, from who they were at home. The stories spoke to a deep understanding of double consciousness, although they did not seem to connect that experience to issues of racism (Bell, 1995). Looking at the experiences of students of color on college campuses using a Critical Race lens allowed the researcher to analyze and document the
ways in which students of color experience isolation, marginalization, and exclusion at the historically white institution in the study (Harper, 2013; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). It also offered a connection to everyday racist incidents that the students brushed off as not a big deal. Even subtle actions added up to create an environment where students of color struggled and had to make decisions of self-sacrifice to achieve success.

The researcher’s journals provided a lens into how comfortable the interviewees were while answering questions related to their experiences with racism. One student in particular seemed extremely uncomfortable and never moved from talking about how others experienced the campus to how they did. As the researcher reflected on the journal entries and the interview responses, it became clear that the student was not comfortable sharing how they felt with the researcher. The three part interview structure was a powerful progression for most of the students. Seeing the data emerge as the process moved forward and their comfort level build to share things that they were seeing and recognizing as racism was valuable.

Critical Race Theorists recognize the embedded nature of racism systemically in society; they posit that Brown and Black people experience racism every day (Delgado & Sefancic, 2001, Solorzano et al., 2000). The interviewees shared incidents that occurred everyday for them that they “shrugged off” but ultimately had negative impacts with how they experienced the campus community. The researcher relied on the voice of historically underrepresented people and aims to create space for counter-narratives as a key way to begin to break down systemic racism. Listening to the stories the interviewees’ shared offered insight into the racist culture created by valuing white norms on college campuses. The researcher based their arguments on the premise that race is a social construct that perpetuates whiteness as a norm. The issues students expressed during the interview process speak to the campus valuing whiteness and for students to be
Campus Climate and Issues of Racism

Culture Shock

The participants spoke to the culture shock they experienced when they arrived on campus. Even students who came from rural areas felt that the campus was different in some way. These adjustments for students made some of them consider transferring after their first semester. The experience with culture shock paired with incidents of bias, created feelings of isolation. Students had to make decisions on what they would do to endure the campus environment. Some interviewees had mentors who played a key role in assisting them with their transition, developing a social network and supporting them academically. Many found community in cultural clubs that brought them together with people who identified similarly and created a place to go for support for incidents students encountered on campus.

Bias, Microaggressions and Stereotype Threat

The participants had numerous stories of incidents where bias, microaggressions and stereotype threats created situations that made them uncomfortable. The students spoke to having had to “brush off” comments as jokes and developed strategies to respond in ways that made it seem as though it did not bother them. Students shared stories of finding derogatory words and drawings on dry erase boards on their residence hall doors, people looking at them and not holding door as they approached, and people making assumptions about them because of their accent. The stories were numerous and occurred in all settings on campus. When students faced an environment where they had to question why these things continued to happen, they became frustrated and struggled to feel safe on campus.
Interviewees related to the concept of Only-ness, where students do not have role models or other students in classrooms that identify similarly (Harper, 2013). Students spoke to the idea of not bothering to speak up in contradiction to a faculty member or other students to avoid conflict. Some participants spoke to the idea of having material presented in classes that did not reflect their lived experiences, although it was being presented as such. One student spoke to sitting in the front of the classroom so that they did not have to see the reaction of their classmates when they spoke.

Participants discussed issues related to stereotype threat that creates situations where students worry about self-fulfilling some stereotype related to their identity, or being treated by others based on a stereotype (Solórzano & Ceja and Yosso, 2000). One student felt that people immediately saw them as weak and introverted because of their identity. Interestingly, they were intentional in behaving in ways that contradicted these stereotypes, but were always aware that they were there. The student felt that there was more to the power dynamic for people of color than just standing up for themselves. Another student felt the impact of stereotype threat when they tried to be a Good Samaritan and picked up a lost wallet. The student had to play the scenario over in their head to decide whether it was worth doing what they knew was right. The impact of having to think so deeply about each situation is exhausting and frustrating for students of color.

