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HEAR OUR VOICES: SUPPORTING BLACK UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN IN CULTURAL & AFFINITY-BASED STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE MIDWESTERN UNITED STATES

A Chapter Style Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership

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ABSTRACT


The United States is a nation rooted in imperialism, colonialism, and racism, built on the backs of minoritized people whose perspectives are not reflected in dominant narratives at every level of society. Historically, Black women have had both racialized and gendered experiences generally and specifically in institutions of postsecondary education, via exclusion and adverse experiences (Collins, 2000; Garcia, 2019; Karkouti, 2016). This historical exclusion exists in part due to the white male hegemony. As a result, and as a coping mechanism, Black women often created or assisted in the creation of affinity-based student organizations. These organizations were aimed at supporting Black students and serving as activist and catalysts for change. This study examines the experiences of Black women engaged affinity-based groups at PWIs in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions held by the study population regarding their institution and how that perception helped them to make meaning of their experience. The research questions that guide this dissertation include: (a) How do Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (during times of activism)? and (b) How do participants describe their relationship with such institutions?
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This research was done for the Black women who participated in this study, the Black women who surround me daily, the Black woman who raised me, and the Black women before her. This study is for the Black women whose voices have gone unheard, minimized, and/or never considered. To the Black women who will continue to use their voice, and to the Black women that have encouraged me to use my voice. To my mother, Carrie Draine Levy, to my grandmothers Minnie Levy Cotton and Rosetta Taylor Draine, for they never knew that I would be their wildest dream. This is for my aunts, and my nieces. Thank you to my sisters and sister-friends for being an example to me and supporting me through the struggles. While I must not neglect the Black men (my dad Fred Levy and my brothers) and other mentors that played vital roles in my life, this study is dedicated to Black women.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, Black women have had more access to enrollment in institutions of postsecondary education and degree attainment. The landmark case Brown v. the Board of Education, granting African Americans access to white institutions of education, and the civil rights movement served as catalysts for increasing Black people’s access to postsecondary education (Benton, 2001; Commodore et al., 2018; Gerlach, 2008). However, this landmark case did not ensure equity in practice and civil rights movements did not interrupt and dismantle structural racism at every level, so Black undergraduate women attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are still facing systemic barriers in education (Sharpe & Swinton, 2012).

To mitigate systemic barriers due to race, Historically Black Colleges, and Universities (HBCUs) “were established with the principal mission of educating Black Americans” (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010, para. 9), providing a sense of empowerment and community. Until 1954, HBCUs enrolled most Black students, but today, Black students enroll at PWIs at a higher rate, of Black students enrolled in college in 2021, 53% of that enrollment is at PWIs compared to 7% enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Benton, 2021; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021). PWIs enroll most of the nation’s Black college students today, but unlike HBCUs, PWIs were not established to support Black students. This is key to understanding the aim of this research. Given the
significant number of Black students attending PWIs, we must provide intentional and proactive interventions to support them; we should listen to the stories regarding the experiences of Black women, and particularly those engaged in cultural or affinity-based organizations.

Black undergraduate students’ experiences are also gendered. Black undergraduate women earn a significant proportion of college degrees, outnumbering Black men, as women earn roughly “two-thirds of bachelor’s degrees awarded to African Americans, 70% of master’s degrees, and 60% of doctorates” (Slater, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for the academic year 2018-2019, Black women earned more bachelor’s degrees than any other race and gender except for both white women and Hispanic women. And though Black students may persist to graduation, it is not without struggle and not yet in parity with white students. For instance, “African American students graduate at a rate of 39.5% in six years in comparison to white students who graduate at the rate of 61.5%” (Leigh, 2020, p. 51).

Black women seem successful, particularly if compared to Black men, in attaining college degrees. But Williams and Williams (2022) note that “only comparing Black women graduation rates (44 percent) with those of Black men (34 percent) masks these disparities and keeps policymakers and practitioners from discussing the needs of Black women” (para. 4). Research has shown that Black women are increasingly enrolling in postsecondary education and have higher completion rates than Black men, and that they are starting to be considered the “new model minority” because of their persistence to degrees and success (Anthony et al., 2021; Benitez, 2010; Williams & Dorimé-Williams, 2022). The increase in seeking postsecondary education for Black women can even be
considered an act of resistance as advantages such as access to postsecondary education were historically afforded to whites (Sharpe & Swinton, 2012).

Yet, such strong persistence data can obscure the historic and contemporary struggles Black women still face in postsecondary education environments (Allen, 1992; Karkouti, 2016; Patton et al., 2017). Despite persistence to degree completion, Black undergraduate women still experience struggles in predominantly white institutions of postsecondary education, which may drive their involvement in activism and/or their membership in a cultural affinity-based organization, like a Black Student Union or multicultural student organization (Allen 1992; Given, 2016; Karkouti, 2016; Patton et al., 2017; Shookhoff, 2006). Supporting the idea that post-secondary institutions remain sites of struggle, Porter et al. (2022) emphasized that “the academy writ large continues to exploit, discriminate, and uphold institutionalized gendered racism through its policies and practices” (abstract). Leigh (2020) contended that “while Black female students are graduating, not many reports of having a fulfilling or engaging college experience…the African American woman college student voice is suffering and requires attention” (p. 52). Quantitative research fails to provide the entire story of persistence for Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based student organizations. This study provides additional insight into those experiences, as I seek to understand the experiences of Black women undergraduate students enrolled in PWIs and active in affinity-based organizations. An additional lens is added for those Black women engaged in activism as a part of their association with affinity-based organizations.

I use the words “engagement,” “involvement,” and “participation” interchangeably in this study and I define the terms as being regularly involved in the
operations of affinity-based student organizations (e.g., Black Student Union or Multicultural Student Association). Students who are planning, advocating for, and/or actively engaged in meetings exert energy to seek and provide support to those with similar racial identities and advocate for the needs of their specific identity group. The experience of Black women involved with a cultural affinity group at a PWI is presumably different than those who are not members of such student organizations or who do not actively participate in events, planning, or meetings, as they may not take on the additional labor that comes with active membership or leadership in identity-based affinity groups.

Student affairs literature provides additional context to the use of terms like “involvement,” “engagement,” and “leadership.” Astin (1977, 1984, 1986) provided an early framework for student engagement, which encouraged student affairs professionals to focus on how students are motivated, and to consider the time and energy students devote to the learning process (Astin, 2014). Astin’s work is the cornerstone of the Cooperating Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, a national study of students organized through UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute since 1973 (https://heri.ucla.edu/cirp-freshman-survey/).

Providing additional support to the framing of student development as an outcome of student engagement, Pike and Kuh (2005) stated that “the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities” (p. 186). Kuh’s work on engagement is what drives the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), another national study on
student experiences in postsecondary education, organized by Indiana University since 2000 (https://nsse.indiana.edu/).

Finally, since 2006, the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) has organized national studies of students involved in the leadership of student organizations and clubs (https://www.leadershipstudy.net/). Informed by Astin’s (1999) work on student engagement (the “input-environment-outcome” (I-E-O) college impact model, the MSL expands the model to include off-campus experiences (e.g., involvement in off-campus employment or organizations). Like Kuh’s NSSE survey, which examines “high-impact practices” that support student growth and learning, the MSL evaluates the following forms of student engagement: socio-cultural conversations, faculty mentoring, student affairs mentoring, community service, membership in student organizations, leadership positions in student organizations, membership in off-campus organizations, and leadership positions in off-campus organizations. They posit that socio-cultural conversations, mentoring, community service, and off-campus organization involvement are the top four ways students can increase their capacity for socially responsible leadership (Dugan et al., 2013).

However, they also found that for Black/African American students, leadership in student organizations had a negative impact (Dugan et al., 2013, p. 8). Their concern was that the responsibility for representing racially minoritized students took a toll on those attempting to lead affinity-based organizations, and/or those involved in non-cultural organizations (e.g., student government) may experience greater pressure or outright hostility. Given (2016) explained, as “Black students’ energy is disproportionately used
to mitigate their experiences with anti-Blackness on campus through various forms of oppositional campus involvement” (p. 57).

Anti-Blackness is “dismay, disregard, and disgust for Black faculty and students” (Bell et al., 2020, p. 39). This anti-Blackness shows up in policies and practices within institutions of postsecondary education produced by white supremacy. White supremacy is a system that supports whiteness in all aspects and often at the expense of non-white people (Bell et al., 2020; Sholock, 2012). White supremacy is perpetuated in institutions of postsecondary education through white, male hegemony, racialization, and other ways supported by literature in this research (Kelly et al., 2021). In fact, Abes (2016) supported the notion that foundational literature is typically grounded in experiences of homogenous samples of privileged populations, excluding historically oppressed populations. Collins (2000) alluded to the sentiment that power begets power—those that hold it create the rules and institutions of postsecondary education are no exception.

Cultural affinity-based student organizations (referred to as affinity-based in the entirety of the paper), act as the hub of support for many Black students at PWIs because of pervasive racism that persists and the lack of representation of faculty, staff, policy, and programs (Griffin et al., 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Affinity or racial caucus groups, now more commonly called Employee Resource Groups in business settings, emerged from employee forums created in response to the racial conflict that exploded during the 1960s, and remain active today as a source of support and advocacy for minoritized populations (Welbourne et al., 2017). Patton et al. (2017) explained “the importance of ethnic student organizations in helping students make cultural adjustments to the collegiate environment” (p. 200) is vital. By default, and/or by interest, affinity-
based organizations often lead the charge on identity specific issues such as the fight against anti-Blackness in the academy and other causes to advance awareness and advocate for resolutions for Black students (Bell et al., 2020; Given, 2016; Kelly et al., 2021). As a part of a minoritized community, one is likely to be a part of the efforts to voice their community’s needs (Linder et al., 2019; Gerlach, 2008). This adds additional emotional and invisible labor, and passion tax, especially when the activism is regarding anti-Blackness and white supremacy (Bell et al., 2020; Given, 2016; Griffin et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to use critical narrative inquiry to delve deeper past the quantitative data and into the stories of persistence, exploring Black women’s perceptions of institutional support as they are engaged in affinity-based organizations, particularly during times in which they engage via activism. As a scholar, I want to discern and understand whether or how the experiences of others may add value to my observations and existing research. My research questions sought to understand the perceptions of institutional support from the lens of Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations either as leaders or general members. For this study, qualitative narrative inquiry is the most appropriate method as it will help to provide perspective in the relationship of the study population with PWIs. The narrative inquiry in this study is derived from a constructivist paradigm. It relies on storying via descriptions of a series of events (Jones et al., 2013). In this study stories are collected both individually and collectively by participants and researcher.

In this study, the term Black will be capitalized while white will be lower case. This is an attempt to intentionally reduce whiteness as the focus of this study and amplify...
Blackness. Additionally, postsecondary will be used instead of higher education, as the latter term encourages a supremacist framing (Dr. E. Ortiz, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

**Statement of the Problem**

Most research that examines the experiences of Black post-secondary students broadly focuses on multiculturalism in general, or references a particular sub-population (e.g., student athletes), and lacks a student-centered perspective (All, 1992; Banks, 2009; Campbell et al., 2019). Black undergraduate women’s voices have largely gone unheard, without literature presented through their lens, particularly when they have engaged in activism via engagement in affinity-based student organizations is limited (Gerlach, 2008). Patton et al. (2015) described Black women’s experiences in institutions of postsecondary education as “an unsettled and conflicted history juxtaposed with an unqualified record of persistence and academic achievement” (p. 31). Therefore, Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations have complex and sometimes conflicting experiences and perspectives. Additionally, practices of systemic oppression has evolved from not allowing Black people to read and write during the antebellum South, to being denied formal education, and attending separate and unequal institutions of education, to experiencing gaslighting, silencing, and pseudo-inclusion (Darder et al., 2017; Karkouti, 2016; Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting is “a form of emotional abuse where the abuser intentionally manipulates the physical environment or mental state of the abusee, and then deflects responsibility by provoking the abusee to think that the changes reside in their imagination” (Roberts et al., 2013, p.70). Gaslighting can greatly impact the ability
to navigate emotions, to advocate for oneself, and to generally be productive for those that experience it.

Recent efforts have focused on increasing diversity in enrollment, as barriers such as standardized tests hinder enrollment of minoritized populations. When it comes to retention of this student population, effective teaching and classroom intervention strategies are lacking (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Holland, 2016). Since there is limited research, there are also limited resources that provide innovative ideas and suggestions to address the problem (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). Research fails to include first-hand perspectives on the relationship between institutions of postsecondary education and Black women students engaged in cultural development and diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

Existing data is insufficient in examining the institutional responsibility for the racialization and gender-based discrimination of postsecondary education, the role the institutional staff play in increasing the daily struggles of students, or the nuanced journey of Black undergraduate women, and particularly those who are engaged in affinity-based student organizations. This study provides a student-centered lens to exploring the perspectives of institutional practices held by Black women undergraduate students involved with affinity-based groups at predominately white institutions (PWIs). The study is informed by my own experiences as both a student and as a professional in postsecondary education.

Many college and university mission statements claim they are aimed at educating students and preparing them to become contributing citizens, including involvement in civic engagement with inclusive campus environments and access to equitable education.
However, findings in the literature reveal PWIs are not great spaces for Black students. Generally, they are hostile places that demonstrate performative diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, which places the needs of the institution over the needs of students (Canty, 2021; Davis, 2007; Kelly et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2015). Not only does silencing and gaslighting occur to Black women at PWIs contributing to the hostile environment, PWIs tend to be antagonistic and provide pushback to those Black women engaged in activism.

Postsecondary institutions also operate out of a deficit framework, following policies and practices that seem to be adversarial to the success of Black women (Patton, 2015; Patton & Croom, 2017). Being a Black undergraduate woman in a cultural affinity-based student organization requires extra armor, meaning in addition to the normal journey of being a college student added racialized and gendered complexities must also be navigated. Additionally, Black undergraduate women are often left with the burden of leading programming and guiding others in self-healing efforts; often feeling exploited (Porter et al., 2022; Shookhoff, 2006).

PWIs do not provide Black student leaders with the necessary armor to survive hostile spaces (Commodore et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2021). When institutions fail to nurture skills for critical discourse, provide resources and support, or achieve proportional representation, students experiencing trauma do not experience support in times of need. Even worse, institutions often attempt to silence student voices by gaslighting and taking no notable action to improve campus climate and sense of psychological safety and belonging (Banks, 2009). Black women are exposed to gaslighting two-fold, because of their gendered and racialized experiences, they endure
psychological abuse that makes them feel as if they are overreacting to any given situation (Sweet, 2019). Racial gaslighting is used as a form of othering centering on race (Vasquez, 2022). These are not modern concepts, they have served as founding principles to the entrance of Black students generally in education, and Black women specifically (Darder et al., 2017; Karkouti, 2016; Patton et al., 2015).

Historically, Black women have been often othered or made to feel as if they do not belong and are left out of the discussion when institutions of postsecondary education developed programs, services, and policies necessary for retention and overall success. This act of exclusion is perpetuated and is reinforced in policies, practices, and programs, as well as with administration, staff, and faculty. Due to systemic racism, institutions of postsecondary education both consciously and subconsciously silence the voices of Black women. This is especially true for those involved in and leading affinity-based student organizations via oppressive policies and practices and amplified for those engaged in activism related to race-related social justice movements (Darder et al., 2017; Karkouti, 2016; Shookhoff, 2006).

White faculty and staff have often failed to provide appropriate guidance to Black undergraduate women participating in said activism contributing to the hostile campus environment and experiences (Canty, 2021; Patton et al., 2015). Although more Black students enroll in PWIs, “there has been a lack of attention paid to creating equity within systems that continue to marginalize Black women in predominantly white spaces” (Canty, 2021, p. iv).

**Purpose of Study**
The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to examine the perceptions of institutional leadership held by Black women undergraduate students in affinity-based organizations enrolled at four-year PWIs of postsecondary education in the Midwest. Additionally, this study aimed to understand how Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs, especially during periods of campus activism. This study sought to understand how participants describe their relationship to their institutions, which contributes to how they make meaning of their experience in such institutions. This meaning is made via both their personal relationship to the institution and the relationship of their affinity-based organization with the institution.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this dissertation include: (a) How do Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (during times of activism)? and (b) How do participants describe their relationship with such institutions? The research questions and study centers Black undergraduate women involved in affinity-based student organizations as active general members or executive board members.

Overview of Research Design

Good research design is built on a particular paradigm of inquiry. Paradigms provide the foundation from which research is situated in, in terms of perspective of inquiry. Furthermore, paradigms are “interconnected assumptions that distinguish between worldviews” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 10). This study is guided by the researcher’s worldview and informed by the worldview of the study participants in the context of their
collegiate journey engaged in a cultural affinity-based organization. The study is informed by both critical and constructivist paradigms. Collins (2000) noted that “every social group has a constantly evolving worldview that it uses to evaluate its own experiences” (p. 10), contributing to how they construct knowledge or their paradigm of inquiry. To encompass the essence of the researcher and participant evolving worldviews, multiple paradigms were necessary for this study.

I first approached this study from a critical constructivist paradigm. I believe inquiry is shared between the researcher and study participants and using a critical lens helps us consider power and its influence on what we do or do not know. I value the perspective of the participant. I passionately participated as a researcher to enhance opportunity for liberation for not only study participants, but ideally to learn from the student stories in hopes of unearthing promising practices for all PWIs seeking to better support Black women students. All of the above is consistent with critical and constructivism paradigms.

The constructivist paradigm recognizes that multiple realities stand individually and/or come together for shared collective experiences and exchanges (Bada & Olusegun, 2015; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Participants in this study are considered both independently and dependent upon the affinity-based organizations. Realities are connected to systems, structures, and processes and meanings emerge from experiences with those systems, structures, and processes (Anderson, 1990; Campos, 2007; Kincheloe, 2005). Interactions with oppressive systems may result in a complexity of behaviors and epistemologies, including distrust and hypersensitivity to oppressive events (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2007). The constructivist paradigm of inquiry is critical in
how teachers teach and learn to teach as it explains the acquisition of knowledge and meaning made from experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Constructivism is a theory of learning that recognizes the relationship between students and their perspective of the world derived from hands-on experiences as the learning tool.

Such perspectives can be more critical during times of heightened tensions, such as social justice uprisings stemming from police brutality against Black bodies. In other words, constructivism considers that underlying conditions contribute to perceptions and behaviors. The critical constructivist paradigm recognizes that perspectives can be flawed as they are constructed in the oppressive society in which we live. Society can provide a negative lens, and lead to individuals seeing the bad in things as opposed to the good, especially if they are from a historically minoritized group (Bloomberg and Volpe 2017). Additionally, researchers using critical and constructivist paradigms of inquiry recognize the influence their background has, understand the importance of said background in shaping their perspective, and acknowledge that power dynamics are inherent in the research process and in institutional operations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The goal of this study was to present information about the institutional impact on Black women students that has historically been unrepresented, due in part to the racialization of postsecondary education, which is explored further in the next chapter, along with critical theories.