Identity Development

A few of the interviewees seemed to rely mostly on the concept that racism exists and they witnessed it for others but it had not happened to them. Although students interviewed spoke to this, they then would proceed to talk about microaggressions they experienced in classrooms, residence halls, at job sites and with friends. Morrison (2010) speaks to the
development of identity and the process student’s take as they progress in their understanding of racism, most move from assimilation to educator. A few of the students in the study seemed to still be at the assimilation stage, which speaks to the campus climate and expectations of the community. Some of the concepts the researcher shared such as stereotype threat and only-ness seemed to resonate with students and bring them to an understanding that they did not already have. As the interviews progressed, students began noticing more of what was happening around them. The researcher struggled with the responsibility of whether or not to push students to a place they were not ready to go. For three of the interviewees, it became obvious that they were not ready so the researcher let them focus on others experiences and did not push for them to connect what they said about themselves to racism. One of the students who mostly focused on other’s experiences spoke of struggling with depression and the implications on their grades. Even if students do not see racism specifically directed towards them, there are still negative implications to the experiences they are having.

**Academic and Social Implications**

**Classrooms**

Classrooms might be a place where faculty could focus on creating opportunities for students to get to know each other to build community for the growth of all. The situations interviewees spoke of in classrooms were concerning. Faculty with the best of intentions still managed to cause harm. Colleges must be intentional in providing education to faculty members about issues students of color face in classrooms and how best to support their learning. The education of white students is critical in respect to changing the experience of students of color at historically white institutions. The daily insults from bias and microaggressions build and create hostile environments where success for students of color becomes a challenge. One student
spoke of the ongoing insult of having a faculty member tell the class to discuss a topic with the person sitting next to them and having a white student look at them and then turn to talk to someone else. Students of color need campuses where they can thrive, not just survive (Harper et al., 2015).

**Friends**

The issues students spoke of related to friendships was powerful. The film “Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible” shared a story of a Black woman who had been hurt so many times by white friends that she felt as if she was crawling across shards of glass when reaching out to accept a white person’s friendship (Butler, S., & Butler, R., 2006). The student’s stories reflected this idea, showing how difficult friendships can be, particularly between students of color and their white peers. The participants in the study spoke to what they had to do as students of color to make white people comfortable with them. The pressure and idea that students of color had to change who they were for the comfort of others is real. Three participants spoke about their struggle with anxiety and depression as a direct result of how they were experiencing the campus. One participant spoke to the fact that they never felt fully relaxed on campus. Five of the interviewees specifically referenced the idea of avoiding drama or conflict. They found it easier to make a joke or let something roll off of them than to engage in a conversation about why a situation was hurtful. When asked specifically about whom student’s closest friends were, most said other students who identified similarly to them. Some of the students who participated in a Summer Bridge Program made friends and considered them their core group. They stated that they would rely on these friends during difficult times, even if they had branched out to other friend groups.
Peer Mentoring and Other Campus Support

Although peer mentoring served a critical role for students of color on historically white campuses, it seemed to not have significant impacts to changing the overall campus climate for students of color. Mentors and mentees felt a similar sense of community but still experienced feelings of exclusion and isolation in the larger campus community. Mentors seemed to have more connections to the campus community through their exposure to administrators and faculty, an important component of the peer mentor program. Mentees seemed to find the mentors critical in their transition to campus and helped them to develop academic support and a social network. Much like the research, the interviewees had varying views on how best to match mentors and mentees. Some thought similar identities was the best approach and one mentee who had had a white mentor saw value in having a mentor who identified differently. Others felt that matching by major would work ideally. The researcher found that the relationship mentors and mentees developed was the greatest impact for both participants. Planning on developing greater interaction for students who participated both as mentors and mentees so that a stronger community exists would be helpful for students who are struggling with racist incidents. Looking critically at how the peer mentor program is structured, how students opt into participating, the communications about the program and the academic versus social aspects of the program all need to be evaluated.

Students spoke of people who had supported them throughout their educational career. In high school, they all had someone who pushed and helped them reach their goal of attending college. Many of the students expressed that without this individual; they would not have made it to college. The students also spoke of people on campus that had been there for them as well. The interviewees mentioned people in the offices specific to diversity, equity and inclusion. In
addition the people involved with the access programs on campus and faculty members who had
gone out of their way to connect with students were also mentioned. Students indicated feeling
most connected to faculty who identified as a person of color. Those faculty members helped
them feel more comfortable and valued in class. One student spoke of how classes with more
students of color and faculty of color offered greater dialogue and lively interactions for all the
members of the class.

Participants spoke of the importance of campuses having cultural centers and clubs that
represented their identities. Even interviewees who had not relied on the cultural center per se
felt that it was a valuable asset to the campus and critical for students of color to have a space
where they could go to be with like minded people. They believed that people new to the
community would be glad to know it existed. Others who had used the cultural center felt that it
had been a space where they could be themselves and had had the opportunity to attend programs
that represented their cultures. Clubs seemed to be even more valuable to the student experience.
All the students interviewed found clubs to be one of the strongest supports for them on campus.
Students spoke of attending meetings where they shared a situation with others to gain support
and advice on what to do. The students who had been admitted through an access program found
community and a core group of friends through those programs. They felt that the Summer
Bridge Program had been extremely helpful in creating a sense of family and uniting students.
Some students felt that it was still important to reach out to people outside the program to build
friendships and community.

Students and Researcher Make Sense of It All

As the researcher saw the interviewees struggle to make sense of their experiences, it
became clear that issues of racism are embedded in the systems and structures of the educational system. Students felt that there was nothing to make sense of as racism to them was commonplace and they needed to do what was necessary to survive and get their degree. Students spoke of situations in classrooms where they chose to be silent instead of speaking their truth to avoid conflicts. The participants shared stories that reflected a lack of understanding of the campus community around issues of implicit bias. Although the interviewees had concrete examples of racism on campus they spoke to others experiencing racism but not themselves. The participants viewed racism as explicit acts and not as the everyday insults of bias and stereotyping. The students developed concrete strategies to avoid conflict and remain focused on their goals of a college degree. The researcher acknowledged the students’ reality and understood why they had to adapt to their environment. As a college practitioner, the researcher felt an obligation to reflect on and evaluate the support from the college in general and more specifically, the department that is provided to students around issues related to racism. The researcher relied on the voices of the participants and made sense of it by committing to continue to engage white people in conversations about the experiences of students of color. The researcher recognized that the interviewees were having success academically on campus, which probably related to their ability to adapt to their environment. The researcher continues to engage community members in conversations focused on the impact of white culture and critically evaluate the systems and practices to breakdown the embedded racism so that at some point in the near future, students of color will not have to accept that this is “how it is” and can feel valued, included and accepted for who they are in all spaces on college campuses.

The researcher found it difficult to not revert to a practitioner role while interviewing students but knew that it was vital for the validity of the study that they remain in their researcher
role. It was a challenge to the researcher to listen to students share stories of bias and microaggressions and not recognize that their personal experiences were racism. The participants shared that they felt the pressure to assimilate on campus environment. The interviewees referenced issues of anxiety and depression that the researcher believes are direct impacts of dealing with the pressures of assimilation. This pressure to assimilate speaks to the issues of the campus being embedded in white culture and made the researcher question the role the institution plays in perpetuating the expectation of assimilation for students of color. As the campus community educates student leaders and new students, it is important to consider if components of the programs manifest and promote the idea that assimilation equals success. The researcher also struggles to make sense of the student experience and contemplates her role on campus and her identity as a white woman and the possible impact this has on how students experience the campus. As a scholar-practitioner, the researcher is committed to continue to work on making sense of the student experience and develop strategies that empower students to embrace who they are and create a campus community that values students of color and includes them as they are in all spaces on campus.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

The new role the researcher had taken limited the contact with students in the mentor program. This added to the trustworthiness of the study. The ability to build trust between researcher and participant was essential to the overall value of the study. The researcher’s familiarity with students involved in the mentor program proved valuable in developing trust and openness when gathering interview data. The validation of this study occurred through several different methods, including prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and pilot interviews. The researcher also incorporated inter-rater reliability by having a faculty colleague
review interviews and code for cross checking. Recognizing that the research was only as good as the researcher, it was critical that the study be held with the highest level of credibility and trustworthiness. Understanding this sensitive topic and the honesty of the interviewees emphasized how imperative it was that student’s identities remain confidential.