I approached this study soliciting narratives, open to themes that came up, as an inductive approach, leading to a student-centered understanding of institutional support. I searched for practices that enhanced the experience of this student population, as the “goals of applied research are to use knowledge to contribute directly to the
understanding of a problem or generate a solution for the problem” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 91). This qualitative study is guided by a constructivist approach, that is, based on how the participants draw conclusions by applying “their existing knowledge and real-world experience” to make meaning of their collegiate journey at a PWI, as they were engaged in their respective affinity-based organizations (Olusegun, 2015, p. 66).

Narrative inquiry is the methodology of this study as it provides an opportunity for information-rich, critical data to be constructed through interviews. This methodology is appropriate when conducting sensitive research, in which participants may be engaged in conversations that can be emotionally charged and potentially pose a threat, such as fear of retaliation for those participating and/or seen as whistleblowing, etc. (Cohen et al., 2017). Data was collected from one-on-one interviews with Black women involved in affinity-based student organizations at PWIs of postsecondary education in one of the three Midwestern states, including both public and private institutions. Interviews provided an opportunity to create rapport with participants to provide a sense of security, which is key in gathering vital information. In addition to interviews, participants were each asked to provide a narrative journal entry several days after the interviews concluded. The Midwest was selected because it is my place of residence (Iowa specifically), it is where I have observed and experienced a gendered and racialized educational journey, and because Iowa also has a unique history with systemic oppression and inclusion. Additionally, Minnesota and Wisconsin were selected for their proximity to Iowa and because of major racial events occurred between 2016-2022 that led to national, community, and campus protests and unrest.

Rationale and Significance
Conducting this qualitative narrative inquiry on the perception of institutional support for Black women students in affinity-based organizations at PWIs may present themes that offer promising practices for staff working at PWIs. Additionally, this study provides qualitative data on the unique experiences of this study population, as the premise of qualitative research is to produce information-rich data (Davis, 2022). The literature review reveals that Black women college students are more frequently understudied in qualitative methods opposed to quantitative methods. To counter the mostly dominant narratives perpetuated by white, cis-gender, Christian, able-bodied men found in literature on theory and practice in postsecondary education and in leadership positions at PWIs (Darder et al., 2017), this study serves to amplify the voices of the study participants and their relationship with the institution from their perspectives.

**Researcher Role and Positionality**

My role as a researcher was to gather qualitative data regarding PWIs and Black women in affinity-based student organizations. In this research, I attempted to create relationships with study participants and create room for open and honest dialogue. The goal was to gain insight on the unseen side of the persistence of Black women at PWIs in general, and specifically as it pertains to their group affiliation and possible activism. Additionally, I worked to ensure my questions followed quality research guidelines (trustworthy/valid, etc.). I also understood my positionality and the influence it has on my study and its participants.

According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), “positionality is the concept that our perspectives are based on our place in society” (p. 15). Qualitative researchers must consider how our social position (race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, ability,
religion, etc.) informs our behaviors and epistemology or how we derive our knowledge from our experiences. Some of the most salient social identities that impact my positionality and worldview are related to my race, gender, and broader context, like the participants in this study.

For more context, I will share that I am a first-generation college student born to parents who were born and raised in 1950s Mississippi. My mother had the opportunity to graduate high school (only her last two years were integrated). Unfortunately, my father did not have the opportunity to graduate high school. While they knew they wanted their children to get an education, to achieve the “American Dream,” they did not know how, or what, went into accessing postsecondary education (loans, college prep programs, etc.). Both of my parents missed many days of school to work in the hot cotton fields to provide for their families. As a result, they instilled hard work and dedication in their children; however, understanding the oppression, exclusion, lack of access and daily struggle has contributed to my identity, worldview, and epistemology.

My parents are old enough to remember the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movements. They lived through the King assassination and riots; their parents talked about the Tulsa race massacre of 1921, the destruction of a successful all-Black town, with little to no reason other than hatred and wanting to see the demise of the Black community in Tulsa and other violence toward Black bodies (Elliott & Peñaloza, 2021). They vividly remember the beating of Rodney King and countless other injustices imposed on Black people in America that resulted in Black uprisings, and mass social justice movements. Since 2016, we have witnessed the murders of Philando Castile, Atatiana Jefferson, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless
others, often with no accountability for the perpetrators. As a result of unjust murders of Black bodies, many social justice movements have been created and/or revitalized often led by Black women. This contributes to my worldview; I have witnessed and experienced many injustices because of systemic racism.

In addition to the above influences on my worldview, my experience as an undergraduate student at a PWI in the Midwest contributed to my epistemology and interest in this research study. I also experienced trials and tribulations along the way that I do not see represented in current research on the persistence of Black women undergraduates at PWIs. I struggled beyond my first year when, I found myself one of two to three Black students in many of my classes of 400 students. Part of my struggle was due to lack of representation. The lack of supportive resources via institutional support for the Afro-house, the cultural house where Black students gathered for community, and Black Student Union, left me feeling as if my culture did not matter on that campus. These were supposed to be spaces for fellowship, community, and intergroup education but typically served to educate the campus community and be the voice for change for the Black community on campus, adding additional labor to those that participated.

As a Black woman who attended a PWI as an undergraduate student, I felt a gap in support from the institution. I experienced this gap in support by noticing the lack of inclusive curriculum, by failing to see much representation of Black women in faculty and staff roles, and by observing the failure of the institution to support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students in ways they said they would. I sensed the institution’s commitment to diversity was merely performative in nature (Ahmed,
2012), meaning they avoided doing any real transformational equity work even as they proclaimed to embrace and celebrate diversity. I also noticed a particularly adverse relationship between Black women students involved in affinity-based groups and the institution as opposed to the relationship with non-Black, non-women organization, which was a hinderance to our persistence. As I moved from student to professional, I continued to witness the performative support for Black students at PWIs,

I made the transition from student to professional in postsecondary education in 2017. In my first role at an institution of postsecondary education, I served as director for multicultural education and gender and sexuality services. In this role, I was tasked with supporting minoritized and marginalized students, while also educating the predominantly white campus community in efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a double minority, someone who identifies as both Black and a woman, in addition to being a young professional, not only was I passionate about the communities I served, but I was also passionate about creating systemic changes that could lead to true transformation for all. However, I did not sit at the decision-making table with senior administrators, nor did our chief diversity officer (CDO), the individual responsible for the institutional advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While my role was to support this specific group of students, the institution did not share my passion, and this lack of commitment was expressed in the form of simply putting on an act, a performance. This institution stated that it was a welcoming place and embraced diversity via a mission statement that mentioned inclusion, but this was only lip service as the actions did not reflect the message. This demonstrated to me that the
institution was not serious about diversity, equity, and inclusion and was being performative.

Then, in 2020, George Floyd was brutally murdered by police in Minneapolis, MN, just three hours away from the institution at which I worked at during that time. As a result of the murder, Black students across the country engaged in campus activism, including protests resulting in several demands for institutions such as creating safe spaces for Black students, hiring more faculty and staff (higher-level administration) of color and changing curricula to be more historically accurate and inclusive of racially diverse perspectives. These protests were results of vicarious trauma, even though many students were not directly involved in said tragic incident, they felt compelled to respond. They felt that it was eerily like their experience as a Black student at a PWI.

The students’ perception was that the institution was limited in the recognition of these events. Lack of institutional support for movements resulting from such events, and led by Black women, added to a sense of erasure and invisibility that impeded on the sense of belonging for Black students (Griffin et al., 2018; Kelly, et al., 2012). While this was not the first nor the last time a Black body was murdered unjustly (like 28-year old Atatiana Jefferson shot inside her home by a police officer after a neighbor called a non-emergency number stating that Jefferson’s front door was open, or Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Emergency Management Technician [EMT] murdered in her home by police who forcefully entered as she woke up in confusion from her sleep, and then lied to cover it up, and the countless others), Floyd’s murder sparked a reinvigorated sense of urgency on college campuses nation-wide.
Like how other moments of tension served as a catalyst for collective action historically, this urgency moved students across the nation to protest, be vocal, make demands, and attempt to hold our institutions and individuals accountable for action, and/or lack thereof as students want agency in their college experience (Commodore et al., 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Instead of embracing civil discourse, as stated by the leadership of liberal arts institutions I worked for, our institution attempted to silence and gaslight the voices of the primarily Black women involved. As these women spoke up, the administration would brush them off, minimize their concerns, not respond to their needs, or label them problematic creating hostile environments and imposing emotional abuse. Superficially, the institution would be concerned but seemingly not address issues brought to their attention, and in some cases institutional leaders would create barriers/loops, and/or re-direct students seeking change through advocacy and activism, which resulted in their voices being silenced. According to Cargle (2019, para 3), “silencing happens when, for white people, hearing the truth is too much.” More attempts to silence Black women’s voices would occur at my next institution.

As a result of witnessing and experiencing a gap in support from institutional administration, I was honored to serve as the Inaugural Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in my next position. For me, this was important because it seemed as if this institution would be more than performative about advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, after my first six months or so, it was time for Honors Convocation. The person who coordinated the program reached out to me for a selection for what was at the time the President’s Award in Human Relations. The description of the award indicated this award was given to a student who has contributed to advancing
human relations, specifically intercultural or interracial understanding on campus. In my mind, it was a clear a particular student overwhelmingly met the criteria to receive the award as they had interned with an LGBTQ+ rights organization, were the former president of Active Minds (a group dedicated to serving neuro-diverse students), served on the campus diversity, equity, and inclusion committee, etc. The student was a very vocal Black woman student involved in many student organizations including Black Student Union (BSU). Additionally, the student led a protest because of a BSU student meeting zoom bombing (BSU’s virtual zoom meeting was interrupted by an uninvited guest yelling racial epithets) that occurred prior to my arrival at the institution.

The student’s activism, and the institution’s lack of and/or limited response, contributed to less-than-optimal relationships, hence added context of concern from staff when I nominated this student for the award. While I may not have had all the nuanced information that preceded my tenure, I had not witnessed any other student I thought was more qualified. After discussion, staff concluded this student embodied the award. Ultimately, the student was awarded; however, the award was temporarily changed to the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Award for Human Relations.

My experience as a Black undergraduate woman at a PWI, and as an institutional administrator, provided different vantage points but similar observations. Institutions proclaim to want diversity, equity, and inclusion, but only if it does not interrupt the dominant narrative. PWIs tend to walk a narrow line between integrity with regards to the needs of minoritized and marginalized communities, doing what is right when no one is watching, and pleasing the broader, dominant narratives of the white community in which they are located. Dominant narratives are stories, framework, polices, procedures or
lenses from privileged groups, and dominant identities include but are not limited to white, cis-gender, able bodied, Christian, and male (Espino, 2012). According to Nicotera (2020), “dominant groups establish and maintain power by articulating meaning in ways that legitimate their views as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’” (p. 229). In the context of this study, dominant voices at PWIs are white people, and white males specifically, as top-level leadership is disproportionately white and male (Cabrera, 2009; Darder et al., 2017).

In the events outlined above, PWIs effectively, intentionally or not, attempted to silence the voice of Black women students engaged in affinity-based groups, particularly in times of heightened activism. Domingue (2014) stated “through the threat of solitude and social isolation, Black women are coerced into passivity, silence, and ultimate acceptance of an inferior status” (p. 37). Despite times of isolation and perceived inferiority, Black undergraduate women persist, however, their perspectives on how institutions of postsecondary education affect their experiences largely go unheard. Black undergraduate women at PWIs have important stories to tell, stories that provide narratives to their persistence, stories that could lead to the development and implementation of promising practices guiding the intentional institutional support of Black women students, and advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work at PWIs.

**Definition of Terms**

Terms used in this study that require additional consideration include:

- **Black**: The use of *Black* is specifically implying being born to parents of African ancestry; note international students will be included in this study if
they identified as Black. *African American* is used when literature being quoted uses this terminology (Bennett, 1967).

- **cultural affinity-based organization:** Dedicated to specific ethnicities and cultures, an organization designed by and for identity-specific groups; groups with common interests (Shookhoff, 2006).

- **invisible tax:** mental, physical, and emotional energy, unseen, and used to merely survive as students derived from experiences inherent dilemmas by being Black in a predominantly white environment (Givens, 2016).

- **gaslighting:** a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel “crazy” creating a “surreal” interpersonal environment; used as a weapon to silence (Meldrum 2021; Sweet, 2019).

- **oppression:** any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society (Collins, 2000).

- **persistence:** the ability to persevere despite challenges (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003).

- **predominantly white institution (PWI):** Institution of postsecondary education in which white students account for 50% or greater of the total student body/enrollment population (Lomotey & Cohen, 2009).

- **racial battle fatigue (RBF):** the accumulative effect of coping with everyday racism (Gorski, 2019). RBF shows up as stressors, physical, emotional, and psychological in nature.
• **racially minoritized/racialized**: the practice of categorizing and assigning value based on race; the process of minoritization (Garcia, 2019; Stewart, 2013).

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter I provided a broad overview of the purpose of this study which includes centering the voices of Black undergraduate women at PWIs to construct a narrative regarding their experiences engaged in an affinity-based groups. This chapter provided framing for understanding how the study population perceive institutional support (or lack thereof) at PWIs, especially when students engaged in campus activism. Additionally, this chapter provides context into the overall aim of this study.

Next, in Chapter II, I review the topical and theoretical literature related to this study, including the historical underpinning of the relationship between Black students and white institutions of postsecondary education and current trends and practices. In Chapter III, I share the methodology and method for this dissertation. Then, in Chapter IV, I present the results of the data collected. Finally, in Chapter V, I discuss these findings and their relationship to existing literature and summarize suggestions for future practice and research. Collectively, all chapters of this dissertation provide the complexity of narratives, past and present, “because a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future, and therefore, involves retelling stories, and attempts at reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter II aims to provide a supporting narrative for this research as Banks (2009) noted that the “historical prohibition on formal education for [Black men and] women generated by enslavement and by the context of limited access to postsecondary education for Black women due to gender oppression” fundamentally excluded their perspectives (p. 3). Retelling stories is vital to the growth of individuals, society, and institutions. Retelling stories allows us to reexamine, reflect on, and rectify past wrong doings.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) asked “how far of a probe into the participant's past and future is far enough” (p. 4), and what history is necessary to reconcile for transformation? The answer is for as long as it takes for true transformation. Deeper than storytelling, narrative inquiry “rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (Bell 2002, p. 207). For this study, it is necessary to go back to the origins of postsecondary education, critically examining the ways in which Black people were historically excluded by institutions (Griffin et al., 2018; Karkouti, 2016).

Current data is limited in examining institutional responsibility in the role PWIs play on the experience of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations. Of the 188 articles that populated when I searched “Black women at PWIs” via the Murphy Library, a general search tool for the University of Wisconsin La-
Crosse, none of the articles explored Black women in affinity-based organizations. None of the articles focus on how Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations made meaning of their experience within said institution. Studies regarding Black women and affinity-based organizations discussed engagement from the perspectives of a gateway to friendship, implications in K-12 settings, or the diverse background and experiences among members of ethnic based affinity groups in identity development. No studies explored the perspective of meaning-making through experience, i.e., how engagement in affinity-based organizations impacts the experience of being a Black woman at a PWI.

Additional research I found included studies of Black women athletes, Black women in white sororities, Black students collectively, and Black women included with other racially/ethnically minoritized students. The impact of racialization and gender-based discrimination in postsecondary education that exposes the daily struggles and journey of Black undergraduate women, engaged in affinity-based student organizations specifically, was absent. This study provides a student-centered lens to exploring the perspectives of institutional practices held by Black women undergraduate students involved with affinity-based groups at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Literature reviewed for this study lacked studies that center the voices of Black undergraduate women who are engaged in cultural & affinity-based student organizations (such as Black Student Union or other multicultural clubs/organizations). Most literature reviewed for this study discussed affinity groups generally as multicultural, did not distinguish between Black students of any gender, or focused on specific experiences of Black student athletes, graduate students, or faculty. The literature reviewed in this
chapter will (a) provide historical context regarding the foundation of postsecondary education and the exclusion of Black bodies/voices, (b) discuss the racialization of postsecondary education and the menial value placed on Black students as a result, (c) summarize the research available on the experiences of Black college students generally, and Black women students engaged in affinity-based student organizations specifically, and (d) present conceptual literature to understand the experience of Black undergraduate women involved in affinity-based organizations at PWIs. Each of these four sections of the literature review will illustrate what is already established in the literature, what is missing, and how theory can inform the questions raised in this study.

**Historical Context of Exclusion**

Because the United States was founded by a hegemonic group of white men, the systems created lacked critical perspectives and consideration for minoritized populations. Hegemony is the process of social control through the moral and intellectual leadership of a dominant sociocultural class over subordinated groups, resulting in the retention of status quo (Darder et al., 2017). Hegemony is expressed through curriculum situated in the dominant lens, as well as through policies and practices that may appear to be neutral but in fact support the interests of the ruling class. The historical literature provides grounding for this dissertation and context into implications of national events such as the great migration, Brown v. Board of Education, the civil rights movement, the evolution of student organizations, and critical theories discussed later in this chapter.

The United States is a nation rooted in imperialism, colonialism, and racism, built on the backs of minoritized people whose perspectives are not reflected in dominant narratives. As a result, critical pedagogy is necessary to help people understand how
social systems, like schools, are set up to preserve the dominance of some groups via white, male hegemony. According to Givens (2016), “white hegemonic educational spaces exclude Black students, their experiences, and their cultures” (p. 57). Abes (2016) supported the notion that foundational literature is typically grounded in experiences of homogenous samples of privileged populations, excluding historically oppressed populations. In other words, “majoritarian” stories are problematic, thus, student development literature that leaves out Black student is problematic and need other critical pedagogies.

According to Darder et al. (2017), “critical pedagogy supports the notion that all knowledge is created within a historical context and that it is this historical context that gives life and meaning to human experiences” (p. 10). Critical pedagogy centers the voices of the minoritized populations and provides alternative narratives to the established status quo (Darder et al., 2017). According to Griffin et al. (2013) the majoritarian stories are problematic; hence this study provides a counter story.

Although the concept of racial formation as a critical theory started in the 1970s, scholarly language has evolved, and the term “racialization” is more commonly used today to describe such phenomena. Garcia (2019) contextualized racialization as the process of assigning value based on race. Language and practices of historic oppression have evolved via racist policies, which now assign value/priority or racialization of groups. Racialization occurs through hiring practices, curriculum design, and support services. Racialization is a thought process, placing value on race, whereas according to Garcia (2019), “racism is a set of actions that play out daily, with power and privilege assigned to people because of perceived racial characteristics...influenced by history,
economics, culture, and politics” (p. 8). Garcia notes that racism persists as a result of the racialized thought process.