Implications for Future Study

The study provided a number of opportunities for future research related to the interactions of faculty with students of color in and out of the classroom, friendships for students of color particularly across identities and the evaluation and criteria of peer mentor programs. The students shared their lived experiences on campus, which provides new questions and concerns that are necessary to study. Listening to the student perspective and how they make sense of their experiences is critical in developing additional studies to continue to move the campus towards change that truly impacts students of color positively.

The study speaks directly to the need for further study in classroom situations that students of color face. Creating an opportunity for faculty to engage in education related to inclusive pedagogy and strategies for classroom practice where a case study could be incorporated to determine the outcomes of such education. Perhaps this study could include opportunities for faculty and students to engage outside of the classroom in order to build relationships that could support students during and after their time on campus. Understanding the impact on students when curriculum represents them and they feel safe to participate in classrooms would be helpful in bringing more faculty on board to understand why inclusivity in curriculum, practice and pedagogy is critical for students of color success.

Further investigation on the role friendships play in greater understanding across identities is
another important study that stems from how students of color develop and engage in friendships on campus. Creating space where students can develop friendships across identities. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to understand how students make sense of these relationships could give the campus insight on how to develop courses and informal engagement activities that assist in building friendships. Classrooms and residence halls might provide the perfect settings to create opportunities to engage in dialogues or conversations that move towards developing friendships. The campus climate survey spoke to the idea that students contemplate transferring out because they have difficulty finding a friend group. This study would have implications for issues related to diversity as well as retention.

The researcher is interested in a study that examines the role the college plays in perpetuating the ideas of assimilation to students through the access programs, orientation programs and leadership opportunities. The students in the study were mostly part of an access program on campus but even the student who was not expressed the importance of adapting to the environment for success so comparing experiences and ideas about assimilation would be a valuable study. Does the institution lead students to believe that they must assimilate to have success on campus?

Further research to understand how best to incorporate meaningful change on college campuses related to racism is needed. The issues presented by the students in the study speak to the need for research on the campus as to how the role leaderships should play and the strategies necessary for successful change around systems and structures that perpetuate racism is vital to the success of students of color. A study that incorporated interviews with a number of different constituents that represents a variety of levels of positions, people who have a vested interest in diversity and those who have not participated. Also, including the President, Chief Diversity
Officer and grassroots leaders who are all working on issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion to develop a broad range of perspectives for greater understanding. Using an IPA methodology would offer the researcher and participants to make sense of their roles and how it is impacting change. This study could give insight into how differently people perceive the campus and offer the upper administration a detailed picture of how best to move forward.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The study examined how students made sense of their experiences at a historically white institution, including issues of racism and the role peer mentoring plays in supporting students experiencing racism. After analyzing the data, the researcher believes there are a number of actions college campuses could incorporate to address issues students faced in the study.

Further developing campus education for students, faculty and staff around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. Building educational opportunities that moved members from initial understanding to deeper interpretations. For faculty members’ workshops and dialogues that address inclusive classroom pedagogy, curriculum and strategies is extremely important based on the stories shared about students of color experiences in classrooms on campus. Strategies to have all faculty involved is critical. The classroom environment can be extremely difficult for students of color. Educational opportunities for staff on how to create inclusive work environments for student employees as well as customer service practices that address bias. Some students found support in the offices they worked in while others did not. Creating education opportunities for all campus community members is vital in transforming a campus culture. Every employee on campus has a role to play in making a student feel like they are a valued part of the community.
A student in the study spoke of their experience working in an office on campus and that now they wanted to look into that field as a career. The researcher plans to discuss the idea of further developing opportunities for students of color to intern or work in campus offices where relationships can be established as well as valuable experience for future positions. By offering opportunities for students to learn about positions on campus, the chance to build a more diverse work force becomes a possibility. Most students in the study had positive experiences working on campus and felt the positions gave them ideas for careers as well as a support system on campus. The relationship building and develop support systems with people working on campus is way to change the narrative for students of color. A critical component of this would be education of supervisors and employees working with the students of color.

On a personal level, the researcher will continue to be a strong advocate for students of color. The researcher will do their part in educating the campus community and examining policies and procedures to continue to break down institutional barriers that impact students of color. The researcher is involved in developing an educational plan for the campus and will continue to build on the opportunities available to campus members to transform the institution. The researcher is working on a dialogue model for a course in the fall and is hopeful that having students across identities build community and engage in difficult conversations will impact the campus in positive ways. The researcher is working with human resources to further the education provided to search committees in addressing implicit bias to be sure search committee members understand the impact of bias and what it is to further diversify the campus community. The researcher will continue to evaluate systems that create expectations for students of color to assimilate to white norms on campus. As a
white person, the researcher will continue to do the self-examination necessary to see racism and stand up for change. Campuses need to recognize that educational systems were built on racist models and that they must be explicit in their expectations of the community.

**Conclusion**

By recognizing the challenges students of color face throughout the educational system, it is imperative that higher education institutions listen to students of color and look at the role the institution plays in perpetuating racist systems. The experience of students of color throughout their educational system is challenging. Without the support of a champion, many students do not make it to college. Students began their time on campus experiencing culture shock, moved into spaces experiencing bias, forcing them to develop strategies to assimilate to the white norms so that they could achieve their ultimate goal of obtaining a college degree. Colleges must look at the role institutions are playing in perpetuating the expectation of assimilation for students of color to be successful. Most are focused on making their families proud and being strong role models for siblings, extended families and communities. The burden of this can be too much for some students. Others had strong coping skills and support so that the goal can be attained. However, in many ways they had only survived the environment. College campuses must recognize the challenges students of color face and have people, systems and policies that support student success. Administrators speak to creating inclusive and welcoming environments but are not unpacking the underlying issues of racism at historically white institutions. Listening to people of color deeply to understand the complexities of their experiences and how racism impacts their every day interactions is vital to a transformational change. Campuses must lead the way in setting expectations of their community members, educate faculty, staff and students and create intentional opportunities for difficult dialogues that
develop greater understanding. As colleges move forward creating inclusive spaces on campus, listening to the suggestions students make around educating white campus community members is important for change. Leaders need to decide what their core values are and adhere to them while implementing change throughout racist systems.
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Appendix A Call for Participants

Are you college student who has participated in the Office of Equity and Inclusion Peer Mentor Program?

Please consider taking part in this study!

A study is being conducted to gain insight into how having a peer mentor has influenced your experience on campus.

In order to participate, individuals must be between the ages of 18-24 and proficient in English. Participants must have participated in the mentor program on campus and identify as a person of color. Participants must be currently enrolled full-time students at the institution in the study. All qualified individuals are encouraged to apply, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, religion, (dis)ability, or national origin.

The study consists of three interviews, which may be conducted either by phone, Skype®, or in person and will last approximately 45 minutes for each interview. The first interview focuses on the participant’s life history and present day experience in relation to the topic; the second interview will focus on the mentor and campus experiences. The third interview will allow the participant to reflect upon the meaning of the experiences.

If you or someone you know would like to participate in this study or learn more, please email Mary Bonderoff at Bonderoff.m@husky.neu.edu or call 607-547-1072. Selection for the study is not guaranteed, but will be determined during a brief 5-10 minute intake call.

Confidentiality is guaranteed, and participants’ names will never be shared with others or used in the published results.