Deliberate attempts at racial order in the U.S. by the white founders are engrained in culture, law, and society (Garcia, 2019), resulting in systemic oppression. Individuals holding dominant identities, namely white men who stole land, developed institutions’ systems and policies (Darder et al., 2017). Garcia (2019) found that assigning value based on race, “dates to the founding of the United States, when white settlers established a society based on the denial and devaluing of the already-present Indigenous people” (p. 8). Early organizations were shaped by the limited frame of reference of this dominant group, which actively excluded an oppressed Black people. As a result, oppression is established and perpetuated through discriminatory practices, policies, and other norms that privilege some and harm others.

Abes et al. (2019) stated, “the ‘wires’ that comprise oppression are forms of power, including discriminatory institutional policies and practices, cultural and social practices that privilege some identities while rendering others invisible, and individuals acts of prejudice and discrimination” (p. 10). Endo (2020) reinforced the notion that white people “are the sole perpetrators of individual and institutionally racist acts because they, as a collective, hold the majority of perceived and real political and social power in the United States” (p. 4). Therefore, historically, Black people have been systemically denied access to postsecondary education via gatekeeping by institutional personnel (Karkouti, 2016). The color of one’s skin and gender has been a barrier to participation for the Black community since this nation was formed (Sinanan, 2016), as seen in Karkouti’s (2016) discussion of government mandates from 1636 until the 1830s.
prohibiting Black students from obtaining postsecondary education. However, despite such oppressive systems, Black women such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and many others resisted and worked against such systems. Critical pedagogy is pivotal in understanding how social systems such as institutions of postsecondary education are constructed to preserve the dominance of some groups over others (Darder et al., 2017). Oppression and systemic inequities are perpetuated today, evident in exclusionary practices, and continue to hinder the success of Black students.

Current exclusionary practices in postsecondary education can be found in admissions via standardized testing, in the collegiate workforce via domestic labor, and in the limited resource allocation to diversity-related initiatives. All of these practices contribute to systemic barriers for Black undergraduate women (Commodore et al., 2018; Darder et al., 2017 & Karkouti, 2016). According to Darder et al. (2017), “critical pedagogy supports the notion that all knowledge is created within a historical context and that it is this historical context that gives life and meaning to human experiences” (p. 10). Critical pedagogy centers the voices of the minoritized populations and provides alternative narratives to the established status quo (Darder et al., 2017).

The need for narratives from minoritized voices is immense; additionally, those in dominant groups unlearning hegemony and paying attention to the critical counterhegemonic narratives currently missing from much of the existing literature can create transformational change. Critical pedagogies, such as critical race theory and Black feminist thought, aim to address issues of oppression and inequities in education as the provide alternative perspectives to new and existing theories. With critical conceptual and theoretical literature reviewed later in this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate how
the historical foundation of education fostered and perpetuates racialization and systemic inequities within postsecondary education and how it impacts the persistence of Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations.

**Racialization of Postsecondary Education & Systemic Inequities**

Black students were unable to enroll in institutions of postsecondary education from 1636 until the 1830s due to governmental mandates and practices that serve to create and maintain a racial order through concepts such as the 1896 Supreme Court decision known as separate but equal (Karkouti, 2016). While this ruling deemed that Blacks should have equal education, they emphasized that education should be delivered in separate environments than whites. It was later evident that the education was not equal, as Black students received lower quality resources. Both racialization as a thought process, and racism as an action(s) impact Black undergraduate women at PWIs.

At the macro level, among institutions, racialization is realized through the lower value placed on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs), and Tribal Institutions compared to PWIs. Garcia (2019) contended that “HSIs [and minority serving institutions] are expected to live up to the dominant white narrative” (p. 7). This trickles down to the meso-level—affinity-based student organizations—and finally to the micro level, with individuals. Oppressive conditions are evident in the very foundation of the institutions of postsecondary education, demonstrated in prior research, contributing to the perpetuation of racialization and invisibility of minoritized groups including Black women (Chatters, 2018; Darder et al., 2017; Garcia, 2019; Patton & Croom, 2017). Assigning value based on race is embedded into the fabric of the United States during its founding, “when white settlers
established a society based on the denial and devaluing of the already-present Indigenous people” (Garcia, 2019, p. 8). Assigning value based on race is also present in postsecondary education today, which can be found in research on the experiences of Black undergraduate students at PWIs.

**Black Undergraduate Experience at PWIs**

The literature reviewed in the previous section outlined the historical underpinning of racialization and inequities that exist in institutions of postsecondary education. The historical exclusion gave way to the racialization of postsecondary education, which is still evident in research finding both silencing and gaslighting of Black students at PWIs (Houston & Kramarae, 1991; Leigh, 2020; Lincoln & Stanley, 2021; Loo & Rolison, 1986). For instance, racialization, or placement of value, was felt among “[graduate] students of color [who] perceive historically white institutions to be racially discriminatory, unwelcoming, and unaccommodating” (Harris et al., 2018, p. 144). Multicultural student organizations such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous student unions, and members of the Divine Nine Greek organizations (historically black fraternities and sororities) at PWIs are expected to live up to the dominant white narrative (Shookhoff, 2006). Historically, whiteness is centered in postsecondary education, white student organizations such as white fraternities and sororities, campus activities boards, and other predominantly white clubs and organizations seem to be of priority and serve as the model of success for policy, programs, services, and support (Garcia, 2019; Jaggers, 2019). Black women students must navigate the “fear of not being a part of mainstream, PWI culture, and the possibility of having to change oneself to fit in” (Leigh, 2020, p. 52). Lincoln and Stanley (2021) collected data regarding the role of systemic oppression
in bias and inequity in institutions of postsecondary education, and found Black students experienced alienation, social isolation, tokenism, and silencing. Scholars have alluded to concerns beyond general college transition for students of color (Griffin et al., 2019). Furthermore, “racial minorities often have additional concerns while attending college, especially at predominantly white institutions” (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 391).

In addition to the typical college transitions, Black students face negative ramifications due to the inability of PWIs to facilitate positive environments, hence fostering hostile racial climates (Davis, 2007; Griffin et al., 2018). Solórzano et al. (2000) defined racial climate as “the overall racial environment of the college campus” (p. 62). Curricular erasure, limited visual representation and oppressive policies and practices adds cumulative weight of the never-ending burden of microaggressions on Black students, leading to racial battle fatigue (Solórzano, 2000). Microaggressions “are subtle insults directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Hostile campus climate, resulting in fatigue, hinders the experience of Black students.

Exclusionary practices also contribute to hostile campus climates. They are forms of microaggressions and they greatly impact the Black student experience. In addition to the everyday college transition nuances, Black students also navigate alienation and isolation at PWIs (Campbell et al., 2019). Due to alienation and isolation, there is a diminished sense of belonging for Black students, and “microaggressions are only one of many variables that may significantly impact African American student’s sense of mattering” (Chatters, 2018, p. 3). Microaggressions “are subtle insults directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60).
Research literature reviewed provides insight into microaggressions, sense of mattering, racial/ethnic socialization, and how that impacts academic motivation and performance for ethnic minoritized students (Chatters, 2018; Griffin et al., 2018). Results from Chatters’ (2018) study, from 77 of 108 African American undergraduate students enrolled at PWIs in the Midwest, highlighted the role that microaggressions and racism play in the lived experience, specifically the sense of belonging for Black students.

De Witte-Stanford’s (2023) article on Walton and Cohen’s (2011) work summarized that diminished sense of belonging “can undermine academic performance and achievement” which can perpetuate inequities into adulthood (para. 3). Furthermore, De Witte-Stanford stated that “for those groups that have historically been excluded in postsecondary education, may see these experiences as confirming that “people like me” don’t belong” (para. 3). Additional research explored how students experiencing barriers related to their socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender, can doubt their capacity for upward mobility. Browman et al., 2017 stated that “students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds have less drive to overcome academic hardships when they harbor doubts about the odds of people with similar backgrounds achieving upward economic mobility” Members of marginalized groups, according to Leigh et al. (2021), “experience firsthand its [institutionalized discrimination] daily impact in the form of alienation, social isolation, tokenism, and silencing” (p. 1233). Additionally, “they may feel the need to seek out other African American students or faculty as a buffer or protection against potential negative feelings of isolation” (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 394), hence the importance of affinity-based student organizations.
The literature reviewed summarizes that Black students often experience PWIs as hostile environments that, in many ways, assault their culture and psychological safety (Benton, 2001; Commodore et al., 2018). Adverse experiences in the classroom, curricular erasure, microaggressions in residence halls, lack of cultural/social spaces, and other consequences of the racialization of postsecondary education causes distress and low self-esteem for Black students (Leigh, 2020). The cumulative effects of microaggressions and other adverse experiences often result in racial battle fatigue, or otherwise, burnout (Campbell et al., 2019; Solórzano et al., 2000). There is a direct correlation between campus climate and the college going experience for Black students. In addition to a racialized experience, Black women at PWIs also have an intersectional gendered experience.

Both Leigh (2020) and Loo and Rolison (1996) attempted to provide perspectives regarding the exclusion of minoritized students and how equity is perceived among African American students at PWIs, providing additional insight and supplemental information for this study. Leigh (2020) examined African American student’s perception of equity at PWIs via a phenomenological study. Leigh’s (2020) study presented six themes: campus climate and relationships, social and academic obstacles, multiculturalism, access to resources promoting diversity, opportunities for success, and inclusion in the classroom, and current impact of attending a PWI. Although Leigh’s (2020) study was regarding minoritized students generally, the study did include a comparison highlighting the differences in the Black women experience versus the Black male experience at a PWI. This section of Leigh’s (2020) study noted gendered experiences with Black women and that their voices have been silenced.
Loo and Rolison (1996) discussed the alienation of ethnic minoritized students at PWIs. Supporting other literature for this study, Loo and Rolison (1996) reiterated the unrealized goals of civil rights legislation regarding “equal access to quality institutions of postsecondary education and opportunities” for ethnically minoritized students (p. 58). Alienation is a byproduct of exclusion and lack of support, and in the “academic subsystem can occur in either grade performance or intellectual growth” (Loo & Rolison, 1996, p. 60). Loo and Rolison (1996) noted that “Black college students are forced to rely on their own ethnicity for social support” (p. 60), as PWIs are limited in appropriate supportive measures. Such research supports the need for engagement in affinity-based groups.

**Black Undergraduate Women’s Experience**

While involvement and engagement in student organizations typically have a positive impact on students, Black women engaged in affinity-based student organizations have more complex experiences than non-Black women and students not engaged in racialized affinity groups. Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations often take on additional labor in the collective group. Their experience change them for better and for worse (Garcia, 2019; Gerlach, 2008; Leigh, 2020). Either students grow and learn how to navigate systems and utilize their voice or the pressure and environment is too overwhelming that they give up and sit back silently or worse, drop out of college (Collins, 2000; Garcia, 2019; Leigh 2020).

Because Black women particularly have both gendered and racialized journeys at PWIs, not only do they carry the cumulative weight of racial microaggressions, but they also have a gendered experience. For instance, Houston and Kramarae (1991) placed an
emphasis on the gendered lens of silencing Black women’s voices. They discussed how men have impeded the ability for women to tell their stories by talking over them and therefore not allowing them to engage in the discussion, and/or by dismissing what they say all together.

Stereotypes rooted in racism and sexism perpetuate hostile environments resulting in struggles for Black undergraduate women (Davis, 2007, 2022). Hostilities exist in unpleasant interactions, such as being excluded from larger campus organizations and study groups, observing challenges to the authority of Black women, experiencing pushback or other microaggressions, and finding the institution underprepared to meet the needs of Black women (Davis, 2022). Jaggers (2020) researched Black undergraduate women’s experience in navigating white spaces focused on involvement in white student organizations. Because PWIs perpetuate gendered racism of Black undergraduate women operating in white spaces (Jaggers, 2020), it is necessary to utilize theories such as critical race theory (CRT) to mitigate adverse outcomes.

Jaggers (2020) documented five themes, using the lens of Black feminist thought: exclusion or not being valued, fake inclusion, gendered racialized experiences. By “exclusion,” Jaggers is referring to Black women being invited by white institutions to sit at the table, but in a tokenized way, or to “look” inclusive. Students recognize this as “performative” exclusion, putting on the performance of inclusion, leaving Black women feeling unwelcome (Jaggers, 2020). Fake inclusion, or “symbolic inclusion” as Collins (2000) called it, is when white people/organizations express the desire in wanting to do more to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in their organization but are hesitant when opportunities to do more are presented. Collins (2000) talked about this mode of
suppression as “lip service to the need of diversity but changing little about one’s own practice” (p. 6).

**Racialized Experience of Black Undergraduate Women**

Gendered and racialized experiences offer two perspectives, the reality of who Black women is and the expectations about who they are expected to be from white people. White-male controlled systems reinforced the notion the Black woman is inferior, putting this population in a “double-jeopardy” existence (Collins, 2000). This segues into the next theme of the double-minority experience, which recognized the duality in the identity of the Black woman. The last theme discussed was the idea of being strong and working harder, this is part of the cumulative weight mentioned earlier in this section (Jaggers, 2020). Black women hold the mentality that they must work harder and show no emotion, to feel worthy of being in predominantly white spaces (Jaggers, 2020). This oppressive environment contributes to internalized oppression, that is, when individuals of an oppressed or subordinated group believe their group or self is inferior to members of the dominant group (Collins, 2000; Garcia, 2019; Jaggers, 2020). This sense of inferiority is perpetuated by systemic oppression, which in turns contribute to internalized racism and imposter syndrome or the feeling of never being good enough.

**Oppressive Experience of Black Undergraduate Women**

This section aims to provide insight into how groups were formed to resist oppression, starting back with earlier social movements through the evolution of today’s student organizations.

Systems of oppression have been perpetuated since the antebellum period; Black women were subjected to second-class citizenship through the denial of their right to be
educated in different ways than Black men and white women (Huff, 2019). Hence, current practices in postsecondary education are still rooted in practices, systemic inequities in policies, programs, and services resulting in life outcomes that lack luster for Black women and creating a less than conducive environment for said populations to thrive. This leaves Black undergraduate women feeling isolated and needing to find community. To find a home in an unfamiliar place, and to find a place unified in the struggle, students created affinity groups to bring equality to their colleges and universities (Shookhoff, 2006).

**National Events as Catalysts for Affinity Groups**

National events and institutional neglect resulting in oppression for Black people, served as catalyst for the creation of culturally-based affinity groups. The migration of Blacks to the Midwest, the Landmark Case of Brown v. Board of Education, and the US Civil Rights movement of the 1960s propelled the subsequent creation of Black student unions and other culturally-based affinity groups. Such groups became a solution to many problems for Black people generally, and Black women specifically (Commodore et al., 2018; Shookhoff, 2006). Involvement in said affinity-based organizations provides additional support to navigate less-than-optimal campus climates (Domingue, 2014; Gerlach, 2008; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Shookhoff, 2006). During periods of national unrest, “students of color felt particularly empowered to voice their concerns and join together as a collective” (Gerlach, 2008, p. 42).

**The Great Migration**

What is known today as the great migration took place in the 20th century, from roughly 1910 to 1970. During this time, Blacks from many Southern states and cities
migrated to the North, Midwest, and West to escape oppressive and hostile environments and look for better social and economic opportunities (Anderson, 2015; Black et al., 2015). While the North, Midwest, and West seemed like better options than the Jim Crow South, systems of oppression existed and/or were eventually created to exclude Black people (Commodore et al., 2018; Karkouti, 2016). Systems like redlining (not providing home loans for Black to live in decent areas), sundown towns (towns where Black could not live and/or visit after the sunset), and the need for green books (books that denoted where it was safe for Black people to travel/visit) were still being implemented (O’Connell, 2019). These systems immensely impacted the social and economic landscape of the North, and gradually increased the attention to racial inequities (O’Connell, 2019).

O’Connell’s (2019) research examined the impact of the United States’ racialized history by examining how sundown towns contribute to the Black—white inequality. Articulated today as redlining, this form of structural racism contributes to disparities not only in housing and, health, but education as well, and still impacts the experience of Black people today (Maness et al., 2021; Poulson et al., 2022). Academic redlining is “systemic exclusion in medical education of potentially qualified applicants from underrepresented racial and economic backgrounds due to admission committees pervasive use of cutoffs scores on ‘standardized’ assessments” (Nakae & Subica, 2021, p. 588). Although Nakae and Subica (2021) explained academic redlining in medical education, the concept can be applied more broadly. Redlining also impacts the quality of general education as taxes pay for schools, and Black people have been restricted from higher economic neighborhoods and well-funded schools.
Landmark Case & Civil Rights Movement

In 1954, the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education solidified the legal integration of schools, marking the beginning of another change in education (Commodore et al., 2018). While this meant that Black students could now attend white schools, they were systemically excluded from the full luxuries of education that white students received (Karkouti, 2016). Black people assumed that the legislation was self-executing, that since this was now law, people would obey it (Patterson, 2001). However, not everyone embraced the outcome; in fact, Southern whites fought back. Anderson (2017) discussed this pushback as “white rage,” finding this concept dating back from the Civil War until 2016. Anderson noted that whites were not necessarily triggered by the mere presence of Black people, but by ambitious Black people, Black people that persisted. In a speech campus speech at Emory University in 2018, Carol Anderson stated that “society has punished Black resilience and Black resolve” (Anderson, personal communication). This was in response to her book, White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Nation’s Divide.

Patterson (2001) noted this pushback was a matter of life or death for Black people by retelling the story of Emmett Till. Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Chicago, whose mother was from Mississippi but relocated to Illinois a part of the Great Migration, was visiting family in Mississippi in 1955 when he was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white lady (Anderson, 2015; Black et al., 2015). The family knew it then, and the public now know this to be a false account as news reports in 2017 documented that the accuser admitted to lying. Patterson (2001) attributed this murder to white rage stemming from Brown v. Board of Education. According to
Anderson and Bond (2015), the murder of Emmett Till propelled the Civil Rights Movement.

After the Brown v. Board of Education decision, and the pushback and violence that resulted, Thurgood Marshall, a Black Civil Rights lawyer and former member of the Supreme Court, stated that the legislation alone would not destroy racial segregation (Patterson, 2001). Other activists and community members had the same sentiments, and the Civil Rights Movement came to the forefront. The Civil Rights Movement sparked national campus movements including those from Black students—resulting in many Afro-American student societies that evolved into what is commonly known today as Black student unions, originally serving as political weapons (Shookhoff, 2006).

**Black Student Unions**

In 1968, a group of students in what was then known as the Afro-American Society at one university in the Midwest was suspended for their role in a sit-in aimed at demanding change because of systemic inequities that contributed to a hostile environment for the students. While not all affinity-based student organizations are born out of and participate in forms of activism, the performative nature, lack of intentionality of and false demonstration of inclusion and systemic inequities perpetuated by PWIs tend to create an environment that creates a need for minoritized groups to seek community and may inspire student activism (Gerlach, 2008; Shookhoff, 2006). Performative inclusion, and lack of support fosters a hostile and alienating environment, contributing to the erasure of said population, and hindering the success of Black undergraduate women (Dominque, 2014; Gerlach, 2008; Shookhoff, 2006).
Due to this environment, Black women seek refuge in affinity-based organizations. Engagement with these groups “can help to mitigate the feelings of isolation that many African American students feel on a predominantly white institution” (Gerlach, 2008, p. 13). This study intends to fill the gap in information by providing a student-centered, critical examination of institutional responsibility and exploring how PWIs perpetuate inequities from the lens of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations. The next section provides insight into the role affinity-based groups play in the lives of Black women.

**Role of Affinity-Based Groups**

Because institutions of postsecondary education, and our nation, were founded in white male hegemony, access to postsecondary education came late to Black women (Cabrera, 2009; Darder et al., 2017). The perpetuation of systemic oppression, including the lack of institutional support for Black women, led to exclusion and isolation, and the need to self-soothe (Givens, 2016; Leigh, 2020). Affinity-based groups are organizations and spaces that bring together common interests. Racial/ethnic-based affinity groups, centered on common ethnicity/race, can “create a bridge between Black students and a predominantly white institution” (Davis, 2022, p. 3). Studies have reported these groups were formed to support Black students with their academic and social needs (Gerlach, 2008).

While affinity-based groups assume a commonality, it is important to understand not all minoritized populations, nor all Black people, are monolithic. Shookhoff’s (2006) study investigated how groups negotiate their differences. Within these culturally-based groups, Black women “hoped to make their educational institutions aware of the need for
equal rights and to use their alliance to bring about social change” (Shookhoff, 2006, p. 23). According to Shookhoff (2006), affinity-based groups typically serve one or more of four general purposes: give students a safe and comfortable space, share their culture and traditions with broader campus, help students achieve academically, and support social activism (p. 25).

Many social interactions served as the catalyst and one of the motivations for the formation of affinity-based groups, especially at PWIs. Linder et al. (2019), in their study of student activists, found “these motivations were more explicitly tied to students’ articulation of their own social identities as a propellant to engage in activism” (p. 77). Affinity-based groups provide “support that has a meaningful effect on students and their socialization and ultimate connection to the institution” (Gerlach, 2008, p. 13). Affinity groups are based on commonalities such as race, identity, and interests, and may take different approaches to forming a shared vision (Shookhoff, 2006). For Black women in institutions of postsecondary education, systemic oppression and specific events resulting from it serve as “pivotal events and movements that heavily influenced the trajectory, state, and experiences of Black college women” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 12). Collegiate affinity-based groups may take the form of social sororities/fraternities or other student organizations. In the next section I will discuss the importance of such organizations in providing the landscape for activism.

**Sororities & Student Organizations**

Black sorority movements in the early 1900s, in addition to national events of the 1950s and 1960s, gave way to the development of subsequent student organizations and the study of Black students at PWIs (Davis, 2007). These early Greek organizations
“acted to address the erasure and neglect of Black women in both everyday life and politics” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 12). Black sororities (a specific type of cultural affinity-based organization) provided opportunities for support, identity and leadership development, social action, and community building. Said organizations fostered an environment in which both race and gender are considered valuable (Canty, 2021). These organizations were created by and for college educated women with the intention of supporting the Black community. Each of the four Black sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (AKA), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (DST), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (ZETA), and Sigma Gamma Rho (SG-RHO) Sorority, Inc., were known for their own “unique mark on the Black collegiate narrative and have taken an active role in highlighting the diverse issues and concerns of Black collegiate women” (Commodore et al., 2018). Like Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first to be established “as a response to the reality of racism and sexism” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 25), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the second oldest Sorority, and Zeta Phi Beta both were founded at HBCUs on the East coast (Commodore et al., 2018). Sigma Gamma Rho was known for educators and was founded at a PWI in the Midwest making it pivotal in the migration of Black women college students.

Like white sororities, Black sororities have national oversight, which can make it difficult to establish a sorority at a PWI, as there are membership requirements that are not easily met for Black students at PWIs, like having the appropriate number of members to establish a chapter. Additionally, PWIs typically lack the resources needed to support such chapters on campus, such as personnel dedicated to such organizations, contributing to the need to form Black student unions instead (Commodore et al., 2018).
According to Commodore et al. (2018), “Sigma Gamma Rho was a reflection of the increased early-twentieth-century migration of Black women to the Midwest in pursuit of postsecondary education” (p. 16). As a result, in 1900, one Iowa college had “more Black women graduates than any other PWI in the North, Midwest, or West excluding Oberlin College [the first college to accept Black women]” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 16). While colleges in the Midwest, Iowa specifically, seemed to be welcoming and inclusive, the experience for Black women changed from the first generation—in the early 1900s—to the second (Commodore et al., 2018). Commodore et al. (2018) noted early on that “some places in Iowa may have been relative utopias for Blacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but this spirit, even in the best circumstances, soon dissolved” (p. 17). As identified in the previous section, affinity-based organizations have been essential in resistance to oppression. The next section will provide critical theories as conceptual frameworks for further supporting affinity-based organizations at PWIs.

**Critical Theories**

In this section, I review two conceptual theories that frame my study: Black feminist thought (BFT) and critical race theory (CRT). These theories examine the relationship of the knower (students), the known (their perceptions, and relationship to the world, postsecondary education, and student organizations), as well as the assumptions about the world from their experiences. Without utilizing the appropriate theories, according to Darder et al. (2017), “practice becomes ungrounded active or blind activism” (p. 12). Theories without critical lenses imply that “the oppressed are less than their rulers, and therefore, are less capable of articulating their own standpoint” (Collins, 1989, p. 747). Additionally, theories that center Black women are necessary as they are
often overshadowed and highjacked by Black men or white women in other theories and leadership of organizations and movements (Kelly et al., 2021).

According to Darder et al. (2017), Paulo Freire was considered the most influential educational philosopher in the development of critical pedagogical thought and practices. Freire’s work questioned power, culture, and oppression within the context of education that served as a catalyst for other critical theories (Darder et al., 2017). Scholars W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson, known as the fathers of Black History, contributed to critical pedagogical thought with respect to African Americans still leaving room for the need of more population-specific critical theories (Darder et al., 2017). Theories outlined in this literature review help guide practices that are critically intentional to Black people as a whole, and Black women separately. Literature throughout this study supports the notion that “Black women college students are a group whose voices and experiences are often lost in the larger narrative of college students” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 1). The intersecting identities of being Black and woman calls for an identity lens to understand individual and group narratives. Additionally, identity critical literature and theories helps to inform institutional practices; they provide an additional set of eyes in which we see the world.

The first critical theory investigated in this section is CRT, which asks people, groups, and institutions to look at policies, practices, procedures and services through the lens of racially and ethnically diverse and historically oppressed populations. This theory is followed by the exploration of BFT. In simplest form, BFT provides insight into the intricacies and nuanced experiences of what it means to be Black and woman, a gendered
and racialized story. Understanding, and operating out of the following theories allows us to center the voices of people of color, women, and Black women.

**Critical Race Theory**

CRT gained its roots in the legal sector. In the 1970s, intellectual pioneer and legal scholar Derrick Bell spent extensive time exploring critical lenses that framed life with race at the center, foundational to this critical discipline of thought. In the 1980s, the framework of CRT, expounding on the work of previous scholars such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Karl Llewellyn and Benjamin N. Cardozo, was on a national platform via a conference organized by legal scholar Kimberlè Crenshaw and Mari Matsuda, both former students of Derrick Bell. An aggregation of the work from Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Kimberlè Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda, and others transcended CRT from the area of jurisprudence to academia and beyond. CRT seeks to provide a broader perspective, a framework in which race is at the center, a lens offering an “alternative to dominant perspectives” (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 324).

CRT tenets include the following propositions: first, that racism is ordinary, it is a way we do business and therefore not acknowledged (colorblind concept), and second, our system of white-over-color serves the dominant group (known as interest convergence or material determinism). This supports the notion that racism is of interest to whites as it advances them materially and physically, and anti-racist efforts are only of interest to whites if such efforts continue to serve their interests. For instance, acts of performative inclusion reported in prior literature make sense in the frame of interest convergence. Institutions of postsecondary education will “perform” diversity work because it serves their public image, but not actually conduct diversity work because to
do so would threaten the maintenance of the status quo. Next, CRT proposes the social construction of racism; race and races are products of social thought and relations, which society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. A more recent development of CRT draws on racialization and how “dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 10).

According to Delgado (2017), “for realists, racism is a means by which society allocated privilege and status” (p. 2). Privilege and status are typically allocated to dominant groups, and racial hierarchies determine who gets resources (Delgado 2017). CRT is a theoretical framework that examines the role of race in our inequitable society, a society where some have an abundance of resources and others are in a deficit of resources, to balance privilege and resources. Although there is no specific set of methodologies for praxis of CRT, two focal points of CRT are “critical intervention into traditional scholarship, and race-conscious and quasi-modernist intervention into legal scholarship” (Roithmayr, 2019, p. 1).

While CRT started out as legal scholarship with primary principles being established during the civil rights movement, this theory has since taken on a broader use as we recognize that multiple realities exist, and it is necessary to understand and implement programs, policies, and services utilizing theories such as CRT. CRT allows users to create practices that puts race at the center, providing a way to combat the notion of race-neutrality and colorblindness (Roby, 2019; Roithmayr, 2019). Both race-neutrality and colorblindness overlook the intricacies and values of race and cultural differences. To say you are colorblind is to imply you do not see people as they are, which is extremely offensive, yet colorblindness is still promoted as an ideal for white
people (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). CRT considers how racism in ingrained in society and suggests we should provide a counter-narrative or voice to it (Roby, 2019).

CRT seeks to understand and provide a framework for addressing racial realities experienced by people of color in the United States (Patton, 2015). CRT offers a lens in which scholarly inquiries focus on how racism and the dominant culture of white supremacy shapes student development (Abes et al., 2019). Vargas et al. (2020) added to this notion by noting that this dominant culture contributes to the pushout problem “whereby talented students of color prematurely quit [research and self-deidentify from science]” (p. 1044). Furthermore, using CRT as a framework for mentorship “counters white dominance in all its pervasive forms” (Vargas et al., 2020, p. 1044).

To provide relevant student support, student affairs professionals must respond to the changing student demographics (Patton, 2015). To this point, Abes et al. (2017) highlighted that “race matters in postsecondary education, therefore student development theory, research, and praxis must account for white supremacy and racism” (p. 17). Therefore, it is necessary for PWIs to understand and utilize critical theories in praxis to counter systems of oppression. In addition to the dominant narrative of postsecondary education, Patton (2015) argued that CRT is necessary to combat academic capitalism—the idea that knowledge is a private good only accessible to the wealthy (most commonly the privileged dominant groups in society).

In addition to using theory to analyze systems, CRT can be used to highlight individual experiences on campus (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) focused on the foundational aspect of CRT in addressing general systemic inequities, and Vargas et al. (2020) used CRT to reframe mentor training with regards to research mentorship.
Delgado and Stefancic’s (2017) third edition of *Critical Race Theory* expanded on previous theories including critical legal studies and radical feminism of Black women. Hence, CRT and BFT are being used to guide this study from the intersections of race and gender, by framing the research methods, paradigm of inquiry, and research questions of this study. CRT offers another way of examining systemic inequities. Like CRT, BFT understands power is transmitted and maintained by the hegemonic nature of institutions. BFT specifically centers Black women’s wisdom regarding the systems they inhabit.

**Black Feminist Thought**

BFT is necessary to use for this study as the Eurocentric perspective of feminism leaves out race as an intersection, although it challenges the hegemonic ideas of white men. However, according to Collins (2000), “Western feminism has also suppressed Black women’s ideas” (p. 5), including by omission of their stories and experiences. Collins also notes that Black woman “have not historically been full participants in white organizations” (p. 5). Additionally, this suppression is expressed in the exploitation of labor (economic dimension), the denial of rights and privileges (political dimension) and by controlling images applied to Black women (ideological dimension; Collins, 2000; Shookhoff, 2006). The mere absence of consideration of Black women in the foundation and practice of feminist theory served as a catalyst for the need to develop alternate perspectives to the mainstream scholarship of feminism, as Black women experience patriarchy in different ways than white women do. Indeed, “much contemporary U.S. BFT reflects Black women’s increasing willingness to oppose gender inequality within
Black civil society” (Collins, 2000, p. 7). The intersection of race and gender had given impetus to Black women’s construction and dissemination of their critical social thought.

The social construction of BFT started with the likes of Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, and Fannie Lou Hammer, and countless others supporting their work (Collins, 1989, p. 745). Collins (2000) stated that “as an historically oppressed group, Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression” (p. 9). BFT as a theoretical concept grew out of the actions of resistance and advocacy from Black women with regards to their racialized and gendered experiences and was influenced by political issues and the epistemologies of the oppressed Black women (p. 254). Collins (2000) pointed out that individuals that create systems get to determine how those systems are used. White men have overwhelmingly created and continue to create mainstream theories, policies, and procedures; therefore, the theories, policies, and procedures reflect the perspectives of white men. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that reflects the interests of its creators, Black women.

Due to the historical hegemony of institutions of postsecondary education, Commodore et al. (2018) literature noted,

Black women college students are a group whose voices and experiences are often lost in the larger narrative of college students. Finding themselves at the intersection of race and gender, this group finds their voices at worst silenced and at best marginalized. (p. 1)

As a direct result, BFT demands that researchers center the voices of Black women.
BFT is critical in understanding Black women’s experiences in society and in postsecondary education especially at PWIs. BFT is rooted in the works of, including but not limited to, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Maria Stewart’s 1831 work on amplifying the voice of Black women and abolishing slavery. Maria Stewart, a pioneering Black abolitionist, teacher, public orator, and lecturer pivotal in the anti-slavery and women’s rights advocacy, effectively simultaneously highlighting both racialized and gendered experiences (Henderson, 2013). Stewart was one of the first women of any race to speak publicly and was radical in her call for Black people to resist slavery (National Park Service, n.d.). Collins (1990) further explored this work in her original publication of her book *Black Feminist Thought*. BFT goes beyond the general “taken-for-granted, specialized knowledge” Black women have and encourages “all Black women to create new self-definitions that validate a Black women’s standpoint” (Collins, 1989, p. 750). BFT encourages a collective identity and new viewpoints for Black women, it unlocks the next level of critical consciousness, inquiry, action, and activism (Collins, 1989).

Collins (2000) seeks to “name Black women’s knowledge” (p. 269). BFT also provides self-definitions and references traditions of Black consciousness and racial solidarity, hence the necessity for this narrative inquiry for this study. Collins (2000) presented BFT as “subjugated knowledge in that African American women have long struggled to find alternative locations and epistemologies for validating our own self-definitions” (p. 269). This is important to note as many other theories used in practice are situated in dominant perspectives. Critical theories on race articulates how white male epistemologies control schools, tenure processes, decision making, and other methods
that legitimize knowledge. This centering of white male epistemologies results in the need for a change in location or “alternative Black feminist ways of knowing” (pp. 267–268). Being both Black and a woman unearths epistemologies related to both identities; although race and gender are distinct, they work cohesively.

BFT includes seven core themes: (a) work, family, and Black women’s oppression, (b) mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images, (c) the power of self-definition, (d) the sexual politics of Black womanhood, (e) Black women’s love relationships, (f) Black women and motherhood, and (g) rethinking Black women’s activism (Collins, 2000). According to Patton et al. (2017), BFT was derived out of the lack of acknowledgment of Black women, in order to inform other theories and frameworks centering Black women. Additionally, this theory urges Black women to reject any negative portrayal of Black womanhood (Patton et al., 2017).

Black women have a certain role to play and if they operate out of bounds, they are problem makers. Institutions of postsecondary education often express negative portrayals of Black women in their interactions with Black undergraduate women actively engaged in affinity-based student organizations, expressed in the attitudes they hold against this population (Shookhoff, 2006). In other words, Black women are almost synonymous with activism, as Collins (1989) noted that “collectively, U.S. Black women participate in a dialectical relationship on linking African American women’s oppression and activism” (p. 22). BFT is necessary to fill a gap with existing literature, since most African American studies typically concentrate on Black men, and white women have always been the central focus of modern feminist and women’s liberation movements (Evans et al., 2017).
Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature that added context to and for the study. The historical construction of institutions of postsecondary education was embedded with systemic inequities that have been perpetuated through racialization at the macro, meso, and micro levels. Outside of critical theories such as BFT and CRT that are intentionally designed to center minoritized voices, Black undergraduate women have been forced to fit the mold of dominantly constructed frameworks (Patton et al., 2017, p. 88). Therefore, BFT and CRT will help us to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate women specifically, not in discussion with Black men, nor in conversation with other minoritized groups. These theories also help us to understand the perspective of Black women who participate in affinity-based organizations at PWIs more specifically. Additionally, critical theories provide guidance for mitigation of oppressive policies, practices, and programs. Critical theories serve as a framework for institutional change. Both BFT and CRT are critical to guiding this study in understanding PWIs from the vantage point of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations.

Chapter II reviewed scholarly literature aimed at providing context for research being done for this dissertation study. Opening literature provided a framework or the foundation of systemic oppression in the fabric of postsecondary education. Subsequent literature review provided critical theories to mitigate the negative impact of the adverse historical underpinnings on Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations. The next chapter will detail the methods for this study, outlining methodology, research design, and paradigm of inquiry that informed the construction of the chapter.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

In the preceding two chapters, I attempted to establish the need to further study Black women undergraduate students in affinity-based organizations and their relationship to PWIs and then reviewed relevant topical and conceptual literature to frame this qualitative study. Literature reviewed for this study emphasized the need for storytelling, collectivism, and “cultural familiarity as vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation” (Patton et al., 2017, p. 201). More specifically, literature showed that PWIs perpetuate systemic inequities, while Black women engage with affinity groups and spaces to survive those institutions.