Mary Bonderoff, an EdD doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, is conducting this study. Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board for research ethics and our university’s Institutional Review Board for research ethics have approved this study.
Appendix B Consent Form

The Role of Peer Mentoring in Building Community
You are being asked to take part in a research study of how college students involved with the peer mentor program through the Office of Equity and Inclusion experience the campus. We are asking you to take part because you are involved with the peer mentor program and volunteered to participate in the study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn how students who participate in the peer mentor program experience the campus environment as it relates to belonging and transitioning to a historically white institution.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed about your role with the mentor program, your experience during your time on campus, your academics and social life. The interview will take about 45 minutes to complete and we will be interviewing you three times. You will be asked to keep a journal during your time in the study but it is not required. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview.

Risks and benefits:
Participating in this study carries minimal risk. I do not anticipate any risks to you while participating in this study other than those you may encounter in your daily life. Some questions about your experiences may make you uncomfortable. Being a college student is a very demanding and we hope to learn more about students who participate in the peer mentor program to understand the impacts the program has on transition, academic success and feeling welcome.

Compensation: There will be no compensation for participating in the study.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be private and confidential. No participant names or other identifiable information will be included in any reports generated from this study. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. We will retain the records for five years to adhere to IRB requirements.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the peer mentor program and/or the campus. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Mary Bonderoff. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Mary Bonderoff at 607-547-1072 or mary.bonderoff@husky.neu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 617-390-3450 or k.skophammer@neu.edu.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature ___________________________ Date ____________________
Your Name (printed) _________________________________

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature ___________________________ Date ______________

Signature of person obtaining consent ______________________ Date ______________

Printed name of person obtaining consent ______________________ Date ______________

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.
Appendix C Interview Questions

Interview #1

The first interview will use the following overarching question and prompts to guide a semi-structured interview. Based on participant responses, follow up and clarifying questions will be used during the second interview.

- Please tell me about yourself. Please think about and share your educational experiences before coming to campus. What was your school like? Did you feel welcomed, supported and accepted as a student? Then, please describe what your experience here on Campus has been like in comparison.
  
  - What initially attracted you to the campus?
  - Explain how campus differs from where you grew up.
  - Reflect on your initial reaction to what was different/similar.
  - Tell me how your experience has changed or stayed the same during your time here.
  - Explain what went well/what didn’t go well and what you think played into those experiences.
  - What do you think was helpful or could be helpful when coming to campus?

Interview #2

The second interview will use the following questions to guide the semi-structured interview. The researcher may have follow up and clarifying questions that arose from participant responses in the first interview. The third interview will include follow up and clarifying questions that come from responses from interview two.

- Now that you are on campus and have been a part of the Mentoring Program, please reflect on your experience with the mentoring program and the role it plays for you here on campus.
  
  - How have you adjusted to campus life?
  - Please reflect on what has impacted your adjustment the most.
IMPACTS OF PEER MENTORING

- What types of supports have assisted in your transition to college?
- What have been the challenges in coming to our university?
- Has your mentor played a role in easing your transition to campus? How?
- Have you joined any clubs?
- Who are your friends?
- Do you have a sense of community on campus?
- Do you feel included in the campus community? Classrooms? Residence hall?
- How are your interactions with white students on campus? Other students of color?

Interview #3

The third interview will use the following questions to guide the semi-structured interview. The researcher may have follow up and clarifying questions that arose from participant responses in the first and second interviews.

- I want to reflect on your time here on campus thinking about the high points, the successes, and the challenges. Explain how you make sense of it all as a student of color in a predominantly white college campus.
  - What advice would you give other new students of color?
  - What would you do the same/or different?
  - Tell me about the stereotypes and/or bias you have encountered since you arrived at this college/university.
  - How do you respond to these stereotypes or bias?
  - What do you do to develop a sense of community?
  - What do you think the College should do differently/same?
  - Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not asked about?
Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Mary Bonderoff successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”. Date of completion:

05/25/2015

Certification Number: 1768911