In this chapter, I pose the research questions guiding this study and discuss the study design. I explain the methodology (narrative inquiry), methods of data collection (interviews and journals), and steps of data analysis. The intent of this study is to explore how Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations describe their relationship with PWIs. I seek to understand how participants perceive their personal relationship with such institutions, as well as the relationship of their affinity-based organization with the institution. In conducting this study, I seek to amplify students’ voices and perspectives, sharing the ways in which Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations (particularly in times of activism) and make meaning of their relationship to the PWIs they attend.

Research Questions
While existing data demonstrates Black undergraduate women persist at PWIs, this qualitative approach takes an in-depth examination student perception of institutional support (or lack thereof) from the lenses of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based student organizations at PWIs. My primary questions, informed by the literature reviewed in Chapter II, are:

1. How do Black undergraduate women that are engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (especially when engaged in campus activism)?

2. How do participants describe their relationship with such institutions, their personal relationship and the relationship of their organization with the institution?

These questions are meant to provide a student-centered perspective on institutional support and examine how PWIs perpetuate systemic inequities. Using a qualitative approach in examining the lived experience and perceptions of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations, this study explores how Black undergraduate women make meaning of their experiences with PWIs. Engaging in systemic inquiry by centering students’ voices, my research design is congruent with my worldview and strengths as a researcher. In the sections that follow, I explain the research design, review underlying critical paradigms supporting the design, describe the narrative inquiry methodology, and explain how data was collected and analyzed.

**Research Design**

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained that some researchable questions are best approached through qualitative research, which is “focused on discovery, insight, and
understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1). Qualitative research is a “method used to integrate findings from existing quantitative research. It is a broad methodology comprising a variety of methods to synthesizing qualitative evidence” (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010, p. 128). Qualitative research presents information rich in data.

**Ontological & Epistemological Framing of Paradigms**

Research design is influenced by the philosophical perspectives of ontologies and epistemologies of both the study participants and the researcher and should be congruent to their beliefs (Mills et al., 2006). Ontology provides assumptions about the nature of reality while epistemology provides insight on the acquisition of knowledge (Jones et al., 2013). Epistemology is “a system of knowing that is linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn” (Espino, 2012, p. 36). By examining ontology and epistemology from a Black, women, student-centered approach, I hoped to capture a critical lens, naming power relations between institutions and students. Black women undergraduate students at PWIs engaged in affinity-based organizations have a unique story to tell regarding their experiences. The ontology of study participants and researcher illuminated the epistemological and methodological methods respective to this study (Mills et al., 2006).

Critical race epistemology was irrelevant to this study because the social construct of race greatly impacts how we come to know, “how we know, what we know and what we value as knowledge is often predicated on who determines what knowledge is and how knowledge is shared” (Espino, 2012, p. 36). For this study, it was essential to understand that the history of oppression has greatly impacted the reality and experiences
of Black women. My experience as a Black woman navigating the oppressive nature of society via systemic barriers, in addition to the critical pedagogies reviewed for this research, contributed to the paradigm used in this study.

A paradigm is a particular lens we look through to provide our world view (Jones et al., 2013). Paradigms are “objects for further articulation and specification” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 35). Scholars acknowledge that paradigms can coexist, and that the nature in which they are used shows maturity in research (Bogna et al., 2020; Kuhn, 1970; Mill et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). We see the world through different paradigms derived from our ontologies, or stories through one’s reality, as it informs how we collect knowledge. As a first-generation college student and a Black woman raised in a predominantly white state, I was placed in very specific social places. Because of these lived experiences, I am working from a critical and constructivist paradigm.

Bogna et al. (2020) noted that merging paradigms provide a deeper qualitative study. I come from a critical constructivist perspective; my reality has been derived from human interactions (Jones et al., 2013). A constructivist paradigm recognizes that “reality is social, cultural, and historically constructed” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 44). This paradigm emphasized the emergence of individual and collective experiences, (Honebein, 1996; Patton, 2002). A constructivism philosophical paradigm is “an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Adom et al., 2016, p. 2).

The constructivism paradigm provides additional perspective on meaning-making, differing slightly from constructionism. Constructionism considers “how knowledge
meaning is derived through social collective process, whereas constructivism is more closely associated with epistemology...how individuals learn and make meaning linking new knowledge to existing understanding” (Schwandt, 2015, as cited in Jones et al., 2013, p. 19). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described the most basic tenet of constructivism being that “reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed”, (p. 44). In the constructivism paradigm, the researcher influences the process of inquiry that is value-bounded (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) shared that qualitative research “is grounded in a philosophical position that is essentially constructivist in the sense that it is concerned with how the complexities of the social and cultural world are experienced, interpreted and understood” (p. 42).

The critical part of a constructivist paradigm surfaces power relations as they are institutionalized and general. Critical theory is referred to as “an advocacy, liberatory, or participatory framework, has a clear focus on social justice and includes feminist perspectives, racialized discourses, queer theory, trans theory, and disability inquiry” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2017, p. 45). Critical and constructivist paradigms are used in qualitative inquiry because each seeks a “range and variation in findings, it delves into the “essence” of the topic” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 39). The critical constructivism paradigm has many benefits including how we teach, and learn, maximizing student learning outcomes, (Adom et al., 2016).

Honebein (1996) listed seven pedagogical goals for designing constructivist learning environments, which consisted of understanding the experience in knowledge construction, and the need for multiple perspectives, understanding realistic and relevant
contexts as well as understanding ownership, voice, social experiences, diversity in modes of representation, and the role of self-awareness in the construction of knowledge (pp. 11–12). Each element listed is essential in critically examining institutional practices regarding the support of individuals and affinity-based student organizations and the perception those individuals and groups hold about the institution.

Critical constructivist paradigms require the researcher’s participation as passionate facilitator, understanding that reality is socially, cultural, and historically co-constructed. And, as such, a desired outcome for this study is to improve praxis for the institutions. The critical constructivist paradigms offer unique but coinciding perspectives and principles to construct a story regarding the social phenomena of the research. These paradigms contribute to our worldview, and how we make meaning of, construct and interpret the information we perceive through our experiences (Jones et al., 2013). Knowledge is not solely constructed by traditional methods, “learning occurs only when the learner discovers the knowledge through the spirit of experimentation and doing [as well as experiencing]” (Adom et al., 2016, p. 2). To gain an understanding of the worldview held by the study population, it is necessary to use critical inquiry to gain insight from their narrative.

The critical and constructivist paradigms used in this study operate from an “emic” position, or insider’s view, as opposed to an “etic” position, or viewpoint of the authority observer (Jones et al., 2013). The critical paradigm, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2017) noted, operates with the understanding that the nature of human interactions can be flawed as the participant’s nature of truth is derived in an oppressive society. In other words, the knowledge we hold is created by our experience within society. These
paradigms provide an opportunity for critique, the opportunity for discourse, and transformation.

My critical constructivist paradigm will allow me to foster authentic relationships with study participants due to similarities in identities and lived experiences. Both critical and constructivist paradigms are applicable to this study as research shows that affinity-based organizations provide a social collective process in addition to the individual epistemology (Domingue, 2014; Gerlach, 2008; Shookhoff, 2006). The ensemble of paradigms is essential for studying Black undergraduate women; while their engagement in affinity-based organizations is collective, their realities are both individual and co-constructed. To collect narratives in a sensitive and effective manner, balance between facilitation and participation is critical. As a researcher I consider that understanding the nature of truth is both individual but can also be flawed because of varying perspectives and bias (Jones et al., 2013; Patton, 2002).

**Narrative Inquiry Methodology**

The methodology is the approach used for data collection and analysis in a study. According to Jones et al. (2013), “methodology describes general strategies of inquiry and influences the choice of methods” (p. 70). Methodology should be informed by one’s research paradigm, epistemology, and ontology, and the methods of data collection and analysis should align with the overall methodology. Several qualitative methodologies would align with my study, yet I selected narrative inquiry. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that narrative inquiry inquires “into the institutional social, cultural, familial, and linguistic narratives in which each participant’s experiences are embedded and that shape each individual experience” (p. 58).
My aim with this research was to collect student narratives to better understand the study population, and stories that may provide data for transformative change. This research provides a critical perspective to existing literature, supporting transformational change, in that “critical theorists want to move beyond representation to be active agents of societal reform, they want to change oppressive practices” (Nicotera, 2020, p. 75).

Being a Black woman in the United States provides one perspective. Being a Black undergraduate woman at a PWI adds an additional layer. Being a Black woman at a PWI, engaged in affinity-based organizations, adds yet another complexity to the experience of the study population. While this research intended to provide the participants’ perspectives [constructivism], it also called for participatory action on behalf of the researcher [critical paradigm of inquiry].

The specific qualitative methodological tradition I used for this study was narrative inquiry. Like other qualitative research, narrative inquiry seeks to reveal rich contextual information about participants’ experience. Narrative inquiry specifically attempts to highlight the participants ‘phenomenon “story” through inquiry “narrative” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) asked researchers to negotiate the entry as a process of narrative inquiry. Negotiating the entry “establishes responsibilities for both researchers and practitioners” (p. 2). This guides the researcher’s methodology, sample population, design, and data analysis.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that recognizes and works with the idea that storytelling is a universal practice, which foregrounds the voices of participants, aimed at providing a holistic understanding (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007; Trahar, 2013). Too often, the voices of Black undergraduate women are left out of research and
consequently policies, programs, and services. Narrative inquiry provides the opportunity to center the voices of study participants, typically gathering data through a combination of interviews, observations, narratives, and other forms of data collection.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described narrative inquiry as “storytelling, storied lives, the way humans experience the world” (p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) recognized that in “educational research personal and social stories from learners, teachers, and researchers are the storytellers in their own and other’s stories” (p. 2). Often the storytellers of students’ experiences are institutions, reporting on student outcomes. The basis of this research study stems from my observation and experience of institutions providing the narrative around Black students broadly, Black women generally, and Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations, during times of activism specifically. Through my experience and research, I observed an oppressive institutional narrative, formed, and maintained by white perspectives. Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based student organizations are the narrators for this research.

A narrative inquiry was the most appropriate approach to this research as it provided a critical context needed to interpret the feelings, and additional information regarding lived experiences not easily acquired through quantitative research or other qualitative approaches. This form of inquiry aligns with the research paradigms and is supported by literature, hence ensuring methodological congruence. Methodological congruence occurs when the study’s components are interconnected and interrelated, making the study cohesive (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This research design, paradigm of inquiry, and methodology contributed to “knowledge that can assist other researchers to adopt interpretive practices that search for deeper explanations of qualitative inquiry”
as it “yields implications for practice” (Bogna et al., 2020, p. 3) as it “yields implications for practice” (Murray, 2009, p. 46).

Through narrative inquiry I had hoped to identify Black women students’ perceptions of institutional equity and support (or lack thereof). Rather than merely report on barriers or struggles of the study population, I had hoped to illuminate institutional responsibilities for more equitable practices. It was necessary to approach this study using narrative inquiry, from a dialectical view of knowledge.

**Research Methods**

This study critically examined structures that contribute to, hinder the success of, or otherwise affect the study population. This study recognized and valued the fact that Black undergraduate women are indeed experts in their own lived experiences (Banks, 2009). As a result of recognizing value, a critical paradigm aims towards liberation, and the understanding that students are agents of their own reality, presented through narrative inquiry. This recognition and similarity of experiences between participants and researcher was central to a collaborative relationship and essential to the data collection process and is one way in which BFT and CRT is presented in the study design. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted several ways to collect data through narrative inquiry as “data can be in the form of field notes, journal records, interviews, transcripts, other's observation, storytelling, letter writing, etc.” (p. 5).

Connelly and Clandinin (2019) stated that “interviews are another data collection tool in narrative inquiry” (p. 5). As a researcher who holds similar identities to the study participants, I understood that data should be collected and interpreted in a manner that was sensitive to underlying meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I conducted one 45-
60-minute interview with each study participant selected to participate in the study. All participants were also asked to provide a one-page narrative following the interview. Participants must have identified as Black, a woman, enrolled at a PWI within the last five years, and involved in an affinity-based student organization. Participants selected were invited for a virtual interview, asked to sign a consent form, and were provided with details of the study and other necessary information prior to the interview.

Interview times were arranged dependent on availability of research participants and research, for equity considerations, I proposed multiple times, and days. All participants were able to participate in an hour interview via zoom and followed up with a narrative journal entry. Prompts for narrative journal entries were derived from additional questions or clarification needed after I reviewed interviews and transcripts.

**Research Sample**

For this research, I looked at Black student organizations at four-year public and private predominantly white institutions in the Midwest; Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were the key Midwestern states I sought participation from. In order to gain participants for this study, I sent an email with a participation solicitation letter (Appendix A) to publicly listed Black student organizations in the target states. I also reached out to colleagues working as diversity, equity, inclusion or multicultural practitioners, as well as colleagues that served as the advisor of Black Student Unions, to utilize as a referral source. Additionally, I posted a social media graphic (Appendix E) to a closed Facebook group for Black student affairs professionals. For study eligibility purposes, participants confirmed their institution type (PWI), and the depth of participant engagement in a cultural affinity-based organization was assessed through participant intake form.
intake form consisted of seven questions around identity, institution type, enrollment period at institution and in student organization, and involvement in cultural affinity-based organization to understand if participants were a general member, or executive member and their role within the organization. That intake form can be found as a link in Appendix B. In addition to the intake form, those selected to participate was asked to complete a participation demographic form (Appendix D) with more detailed information about their race/ethnicity, institution type, and select a pseudonym.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated that “in qualitative research, selection of the research sample is purposeful” (p. 187). Purposive sampling is the process of selecting information-rich data sources for the specific study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For this study, I used the snowball method of purposive sampling to identify participants. Nine participants responded to the call for solicitation, representing each of the three study geographic areas.

The snowball method involved identifying a few participants possessing the necessary criteria and asking them to refer others who may be a good source for the study, this is also referred to as networking or chain sampling, (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Coyne, 1997). The goal of qualitative research, specifically purposive variation, is to provide context heavy stories of specific groups, rather than generalizations. The aim was to “describe a particular context in depth, not to generalize to another context or population” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 186). In this case, the participants served as information-rich sources in a specific context, those from which one can learn a great deal about the issue of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Suri, 2011).

Data Collection
The Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse reviewed and approved all procedures used in this study. Adhering to narrative inquiry data collection techniques, I conducted 60-minute in-depth interviews and collected a narrative journal entry from each participant. Prior to scheduling interviews, I asked each participant to read over the consent form (Appendix B) and prepare any questions they had so they could ask them at the beginning of our scheduled interview time. I conducted each initial interview using my interview protocol form (Appendix C) that was constructed in a manner to progressively elicit information aligned with the study’s research questions: (1) How do Black undergraduate women that are engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (especially when engaged in campus activism)? and (2) How do participants describe their relationship with such institutions, their personal relationship, and the relationship of their organization with the institution?

Data Analysis

Upon the conclusion of virtual, recorded interviews, I used Zoom auto-transcription software to transcribe the recordings. All recordings were downloaded and saved to a password-protected USB drive. I took field notes as I spoke with each participant if something came up that I needed to make a notation around such as quotes or key concepts. Field notes are a consideration for the practice of narrative inquiry, as they supplement the recorded transcription notes (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). I read all transcriptions and narrative journal entries and used thematic coding to code for critically salient information and themes that contributed valuable information to my research questions.
Common reiterations, words, sentiments, and messages started to arise with participants, which provided insight into saturation. Saturation “is the conceptual yardstick for estimating and assessing qualitative sample sizes” (Greg et al., 2020, p.1). Greg et al. (2020) listed three primary elements as metrics for saturation including base size, run length and new information threshold in addition to congruency with existing findings from previous studies.

The goal of thematic coding was to link the data to the experiences that are informed by the literature reviewed in this dissertation providing implications for further research and practice (Daiute, 2013; Linneberg, et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2013). According to Saldaña (2011), coding is a method of discovery that helps to “classify information into emergent categories for further analysis” (p. 95). Coding throughout the interviews, via short words, symbols, field notes, highlighting, and other means, is the most common type of coding with qualitative data and helped with managing data during the data collection period (Connelly & Clandinin, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2011). Field notes and coding during data collection allowed me to ask follow-up questions as prompts for the journal entries and helped me easily identify key contributions later during the in-depth analysis.

Participants did not receive journal entry prompts until a few days after their interview, after I had a chance to review and start preliminary coding. Participant prompts varied as they were follow-up questions I had as a response to their interview. Participants also were able to add any information they forgot to include during the interview. The journal entries ranged from three paragraphs to three pages, no new
information was produced, clarification on statements in the interview was most of the content.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and their respective interview was assigned additional descriptive notations for easy access to transcriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While data analysis in qualitative research occurs simultaneously with data collection, hypotheses and educated assumptions provide valuable insight that potentially needs to be refined during analysis, which calls for a more intentional analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The data for this study was aimed at unearthing a more informed understanding on how Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations make meaning of their relationship with PWIs and provides a student-center perspective. The critical theories of BFT and CRT were used to interpret the life history narratives of the participants. When analyzing the data in this research, I was mindful to consider the complex set of assumptions and principles in the narrative (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007).

After the interviews and journal submissions, I coded transcripts and journals to identify codes for analysis. According to Saldaña (2013), “any researcher who wishes to become proficient at doing qualitative analysis must learn to code well and easily” (p. 2). In qualitative research, inductive coding is primarily used; however, I used deductive coding as the initial level of coding, as the research questions and the chronological nature of the interview questions allowed for a predetermined, structured and ordered set of codes for this study critical to linking the data to meaning (Daiute, 2013; Saldaña,
2013; Williams & Moser, 2019). This deductive coding allowed for an easier generation of themes and identifiable patterns leading to findings.

Then, through the first cycle of thematic analysis, I searched for elemental and affective methods including process, emotion, values, and In Vivo. In Vivo code is when codes are taken directly from participants and placed in quotation marks, this helps to keep the data grounded in the voice of the participants (Saldaña, 2013). Process coding provides a dynamic account of events as it provides “gerunds” (“-ing” words) that depict the actions experience throughout to collegiate journey for the participants (Saldaña 2013, p. 96). Words such as “navigating,” “struggling,” and “advocating” in the participants’ interviews indicated ongoing interactions aligned with process coding.

Emotion coding labels the feelings participants have with regards to their experience in its entirety and through each storied events, via both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Values coding helps organize themes based on their importance and participant worldviews and label subjective perspectives while outcomes coding allows for observations of patterns, that provide meaning and surfaces findings, (Daiute, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). In Vivo coding allows for the participants’ voices to be heard as direct quotes are used, “drawing from the participant’s own language” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 84).

In the second cycle of analysis, eclectic coding was used to tell the storied experience of the study population as well as to move from observation to findings that inform the implications for future research (Daiute, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). As noted, themes arose from coding, as according to Saldaña (2013), the “theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (p. 175).

**Ethical Considerations**
As the researcher, it is my responsibility to ensure this study produces credible results as well as gains participant buy-in. To do so, I was as transparent as possible with the study participants regarding the purpose of the study and how the data collected will be used. The participants were asked questions regarding their lived experience, including being asked to recall potentially traumatic events; I informed each participant that they were permitted to end the interview if it became too traumatic. I collected a list of relevant supportive resources, such as counseling centers, to provide to participants shall they need them. Additionally, since participants might have provided information, they may believe could be used in a retaliatory manner, it was pivotal to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

Confidentiality is an agreement about what can be done with information, such as participant identities and identifiable information, from participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms. Any identifying information, such as names of the specific universities, student organizations, and campus centers, are not disclosed in the study. Additionally, an informed consent form was signed by each participant explaining the purpose of the study, and how the information will be collected and used. The information was stored on a secure USB device. Participants were made aware of all potential risks including if any breach of information occurs and outlining the steps, I took to protect the participants’ identities.

**Delimitations**

As a researcher, I recognize delimitations imposed on this study, many which were created by me to ensure a specific focus of the study. The study population was limited to Black women undergraduate students at PWIs in the Midwest. Limiting the
study to the Midwest was a purposeful delimitation as it has a unique history with oppression and inclusion. Very few states in the Midwest were slave states and many states exhibit an abundance of white liberalism. However, Iowa displayed positive momentum of inclusion with early migration and the integration of postsecondary education, setting the stage for graduating Black women, as well as graduating former enslaved turned scholar, George Washington Carver (Commodore, 2018; Schwalm, 2009). Purposive sampling was used to identify study participants; the snowball method of purposive sampling provides added delimitations as the study population is dependent upon the referral of others.

Chapter Summary

Chapter III provided a comprehensive explanation regarding the proposed data collection and interpretation. In this chapter, I reviewed the proposed study design and provided rationale for the selection. I explained the paradigms and perspectives that inform the study, and guided the research questions, data collection method, as well as plans for analyzing the data. The methodology section concluded with ethical considerations, and delimitations. In the next chapter, I will provide the results of the study.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS: HEAR OUR VOICES

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a student-centered voice to the experiences of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based student organizations and the meaning they make with regards to their experiences at PWIs. Chapter III provided an outline on the methods used to gain insight on the experiences of the study population. Those methods were used to solicit stories in alignment with the narrative inquiry approach. The following research questions provided a framework in guiding this study:

1. How do Black undergraduate women that are engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (especially when engaged in campus activism)?

2. How do Black undergraduate women describe their relationship with such institutions, their personal relationship, and the relationship of their organization with the institution?

In this chapter, I share the results of my data collected through participant interviews and narrative journal entries. This chapter begins with an overview of participants, including demographics and pseudonyms used in place of actual names to provide participant anonymity. Aligned with the focus of this study and to pay homage to the many Black women scholars, feminists, and activists who paved the way for current and future generations, I asked participants to provide me with the name of a Black
woman they have been inspired by that embodies the adjectives above. Participants were provided the opportunity to select their pseudonyms and some self-selected names while others opted for me as the researcher to select their pseudonyms. Following the review of participant demographics, I share participants’ narratives in the form of episodes, and these episodes illustrate the themes that emerged from the data.

Participant Demographics

This study solicited participants from four-year public and private PWIs in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Data was collected from a total of nine women, five from institutions in Iowa, two from Minnesota, and two from Wisconsin, via a single 45-to 60-minute semi-structured interview with each participant and a paragraph to one-page written narrative journal entry provided by each participant after the interview, guided by prompts from the researcher. Participants included alumna (enrolled at some point between 2016-2022) and current undergraduates ranging from second-year to fifth-year students. Many were undergraduates during national incidents such as the murders of George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Jacob Blake and countless acts of violence against other unarmed Black people. All but one participant experienced some extent of the pandemic during their undergraduate journey and at least three started postsecondary education during the global COVID pandemic in social isolation. All participants experienced major historic events that contributed to their meaning-making.

Some participants grew up in what was considered majority Black neighborhoods; however, most participants in this study attended predominantly white schools for their primary and secondary, or kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12), experience. One participant noted she started off in racially/ethnically diverse schools but eventually
attended a predominantly white school. Another was raised in a state with a larger Black population but that changed once they moved to Iowa. One attended a private school, and one attended a college prep school. Eligibility for the study included participation in affinity-based student organizations, and participation varied from being on the executive board to being a general member of the organization. All participants identified as Black women, and participants reported additional salient identities such as religious affiliation, first-generation, multiracial, single-parent households, two-parent households, and varying socioeconomic statuses. Table 1 provides a review of participants, including dates of enrollment, role in affinity-based organization, and salient identities. Geographic location, institutional type or size, and specific organization are not listed to protect participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Four-Year Institution Type</th>
<th>Four-Year Institution Classification</th>
<th>Role in Affinity-Org.</th>
<th>Other Salient Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Church Terrell</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Executive board member</td>
<td>Did not disclose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida B. Wells</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>General member</td>
<td>African, Muslim, Neurodivergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley Chisholm</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Executive board member</td>
<td>Former athlete, First-generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Davis</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Alumna</td>
<td>Executive board member</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie T. Alexander</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Executive board member and founder</td>
<td>African, Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa Parks</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Alumna</td>
<td>Executive board member (president)</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Amina</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Fifth Year</td>
<td>Executive board member</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sojourner Truth</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Alumna</td>
<td>Executive board member (president)</td>
<td>Biracial, First-generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audre Lorde</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Executive board member</td>
<td>Afro-Latina, First-generation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consistent with narrative inquiry methodology, the participants’ experiences are presented below by episodes or groups of smaller stories of events occurring as a part of a larger picture. The episodes included points in time during the participants’ journey leading to their college choice/decision and throughout their college experience. The undergraduate journey is a season in one person’s life full of episodes or experiences that shape perspectives and created meaning in their lives. These episodes are narratives, created by the themes emerging from this study to answer the research questions of (a) how Black undergraduate women engaged in cultural affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (especially when students may also be campus activists) and (b) how participants describe their relationship with such institutions. From data collected using both deductive and inductive processes, six themes were uncovered.

Theme 1, *Why Am I Even Here: Complicated College Choice*, presents stories of how the study participant decided to attend a PWI in the first place. Theme two, *The Making of Me: College Transition*, was about the difficulty participants faced in moving from high school to college. While these first two themes do not tie directly to answering my research questions, they provide vital background information. It is important to understand what contributed to the decision to attend a PWI and how that contributed to the need to seek out affinity-based groups.

Theme three, *Where My Sistas At: Engagement with Affinity-Based Organizations*, explores the need to belong and the light provided by these organizations during a period of isolation. This section begins to address my first research question by examining how participants first got involved in affinity-based groups. While they found community, they also often experienced at best, performative support and at worst, a
hostile campus climate full of microaggressions and extremely taxing invisible labor, which is presented in theme four, *I Don’t Belong Here: Campus Climate*. This theme also addresses my first research question by uncovering how participants perceived their institution’s environment and the support offered by campus administration.

As a result of their experience outlined in themes one through four, participants provided stories of the meaning of their experiences, highlighted in theme five *My Perspective: Institutional Relationship & Meaning Making*. Theme five addresses my second research question exploring the relationships of participants to institutions, and of affinity-based organization to institution. Themes one through five were grouped together in season one as they all relate episodes of participant experiences at PWIs, including unveiling how participants came to be at their PWI, what their experience was, and what they learned.

Finally, in theme 6, *Hear Our Voices: Recommendations for Campus Administration*, participants provided insight into their needs via suggestions for the PWIs they attended. As this theme broadens the focus from participant experiences to the larger world of PWIs in general, it stands on its own in season two. The goal of this theme is to provide parts of the blueprint for other PWIs in supporting Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations.

**Season 1, Episode 1 – Why Am I Even Here: Complicated College Choice**

“College wasn’t a thing until I transferred into the wealthier school district.” Reflecting on the college choice and decision-making process, Sojourner told stories during her interview about the stark differences in schools she attended K-12. Roughly half of the students in the less wealthy schools didn’t speak English as a first language, so
the schools “focused primarily on like reading, science, and writing… they all spoke Somali or Spanish.” Moving to a wealthier middle school presented more options, more opportunity access to college for Sojourner, “I remember we pulled up the University of Iowa, Drake, Iowa State, and UNI. We declared our majors in third grade.” Other participants’ parents mentioned college to them; however, the college choice was primarily based on financial aid packages and proximity to home.

“At the time, my institution was big on outsourcing their funds,” Angela explained, as it was cheaper for her to attend this PWI out of state instead of one in her home state. They had a specific program with scholarships to gather “students from these urban areas” referring to a program she discusses later in the study. “Looking back, I wish I would have done a little bit more digging” she shared as she talked about how in hindsight she would have gone to a different institution, maybe an HBCU. She then explained that in addition to financial aid, she committed under the pretense that Divine Nine (African American sorority) organizations would be established on campus, which did not occur during her time there. Doing more research and having more information “would have definitely helped me shape a more well-informed decision for my college” Angela stated.

Similar to Sojourner, Sadie was exposed to career readiness, resume building, and access to college via a program at her predominantly white high school. During this program, she and other participants participated in an overnight trip at a college. It was there she connected with a Black, Muslim woman who ultimately influenced her to attend that institution. “It was mainly her, and the aid that I got,” Sadie said as she talked about being able to “see myself” at that institution. Sadie also explained the role her parents had
in her decision-making process. While both of her parents had degrees, their first degrees were from countries in Africa, providing a completely different experience. Her parents also had two very different views: her mother wanted her to attend a very prestigious university as she “wanted me to succeed and reach the top.” Her father on the other hand recognized the complexities of being a Black, Muslim woman, and told her “I know how hard it is to go through life with the identities that you have so find the place that like, is for you.” Contrary to Sojourner and Sadie, and how they wanted to attend college, Queen had a different experience.

“It’s a funny story” Queen said as she started to discuss her college choice. “Because I didn’t want to go to college, I DID NOT [emphasis added] want to go to college. And I think that was because I was limiting myself to an experience I already had and how I had already viewed the educational system.” She explained that she went to predominantly white Catholic schools K-12 and that this experience “has its own traumas” which she anticipated would be similar at a PWI. Queen noted that she wanted to go to an HBCU and even got accepted into one, “but at the end of the day, if you don’t have the money, what’s the point.” She said that without her financial package and financial opportunities, she wouldn’t have been able to attend college.

Angela also discussed HBCUs, but in a different context. “At the time, my institution was big on outsourcing their funds,” Angela explained. It was cheaper for her to attend this PWI out of state instead of one in her home state. They had a specific program with scholarships to gather “students from these urban areas.” “Looking back, I wish I would have done a little bit more digging,” she said, because in hindsight, she would have gone to a different institution, maybe an HBCU. She then explained that in
addition to financial aid, she committed under the pretense that Divine Nine organizations would be established on campus, which did not occur during her time there. Doing more research and having more information “would have definitely helped me shape a more well-informed decision for my college,” Angela stated.

Audre also shared,

[I] wanted to go to an HBCU so bad, but I think just like the distance kind of messed in my brain a little bit because like my family needs me, and that’s like a very women of color thing to be like I need to be there for my family. For her, she knew that she wanted to be surrounded by people that looked like her because “I went to PWIs my whole life…I was like I need people who share the same culture as me and that look like me.” Ultimately, proximity to home, the fact that she received a full-ride scholarship, and her area of study led her to select the college she attended.

Like Audre, for some of the participants, proximity to home was a major factor in the college-going/college choice decision. Contrary to other participants, Rosa noted in her interview that her first choice, while still a PWI, “wasn’t far away enough from my family.” Like the other participants, Rosa explained that financials were a great contributor to her decision as she “couldn’t afford it, at the end of the day I was gonna go to a PWI, because I mean, I didn’t really have a choice, right?” Unlike Sojourner, Rosa said, “I think that I just mean growing up like I always knew that there was no if, and, or but about it, like I was going to go to college because that’s what my family wanted.” Like many of the other participants, Rosa was a first-generation college student, did not
have much guidance with the college-going/choice process, and became overwhelmed with the process.

Mary, like the others, listed proximity as a contributor to her college choice. She was born and raised in Minnesota and was attending college in Wisconsin. However, she was the only participant that attended a college preparatory high school. Because of that, Mary stated, “I feel like I was very prepared” for college. Additionally, both of Mary’s parents and older brother went to college so she always believed that college was a path she would take.

Participants concluded that there were complexities when deciding what college, they would attend. Although participants’ K-12 experiences varied from college prep schools to public schools, there was a consensus that proximity to home and financial aid/access were the top two priorities when selecting a college to attend. While some participants felt more ready for college than others, all participants noted struggles with college transition.

**Episode 2 – The Making of Me: College Transition**

The participants typically had a difficult time making the transition from high school to college. For instance, although Mary was extremely prepared, “it was a hard transition,” to move across a few states, be away from home, and change culture.

As Rosa recalled,

>You have to jump in, and, like you know, figure it out and like, pray that you have like a few good mentors and good people that will help you, and eventually like I did. But when I first got there, I was just like, this way over my head.
Sadie shared the same stance about her preparation for college. Despite being engaged in previous college readiness programs via her private school, she said “No, no. I feel like college has so many unspoken like situations that I could have never imagined.”

Many of the participants were first-generation college students, which impacted their college transition. “I’ve never had to like do something that I just had really no guidance on,” Audre stated as she described how neither of her parents went to college and couldn’t provide support in that way. She said she needed to figure it out so that she could assist her little brother and sister when it became their time to attend college so “they have someone to guide them.”

In addition to the typical college transition issues such as the new environment, new people, homesickness, etc., Sojourner disclosed that the “shift happens to like marginalization and the othering” once the transition occurs. Angela described this shift in more detail. While she felt as though her high school “is predominantly Black,” there were still a lot of white students but “they never made us feel less than, and there was never any sort of racial issues that I ran into in high school.” In high school, Angela was in the majority, and in college things changed and she was in the minority. She noted “they wanted to push and make it a strong stance that you are it the minority in this situation” as she talked about the othering that occurred.

Both Angela and Rosa told similar stories of othering and marginalization after their initial and intentional welcome. Their first days on campus were during an orientation of a program with other students of color. They thought their entire college
journey would be with people that looked like them and they were excited. But once
school started, as Rosa said,

> It was also very confusing because I didn’t realize… [during orientation,] I’m
surrounded by, you know, Black and Brown people and I’m thinking, oh, was this
what this school is like?! And then you get that realization when everybody
moves back on campus, you’re like oh, no, this is it.

While not talking about herself, Shirley had a similar story focusing on a program
in which the college she attends hosts students from Chicago Public Schools (CPS).
Shirley noticed that these students came from an “atmosphere where everyone looks like
them right? Everyone is Black, right, and then you come to a white atmosphere it’s just
like, wait a minute.” She went on to explain, “you would see those students eat by
themselves, they would see those students, you know, not talk as much,” as she discussed
the isolation students felt outside of affinity spaces.

Queen felt like Angela and Rosa that there was a false sense of representation on
her campus. “You get here and you’re like what the fuck, where is it? It’s like, I’ve only
been seeing people in pictures, I haven’t seen those people in those pictures in my
classes, in these dorm rooms, nowhere,” Queen stated. Queen discussed her role as a
resident assistant (RA) and how it was beneficial but also problematic:

> That’s also where PWIs take advantage of students of color. Because once again
we’re kind of portrayed as these trophies of diversity. Or, I don’t know, just like
being used in inhumane ways. Yes, we do have diversity here, as you can see
here the 12 people that represent our diversity.
Like Angela and Rosa who spent their first days on campus surrounded by people of color, one of Mary’s first interactions was with a student engaged in the Black Student Union (BSU): “She came up to me and said, have you heard of Black Student Union?” Mary was a first-year student and knew of the organization but hadn’t been involved. The peer told her about the organization and invited her to the next meeting. Mary explained that her high school did not have any cultural clubs and so this was new for her, and getting involved helped with her transition as it provided support and community and a “safe space.”

Sojourner reflected on her childhood when storying her college transition because this college transition was more than simply enrolling and attending an institution of postsecondary education, it created transformation in her worldview. “When I was growing up (in high school) people really didn’t see color,” she said. This changed in 2016, “at least, being from a younger perspective.” During this time “my brain is evolving, or my brain is growing and formulating all these ideas and seeing all of that happen.” Sojourner continued to reflect on her experiences:

Getting into high school (and college) realizing that I had the privilege of being somebody that looked white, kind of acted white, but had the characteristics of a Black woman…I could get into certain rooms that my peers couldn’t, and some of them respected me because I got into rooms, a lot of them hated me for it.

Audre talked about her first year and serving as a first-year representative for BSU and how it helped her transition to college, “just kind of getting like, my first step into learning how to kind of navigate the campus as a Black student.” All participants provided stories of issues that they navigated during their college transition. For some it
was just being in a new environment and away from family, and for others it was the illusion of diversity that was unrealized once they settled into campus. Regardless of the reason, participants sought refuge and community in affinity-based organizations.

Episode 3 – Where My Sistas At: Engagement with Affinity-Based Organizations

“I didn’t really know how important it was to really be around people who kind of look like you outside of your family until I got to college,” Shirley said. Ida and Sojourner grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods, and needed the continued familiarity that was provided in affinity-based organizations. “I benefited so much from being immersed in an environment with all kinds of people and cultures,” Ida wrote in her journal narrative as she discussed her motivation for joining affinity-based groups. She went on to note that “I was a part of something, and I wasn’t really alone.”

To this extent, Mary noted that her college experience would have been “probably very different, because that’s how I found people like me on this campus” and friends she could relate to. Sadie’s reason for going the affinity-based organizations was because she wanted to feel supported, and “feel like I don’t have to explain myself for a lot of things.” She was introduced to the multicultural center and its programming by a staff member. This center offered peer mentors to underclassmen. “It’s a really great opportunity to have like one-to-one connection with somebody who’s just also BIPOC, and like, just can relate to you in a level that literally nobody else can,” she continued.

Angela shared this position, as she attributed her academic success to the Black student union because being around “people who look like me, that dress like me, that shared similar interests as it made college all the more engaging.” She said this
engagement served as a gateway for her involvement with other organizations and experiences.

Audre didn’t have affinity-based organizations in high school and so “that made me seek it in college,” she said, though she noted that initially, her engagement was out of the need to “beef up her resume.” Her need to enhance her resume stemmed from exposure to experience of inequity and the fear of not being able be successful, specifically not being able to obtain a job because of her identity. Due to the gendered and racialized nature of society and postsecondary institutions, Audre felt as if she had to be involved with as much as possible and said that she had:

To work twice as hard because I’m Black, but then four times as hard because I’m a woman, a Black woman. And so, in my head, you need to do as much as possible, and even do more than like, what my Caucasian counterparts would do if I want to get the same positions.

She added, “I need to have something to prove that I’m like, worthy.”

However, once engaged, Audre thoroughly enjoyed the community and recognized that she needed this affinity space herself and she could be a catalyst for the involvement of other Black. “When I realized the power of the Black community here…I realized that I needed this space,” Audre said. Because Audre is Afro-Latina, she was also involved in a Sorority that was historically Hispanic but evolved to be a multicultural organization. “So, it’s nice, I get like kind of both of my cultures into one,” she said. Audre stated that in the last year, she has been more heavily involved with BSU and the African American Cultural Center. She wanted to do more, noting “other people younger
than me, who look like me, who are fully Black, also need this. And so, I need to
program and like, get them involved and feel the love in this space that I feel.”

Sojourner initially joined a predominantly white sorority; she told stories of racist
incidents within the sorority house “and that’s when I started caring about how Black
people were treated at this campus.” She described attending a party upon her completion
of the Rush (recruitment process). At this party a student comes up to her and says, “I’m
surprised you joined.” Sojourner asked why, to which the student responded, “well, this
house’s nickname is the KKK” because of numerous racially charged incidents without
any measures of accountability. This led her to connecting with BSU and eventually
becoming the president.

Rosa summed it up when discussing how other students encouraged her to join
affinity-based organizations as they told her that “these places and spaces make them feel
safe and understood…it helped me find community.” Ida used similar language, saying
“it still served as a safe space” even as she began college in 2020 during COVID and was
still afforded the opportunity to engage with the affinity group via Zoom. “I was just
trying to find friends and find that community. Another reason was familiarity… I was
looking to meet other Black folks.”

Queen also noted being not from the Midwest was another layer adding to the
experience of the college transition. Black students from Iowa navigated the campus in a
very different way than Black students from Atlanta, for example. While Black students
from Iowa seemed to be equipped to navigate the microaggressions, students from other
places were less forgiving of them. As illustrated by Queen’s story, it is important to note
that Black women are not monolithic. While all participants’ most salient identities were
being Black women, other identities participants held were Muslim, Afro-Latina, biracial, queer, only child, guardian of household (both biological parents absent) in addition to being first-generation college students, which were not considerations of this study. It was often tedious to discern the impacts of different parts of their identities in relation to specific experiences. But also, as Queen emphasized, “in America, hell, if you have one oppressive structure in your life, you’re thrown into the whole pool of marginalization. Like if you got one of them, you’re with all of us, like that level of intersectionality.” The marginalization, othering, and pushback these Black women endured individually and in their student organizations created a hostile campus climate.

**Episode 4 – I Don’t Belong Here: Campus Climate**

“I have noticed or experienced firsthand how much—what’s the correct word—violence we get as the Black community at a PWI versus any other race here.” Queen’s comment illustrated what many participants shared, which is that they found their affinity-based organizations provided a place for engagement and community, but the broader campus community was still hostile. Participants shared moving stories about memorable moments and people, including relationships with peers, faculty, staff, administration and the larger community. When reflecting on their campus climates, most reported observing or witnessing race/ethnicity-related incidents of bias. And so, Episode 4, “I don’t belong here,” represents the theme of feeling included within the affinity-based organization but excluded elsewhere and discusses the lack of institutional support felt by participants.

“I never thought this would happen,” Sadie noted as she discussed experiencing microaggressions and racist incidents. “I thought I could just spend four years, get my
degree, and leave. But I have like, all of these things to think about.” She talked about how much her predominantly Black neighborhood supported her compared to her institution: At home, “you have like 10 people that are willing to stand up for you, but when it comes to PWIs, there’s no support there whatsoever unless you have a relationship with these people.” Angela said “the surrounding area felt a little bit like borderline of a sun downtown for Black people,” as she reflected on feeling unwelcomed. She goes on to tell a story of racial insulation, and how the institution would recommend students not go to the nearest city with a large Black population.

Mary described what occurred after the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, resulting in protests that led to the murders of Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber and serious injuries to another. Earlier in the year, the murder of George Floyd occurred, and the nation was already in a heightened state. Mary discussed how after the verdict regarding the Jacob Blake case and the subsequent murders led to several protests. Students at Mary’s school responded to the announcement of the not guilty verdicts in both cases, by painting the word guilty on rocks. Mary stated that “some people were not happy about it and they painted over it like two hours later.” This action caused a larger disagreement on campus that led to student protests. Mary also talked about incidents of hate speech, and other incidents and how the institution would “usually just make a general statement that’s not going to do anything.” Sometimes, Mary said, “I don’t think administrators even got involved at all.” Specifically with the rock painting situation, “at least they can acknowledge the fact like what’s happening on campus.”

Audre described similar lack of support for Black students. She told a story about a conservative student organization that brought Republican and right-wing speakers to
campus. During a presentation, one of the speakers showed a racist meme. A Black student that was at the presentation got upset and kicked a projector. The institution then did a “full-fledge like investigation on this student and he became blacklisted, not blacklisted um, banned from the university premises.” She then said the Black students were outraged and it resulted in a protest but ultimately the institution didn’t care or respond.

Audre also told a story about an “white…I mean ‘not white’ fraternity” hijacking methods that Black student protestors used, such as taking sayings or taglines like “no justice, no peace” and not engaging Black students. She said their protest was just to “turn over cars and light things on fire.” She stated that this protest filled the streets, and “people were literally flipping cars, like damaging this house… The cops were there and did nothing.” Audre talked about how she went to protests after the murder of George Floyd “and I think seeing how the cops reacted to us then and then seeing them react to this was insane.”

In addition to feeling a sense of exclusion, Shirley discussed having to take on additional labor created by the campus climate and how her institution’s campus climate was “antagonizing.” She shared stories of feeling singled out and tokenized as the only Black woman in a group for a class project:

Every time we talk about Black people, he’s looking at me. It’s like every single time we get on a topic of Black people, it’s like you’re looking at me for confirmation. We can feel it when it’s antagonizing. We can feel when it’s for show, we can feel when you just… and I was feeling it.
Angela used similar words as she talked about the feeling of exclusion and being out of place at her PWI: “We would have imposter syndrome immediately coming into school…you can just feel it.” Sadie also felt tokenized or expected to be the spokesperson for her community: “Black students should not be forced to be the voice of the classroom in race related issues, nor should the responsibility of being the representative of their race in predominantly white spaces lie on them.”

Angela’s experiences at a separate institution supported Sadie’s conclusions, as she stated “we are also doubling as activists.” She described students who were seniors and attempting to graduate but still having to do work to ensure the next generation of BIPOC students at her institution would have to deal with a lot less. We “try to push through this thing to make basically the space better for those behind us that are coming next, because we won’t be here to enjoy the benefits of what we’re trying to create,” she continued. She did note that the results of this was the creation of a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position, however, those positions are typically under-resourced and are only able to scratch the surface towards change.

Shirley described a class discussion about COVID that evolved into a discussion about discrimination. At some point, the professor made the statement that “no one was saying Asian lives matter during COVID.” Shirley said that she was furious, not particularly about the statement but because she was the only Black student in the classroom, and she felt the undertone of the coded language by the professor. Mary shared a similar sentiment with regards to faculty and staff: “I feel like people kind of rely on you to represent everybody, and that’s not how it is.” This often leaves students exposed to a hostile environment where they either have to defend themselves from their
peers, hindering relationships, or say nothing and potentially be seen as not standing up for the culture. Instances of microaggressions, discrimination and tokenization occur regularly for Shirley. “I am only in my sophomore year of college, and I had one already, and I had one last year,” she said as she reflected on said incidents.

Audre described a different aspect of microaggressions that she and her friends experienced, that people were always complimenting her on things that seemed to be stereotypical. She used an example of her friend to illustrate her point more clearly: “my friend is Native American, and this person will compliment her on like her long hair, like her high cheek bones, like things that are very like Native person-centered.”

Like Audre, Mary had experiences with her peers that were not “necessarily bad ones.” “I guess it’s like a Midwest thing,” she said about her interactions with individuals outside of her organizations. “I feel people like to still smile at you but it’s not like they will approach you or anything.” Queen termed this Midwest thing “Iowa Nice” as she explained the difference in how Black people handle microaggressions. Queen said Black people from states where there are a lot of Black people are not as passive and nice in the approach to correct someone who has perpetrated a microaggression. Queen explained that “this is how we can be in spaces with white people” and that “it’s for our own protection to be that way’.

Audre stated that she avoided anything outside of her affinity groups as they were her safe spaces. She was often the only person of color in class, and she would notice microaggressions:

people will sit everywhere else, but next to me. While I don’t think it’s necessarily intentional, but it feels like it because it’s just like, people always say
they find me intimidating or they don’t know how to approach me, but I’ve never had that said to me by a person of color.

She went on to say, “my experience has been like they are afraid of me, and so I think that’s why I avoid those [white] spaces.” When reflecting on preferring to be in affinity spaces, Sadie too stated that “people told me that I’m intimidating, but the majority of people who said that have not been people of color.”

Queen stated that it is “exhausting, tiresome, but it’s also very much needed” as she talked about navigating the microaggressions and interrupting them on her own behalf and on the behalf of other students like her. “I’m sure you’ve seen it being a Black woman yourself, having to continue, continue, continue to push for something that everybody is aware it is an issue, they just continue to ignore it.” She stated this is especially true “when we’re talking about like, self-care for Black women, and what that looks like, and how we’re overeducated, but undervalued.” She noted that she was writing a paper about how Black women’s burnout looks completely different from that of women of any other race and that it isn’t talked about as Black women are lumped in with other minoritized women or Black men. Sadie also emphasized how her student organization had a lot of programming focused on mental health and self-care her freshman year, in 2020. This was as a result of the COVID pandemic and because of the racial tensions that were present because of police brutality against Black bodies.

Not only does campus climate greatly impact the college experience for students, but even their trajectory. Of some Black students, Rosa said, “they didn’t stay, and that was because a lot of them like they just really didn’t find that community, they weren’t like as involved.” Sometimes, even finding a community isn’t enough. The invisible
labor associated with being involved in an affinity-based organization at a PWI caused some students’ grades to suffer, them to transfer, or even to drop out. Angela described students coming in and having good grades their first two years, and then falling under the pressure of having to lead institutional advancement of DEI and advocate for the Black community specifically, that it led to her not finishing school.

On the other hand, if participants were not engaged in affinity-based organizations, they feel they wouldn’t have made it at their PWIs. As Rosa recalled about her engagement,

The biggest part of being associated with student organizations was really like that social aspect. But knowing that that social aspect has tremendous impact on your mentality, your emotional, physical, all those different being on campus to help your transition and just your overall experience. So, I honestly think I wouldn’t have liked finished if I didn’t have that.

Similarly, Angela reflected on her persistence in overcoming a less than positive campus climate at her PWI and said, “I don’t know if I would have been able to push all the way through without being as involved with Black Student Union and without having them.”

But Ida and Queen provided stories of how they felt antagonism about the affinity groups. Ida got comments like, “Why is it, you know, why is there a Black student union or African student union? You know, if I had a white student union and then, oh that would be a problem.” Queen told a story about an event that her affinity group hosted with an aim to “symbolize and emulate Black excellence [at her school] because once again you don’t see that happening here.” She said that they received a lot of hate from
current students and alumni: “‘Oh where is the white gala and this, that, and the other?’ Very much an ‘all lives matter’ movement.”

“Overall,” Mary stated as she described the campus climate, “it’s, I guess, welcoming in a sense, like I walk into a space and I don’t feel unwelcome.” However, while her campus climate was not hostile it was also not inclusive: “In general, I feel more welcome in the spaces that are people that I am familiar with.” Ida shared the same sentiments, articulating that while the campus wasn’t unwelcoming generally, she felt more included within the affinity spaces. Audre described how she had come to view the institution: “I’d say it lacks support, and they don’t take it seriously because of their image they want to like keep.”

**Episode 5 – My Perspective: Institutional Relationship & Meaning Making**

While some institutions provided little support, none of them were very proactive in creating meaningful relationships with the affinity-based organizations represented in this study. While Mary stated that the relationship between the institution and her affinity-based student organization is improving, beyond funding events or doing collaborations “beyond that, there is not much of a relationship.” This supports the notion of institutions being performative in their claim to value diversity, as students asked for monetary support, increased employee representation, and interrupt bias, and systemic racism. “In general, the efforts trying to build a relationship with my organization in order to have a better look on their end and not solely because they care about the betterment of the organization,” Mary proceeded to discuss how the relationship was not perfect but has witnessed some efforts to improve.
Adding to this notion of performativity, Queen said “I think that’s also where PWIs take advantage of students of color.” She goes on to say “once again we’re kind of portrayed as these trophies of diversity” as she talks about this very transactional relationship with the institution. “I feels performative. That would be the main word that I would use,” Sadie said as she talked about the administration allowing her on committees and meetings with the president only to be told no at every turn. She went on to say,

I think they’re kind of trying to like give resume building opportunities so that when you go to Stanford, when you go to whatever for grad school and you become something, then you turn around and be like if they didn’t put me on this committee then I wouldn’t have been able to succeed, and all that.” She continued “they just elevate you until they need you, and then when they decide that you’re being too loud they just kick you to the curb and find the next one that they can capitalize on.

Engagement in affinity-based organizations at PWIs, exposure to bigotry, silencing about race and exposure to historic information, has led to change in how the participants have made meaning of their experience and the perception of institutional support they hold. Participants went from taking a back seat and not speaking up on issues, to leading student organizations out of the growth from their experiences. Sadie talked about how her experiences changed her trajectory:

I never wanted to be an advocate. I simply wanted to be a student…my experiences have taught me that I cannot passively assume that my needs will be met without the voices of people who look like me speaking on them.” She has a new meaning as a result of her relationships and interactions, “I want to work
towards a world where I’m more than just listened to, I’m advocated for without
having to step up and fight to do it myself.

In her journal narrative, Ida described her organization’s initial relationship with
the institution as adversarial. She said,

My first year was pretty tumultuous given everything that was going on in the
world. I believe most of my peers were tense as well, which made us frustrated
with administration and how they did/didn’t handle situations that came about
(COVID case spikes, police brutality, racism/microaggressions on campus, etc.).

She noted that the relationship has improved since her first year. It was hard for
Ida to decipher if her silence was due to her environment or due to her neurodivergence.

“I did not just did not want to speak up in class because I was afraid of saying the wrong
thing,” Ida said as she described what she attributed to her neurodivergence. However,
Ida also provided a story of her being the only person of color in a class her freshman
year. The professor was a white man and there were 40-50 other students in the class, a
discussion occurred about protests that were happening and how they were so violent and
they, the students and professor, didn’t understand why. Ida went on to describe this
professor as having a “very strong presence in the course, very much an authority figure,
dominance and aggressive if you will. That wasn’t his only issue, he was also rude and
callous.” As a result, Ida stated this “made it hard for anyone to stand up to him.” She
remembers thinking that his behavior was not okay and that she regrets not speaking up.

Mary noted that in terms of support, it was only the advisors of the student
organization that showed they cared. “It is my positive memories like specifically with
those staff members,” Mary discussed in her interview. In terms of the institutional
relationship, “it’s upsetting to like, not feel direct support from like administration… people in my position feel like we have to just rely on each other for that…we can’t rely on them” Mary explained as she discussed the perception she holds regarding the institution. “So, I think that’s like probably their perception as well,” referring to others in her organization. Sadie also stated “the institution would not care about the experiences that me and people who are like me went through” as she reflected on how the affinity-based group took the lead on supporting Black students during times of heightened racial tension and discourse.

She stated that the most she believes occurred was an email, but no actual response via change in policy or practices. “I don’t even think they think, like what about our Black students? What about our Black women? Until like people who look like me came in and been like, okay, but what about us?” In addition to lack of support from her institution, Sadie also noted pushback and roadblocks created by the institution. For example, they weren’t able to protest on campus, they couldn’t hang up anything that had to do with the protest, of course everything on their social media had to be vetted through the publicity office, etc. Essentially, the institution attempted to silence students.

“It takes a lot, when you go to a predominantly white institution you would really like, you either come in knowing a little bit about yourself, or you come out knowing a whole lot” Shirley stated as she talked about having to speak up against injustices at her institution and the impact it has had on her college journey. Shirley also noted that she came to her school as she was recruited for track, but noted that her track year ended and she stated, “I do think that it was because of how I felt as a Black student.” Shirley went on to say that that was the culture of the track team, “it is very well known that the
students of color don’t always stay all four years on the team.” She said this was because she and other students of color felt disconnected and that some of her peers let “the white atmosphere kind of create them, and maneuver them,” meaning they had to code switch and couldn’t be their true authentic selves. “There was something that was a missing piece that was taken by the institution that we were in, and I wasn’t really feeling it…I chose me over my athletic career.”

As she talked about her relationship with the institutions and the meaning of that relationship in her experience, Angela said,

The institution gave me definite trauma of even having to go through that as a student and having to be in the space to push for change as hard as I had to as a student when it is their job as the administration basically to make sure we’re comfortable, that we’re safe.

Despite the adverse experiences participants faced, the experiences and engagement with their affinity-based organizations helped them make meaning of their journey. For example, Audre described the impact being in the organization had on her, specifically as she was tasked with educating people on her culture:

It actually kind of made me change like what I wanted to do in my future as well, I came in very like science based, healthcare. Now I’m thinking instead of just like public health, like public health education so like I’m educating people.

Others learned to use their voices to advocate for change.

Season 2, Episode 1 – Hear Our Voices: Recommendations for Campus Administration
While this entire study aims to center the voices of Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations, the last theme explicitly elicited the participants voice with regards to strategies for transformation for PWIs. The sense of participant agency radiated in the responses, the last question asked participants to share what they would like administration to know about their experience holding the identities listed.

“It doesn’t feel like they’re really listening to like our needs,” Sadie said as she told a story in which students protested the inaction of administration. She wasn’t alone in feeling this way, other students obviously felt this way, her institution wasn’t the only PWI that perpetuated oppressive an oppressive environment. “It was bad, as far as how they treated students of color, right?” Shirley said as she talked about what she heard from students that attended her college prior to her arrival and around the time George Floyd was murdered. She noted, “a lot of students felt that there should have been more support in that aspect as far as our campus.” As she described the lack of support for campus administration, Shirley went on to talk about her frustration with the tokenization of George Floyd and Jacob Blake in particular, stating that these shouldn’t be the “only reference that a white professor should be using.” This is how she articulated the need for the institution to do more. She went on to talk about how most of the individuals at her institution that provides the necessary level of support ant understanding are faculty and staff of color. She noted that others need to do the work: “we need a lot more people who aren’t people of color to get in this, to stand with us.”

While the sentiment of “America’s not going to listen to a woman” as stated by Sojourner specifically regarding the 2016 election and Hillary Clinton’s run, seemed to translate via the gendered experiences these Black women had at PWIs, this study is an
opportunity for administration to “HEAR OUR VOICES.” “Just having more resources, mental health resources for BIPOC students, I hope they increase those resources for students like us.” This is what Ida wants campus administration to know in support Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations. Similarly, Ida stated that being in an affinity-based organization “impacted my mental health and just my social circle and my ability to socialize the most.” She went on to say that “being in community and having that circle of friends, fellow Africans did help with my just sense of belonging and feeling safe… so I was able to perform my best.” In addition to having the same level of support for “culturally-based groups” as for white organizations, Queen wants changes in policies and practices, “I think first and foremost, if they’re really about it, there needs to be policies, more tangible and sustainable changes.

Administration should hear the voices of students, shift their mindset from a deficit mindset to a strength and equity mindset that will mitigate silencing, increase support and reduce unrealistic expectations regarding the experience of this student population. While stating recommendations for practice at her PWI, Sadie noted,

I’d really appreciate it if Black women were supported by concentrated efforts, some of which includes administration taking our perspective into consideration when making decisions, funding allocated to us in the form of scholarships to help ease financial stress, increasing of faculty, staff, and mental health professionals that look like us, or even increasing people who look like us in administration itself,

Additionally, “To us, this is our culture, our stories and struggle are not a spectacle,” Sadie noted as she, similarly to other participants, urge institutions to hire more Black
faculty and staff, increase representation in the curriculum, and not only make statements about incidents but out action behind them.

**End Scene**

Chapter IV presented a composite of narratives from Black women engaged in affinity-based groups at PWIs in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Participants ranged from alumna to current fifth year students. Institutions were four-year public and private colleges and universities. While the participants had a positive experience from the collective of being in community within the affinity-based organizations, their experience was adverse, and sometimes led to racial battle fatigue, a decline in grades, added stress, and even leading students to dropout. Gerlach (2006), supported this notion, noting that Black students at PWIs are at greater risks of not completing college compared to other students. Although students provided stories of trials and tribulations, they demonstrated how they persisted with the community from their affinity groups. The community allowed them to show up as their authentic selves, served to empower them socially, mentally, and provide support in ways that the institution would not. Collins (2000) noted that “Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, an/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice” (p. 9), collective community aids in the mobilization of efforts. Their experience gave way to, while not new, strategies for serious consideration.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

In this chapter I analyze the data collected, discuss limitations, and offer my own take regarding the findings of this study. This chapter also includes strategies for practice articulated by the study participants as my “narrative research questions focus on identifying the experiences of underrepresented persons” (Daiute, 2014, p. 245), and, like other critical narrative inquiries, may lead to transformative change (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Nicotera, 2020). The aim of this chapter is to synthesize my observations and research questions with the literature and data collected from the participants of this study. The big question this research sought to inquire about is how the said population makes meaning of their experience via the perception of institutional support and experiences. The accounts people tell us about their lives form a fundamental part of social inquiry; that is, as social researchers we gather accounts about people’s lives, which we subsequently use to produce our own accounts of issues of concern to us (Earthly & Cronin, 2008).

Literature reviewed from Darder et al. (2017) on critical pedagogy, Cabrera (2009) on invisible racism, male hegemonic whiteness, Karkouti (2016) on Black students’ educational experiences, and Garcia (2019) and Endo (2020) on racialization of postsecondary education provided grounding context on the hegemonic foundation on institutions of post-secondary education. This hegemony is portrayed in the leadership of a dominant sociocultural class leading to social control over subordinated groups. This
grounding literature provided context to implications of national events such as the great
migration, Brown v. Board of Education, the civil rights movement, campus
organizations and critical theories. This grounding literature also provides insight into
how Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations experience
PWIs and how they make meaning of said experiences.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) discussed critical race theory as it provides an
alternative lens to white, male hegemony. Its aims to offer the perspective of less
commonly heard voices of BIPOC people. CRT considers the ways we think about
racism, racial hierarchies in determining how benefits and who doesn’t and the
relationship of dominance and power. This study reexamined history and attempted to
replace majoritarian interpretation with accurate stories of experiences of the racially
minoritized and gendered experiences co-constructed by myself as researcher and my
study participants.

My positionality allowed me to interpret and validate the data I collected through
the participant interviews. In addition to my positionality, critical theories and paradigms
of inquiry used, offer guidance for this study. Research such as literature from Allen
(1992) on the color of success, Karkouti (2016) on Black student’s experiences, and
Patton et al. (2017) on critical perspectives regarding Black women and college success
shows that Black women persist, however, they often struggle silently at navigating the
systems of oppression. BFT offers the intellectual framework for “understanding Black
women, their experiences, and their realities within systems of domination and
subordination” (Patton et al., 2017, p. 89). Collins (2000) placed emphasis on the
endemic reality of racism in shaping the lives of minoritized people, displayed throughout the literature and participant stories.

This study aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of oppressive structures baked into said institutions by lifting the voices of Black women engaged in affinity-based groups providing implications for practice and further research. This study was derived from my experience with and observations of systemic oppression as it pertained to Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations at PWIs. I have witnessed first-hand how Black women in affinity groups at PWIs in the Midwest have unique experiences.

Knowing that PWIs are complex, I wanted to further understand (a) how do Black undergraduate women that are engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (during times of activism), and (b) how do participants describe their relationship with such institutions. This study also provided the student-centered narrative of persistence including participant’s struggles. I used critical theories and historical knowledge to support the reason for this inquiry/concern. Results of data collected from this inquiry are outlined by themes in this section. Themes are college choice, college transition, engagement with affinity groups, campus climate, institutional relationship/meaning making, and recommendations for campus administration.

Noted in chapter IV, episodes one and two provided background context into the holistic story of college choice and transition of attending PWIs. These themes aim to connect the reason for attending their college with the reason they sought affinity-based organizations. Drawing upon themes of BFT and CRT, participants provided stories of familial/communal support in sense of belonging that affinity groups provided, power
relations between their groups and the institutions, and provide bodies of knowledge that may inform institutional practices.

Proximity to home and financial resources were the top two contributing factors to college choice. However, many participants noted wanted to attend HBCUs as they believe they would have a better educational experience. The nonexistence of HBCUs in Minnesota, Iowa, nor Wisconsin significantly narrowed the choice for the Black women in this study. This is significant to note as in chapter I discussed the foundation of HBCUs as being established for Black people (NCES, 2010). This study demonstrates that PWIs were founded under significantly different circumstances, particularly white male hegemony, that hindered the experience of Black students (Benton, 202X; Commodore et al., 2018; Darder et al., 2017). Patton et al. (2015) similarly noted that the successes of African American women are included in the statistical information, but, their experiences are invisible.

The first theme also provides context into this study, it provides information on college choice which adds to existing knowledge as most college choice research centers white middle class students, findings are around program offerings and selectiveness. The findings in this study offered insight into the implications for college choice from an alternative perspective. This vantage point from Black women found that choice was influenced on financial aid/access and proximity to home, as demonstrated through the narratives of participants in this study. Because many of the participants were first-generation colleges students, they lacked guidance around what to look for in a college but knew affordability and proximity to home was key. Some participants attended
predominantly white and wealthy schools and others attended private schools for K-12, and those privileges provided them with greater access to college.

College choice literature is often presented as race-neutral, not exploring the intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class. But one might wonder after reviewing this study whether Black men feel the same need for proximity to home or if that is a gendered racialized experience. Or, one might wonder if the “far away school theory” (FAST), described by Oldfield (2012), which presumes first-generation poor and working-class students presume they are not qualified for the more rigorous schools far from home, might also apply to Black students in the Midwest.

Regardless of the level of participation in college prep programs and readiness, all participants alluded to just needing to experience the transition for a clearer understanding. Thus, the second theme related to college transitions, although it did not explicitly address the research questions, does provide useful context to how Black women made sense of their relationship to PWIs. Indeed, several participants reported that it was their early experiences at the PWI that drove them to seek out involvement in affinity-based organizations. Scholars have alluded to concerns beyond general college transition for students of color. Researchers recognize that “racial minorities often have additional concerns while attending college, especially at predominantly white institutions” (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 391). This is even more evident for Black women engaged in activism via their affinity-based organization.

Participants attended both public and private colleges and universities; although the institution types were different there were substantial similarities in experiences despite institution types. Four participants were from public state institutions in Iowa, and
five participants were from private institutions in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin, so a
total of five different institutions were represented. Angela and Rosa were alumna of the
same public institution, although at different times. Sojourner attended a private college
in the same state at Angela and Rosa. Also, in the same state as Sojourner, Angela, and
Rosa, but different institution, Queen and Audre attended the same school, also a public
institution. Mary and Shirley attended the same private institution at the same time, while
Sadie and Ida attended different private institutions in the same state.

All participants, regardless of their institution or years of enrollment, noted
feeling as if they did not belong at their PWI, which served as a catalyst to join and/or be
more engaged with their affinity-based organization as well as other social organizations.
It is also important to note that because participants ranged from alumna to second-year
students. While all participants had similar experiences, some, specifically alumna, had
more time to reflect on those experiences. One, a second-year student, may not have fully
articulated her experience as she is still early in her collegiate journey.

Both Angela and Rosa were alumni reflecting on their journeys, and despite
having years to process their experiences, the traumatic impact was still very much
present in their stories. People remember trauma as it occurred, even though Angela and
Rosa had time to process their experience a little longer than the other participants, their
tone and stories were told with the same disdain. Although Shirley was a second-year
student, she had the ability to articulate the experiences that she had gone through.
Aligned with the critical paradigm of inquiry, Shirley had already experienced the
oppressive society and that was evident in her experience. Ultimately, all participants
noted that their adverse experience(s) at some point in their journey shaped the meaning
they made regarding the institution via interactions with administration and overall campus climate.

All organizations that participants were engaged in were focused on social identities, specifically with regards to race/ethnicity or gender and not so much political. Sojourner shared a story in which she participated in a group outside of her intersection of identities and found herself experiencing extremely traumatic events. Ida also talked about the nuanced experience of being in an African student organization versus being Black student organization. She noted less adversity for African union, in fact the institution was always willing to increase funding for that organization when needed. While this study does not focus on this comparison, it is important to note that Blacks born on the continent of Africa and arriving to the United States as immigrants or refugees have a different experience than American born Black students, particularly due to the historical legacy of enslavement in the United States.

As a result of not being able to attend HBCUs or experiencing feelings of isolation, and needing to just experience the transition to college, participants were faced with additional challenges not necessarily common to other new college students. In addition to moving from teenager to young adult, living with parents to living independently, and the typical college transition issues, the sharp awareness of needing to feel as if they belonged was a sentiment expressed by each of the participants. Some expressed feeling bamboozled, or tricked into thinking their campus would provide that sense of belonging via targeted orientation programs for BIPOC students. However, when they began their first day as an undergraduate student, they immediately felt a disconnect and racial tensions were present. The need for community ultimately led the
participants to seek out engagement with groups that were for students who looked like them as they sought a sense of safety, which contributed to their ability to navigate the hostile environment of the PWI.

While some participants initially joined the affinity group to add leadership and campus engagement to their resumes, ultimately all the participants wanted to have a space where they could show up as their full authentic selves, knowing that others would understand their plight as they navigated the unfortunately familiar barriers that their respective PWI presented. Some participants were already accustomed to using their voice to advocate for the advancement of Black people, and Black women, and others developed their voice by being engaged in affinity groups. After being active with their affinity group, all participants demonstrated they had grown through their journey. Their meaning of why they joined the organizations in the first place, changed to have new meaning. They were now invested in ensuring the campus was a better place for those that came after them similarly to Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Sadie Alexander did. While there was a disconnect and distrust on some parts with the institution, affinity-based organizations were a safe space for study participants.

Audre went from the need to beef up her resume to finings community and to being passionate about making a better place for her siblings. Queen expressed similar sentiments noting that she wanted her institution to be better for BIPOC students to follow. Ida found her voice, Shirley’s voice grew louder, Rosa, and Mary found a safe space. Through the collective of the affinity spaces, all participants found their critical consciousness, supported by BFT. BFT encourages the next level of critical consciousness, inquiry, action, and activism (Collins, 1989).
Themes three through six connect with multiple concepts of critical theories, such as Delgado and Stefancic’s (2017) discussion of CRT (themes of interest convergence, material determinism, racial realism, revisionist history, critique of liberalism (colorblindness/neutral concepts-equality) and structural determinism – certain groups determine what is thought), concepts reflected in some of the stories of participants. CRT provides an alternative lens to white, male hegemony. Its aim is to offer perspective of less commonly heard voices of BIPOC people. CRT considers the ways we think about racism, racial hierarchies in determining how benefits and who doesn’t and the relationship of dominance and power. Reexamining history, replacing majoritarian interpretation with accurate stories of experiences of racially minoritized people. BFT focuses on racialized and gendered experience. BFT is necessary to use for this study as the Eurocentric perspective of feminism leaves out race as an intersection, although it challenges the hegemonic ideas of white men. As Collins (2000) stated, BFT seeks to “name Black women’s knowledge” (p. 269).

A climate free from discrimination microaggressions, and the overwhelming racial tension that is in the air at most PWIs, would make the campus a better place for BIPOC students. Unfortunately, the current climate provides at best roadblocks and at worst trauma for Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations. In fact, Angela explicitly stated “trauma” throughout the entirety of her interview, explaining how trauma leaves potentially a longer residual impact than the temporary excitement of actually receiving a degree. As a result of the barriers placed for this study group, the participants had a less than fruitful relationship with the institution impacting their interpretation of single experiences and of their overall college experience. Regardless of
the experience, each participant gained more value about life and purpose, gaining compassion in the impermanence of the hostile aspects of their collegiate journey.

Participants want the administration to listen to them. They want administrators to take into consideration the needs of the students from the students and not speculate about their needs. The Black women in this study confirmed the hostile and performative nature of their institutions.

Participant stories align with the literature regarding the experiences of Black undergraduate women at PWIs. Stories of exploitation, stereotyping, discrimination, gaslighting, and silencing that Black women have had to “navigate, negotiate, and learn how to thrive from their respective standpoints and epistemologies” (Porter et al., 2022, preface) were unearthed during the interview process in this study. Porter et al. (2022) described navigating PWIs for Black women was “like standing in a crooked room and they have to figure out which way is up” (p. 2). This same text discussed how Black women experience politicization; I would argue this is politicization is heightened for those engaged in affinity-based groups. Porter et al. (2022) went on to say, “their standpoint in the crooked room depicts how they make meaning of their positionalities in society” (p. 2). This was certainly true for participants in this study, who reported the displacement or disillusionment they experienced during the initial transition and/or in the general campus climate experienced.

Houston and Kramarae (1991) focused on the gendered lens of silencing Black women’s voices. As noted earlier in this dissertation, these researchers discussed how men have impeded the ability for women to tell their stories by talking over them, and not allowing them to engage in discussion, or dismissing what they say all together. One
participant provided an example of this as she discussed one professor who had a “very strong presence in the course… he was also rude and callous.” She discussed how this made it hard for her to speak up.

While there were both positive and negative impact as a result of engagement/activism in affinity-based groups as storied by participants, there was a consensus that they needed their affinity spaces. Participants told story after story of experiencing microaggressions, tokenism, and even blatant racism in one instance discussed further in the next theme. While they lack support from the institution, they found it in the familiarity of their affinity-based group. All nine participants noted the need for representation and understanding as a reason they sought an affinity-based organization. While at least three participants discussed having some level of critical consciousness prior to entering college, all participants noted engagement in affinity-based organizations pushed them to use their voices more. There was this sense of nuances, wherein they felt supported by their affinity groups/spaces, but they also felt overwhelmed, tokenized, and oppressed in other ways (both individually and collectively) as a result of being tasked with institutional change because of their organization’s “expectations.”

Participants also expressed strategies supported by the theoretical concepts and literature in Chapter II. They want administrators to consider alternate, less commonly heard perspectives. To do that, students recommended hiring more faculty and staff of color, providing monetary and physical resources to support Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based groups, and reviewing policies and practices through an equity lens. Although I had hoped to find new insights from this study as the less salient purpose
of this study was to understand what would contribute to a successful college experience for the study population, generally, the findings in Chapter IV reiterate the literature reviewed in Chapter II.

Kelly et al. (2021) supported student concerns of marginalization and performative DEI by discussing how PWIs “boast about their racially inclusive student body through pictures in college viewbooks” (p. 203). Institutions of postsecondary education were created in hegemony and lack critical perspectives which excluded voices that were necessary in providing alternative narratives and strategies, expressed as performativity. That system continues to perpetuate exclusion today, causing harm to students, specifically Black women engaged in affinity groups. This study provides an opportunity for PWIs to reconcile the harm by understanding and considering perspectives.

To reaffirm the goal of this study and highlight findings; please *Hear Our Voices* and consider experiences and identified practices to assist in a positive meaning-making experiences for Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations at PWIs with information gathered from their stories. Collins (2000) told a story of a mother and daughter that walked pass a statue depicting a European man who subdued a lion with his bare hands. The little girl said to her mom that that was impossible for this man to defeat a lion with his bare hands. The mother replied by saying the man made the statute. This story understood that those who write the story determine the narrative.

Consistent with the literature on the historical exclusion of Black women in postsecondary education, and as a result of their experiences engaged in an affinity-based group, participants described their group’s relationship with the institution at worst to be
adversarial and hostile and at best ingenuine and performative. They want institutions to hear their voices, understand and respond appropriately to their narrative. Many of this study’s findings were directly aligned with the literature reviewed for this study and previous research, and supported the critical theories used. CRT considers the ways we think about racism, racial hierarchies in determining how benefits and who doesn’t and the relationship of dominance and power. CRT offers insight into race inequality, and BFT offers insights into intersectionality and inequalities of both racism and sexism. Collins (1989) explained that knowledge is power and that the group that creates it holds that power. Knowledge in this study is constructed by the study participants, there is power in their stories.

**Limitations**

Qualitative research is an inductive process that has many complexities. While qualitative research “has a set of interpretive activities, privileges no single methodological practice over another, it has no theory or paradigm that is distinctly its own” (Lee, 2012, p. 404). Therefore, there are limitations in the specificity of research paradigms and methodologies, making qualitative research elusive (Lee, 2012). Limitations with the selected methodologies include the opportunity for information overload, as “gaining in-depth data (thick description) is possible because this often occurs with ease in narrated event” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 466).

Narrative inquiry has the potential to collect too much unrelated information, creating difficulty in sorting for relevancy (Banks, 2009). Additionally, “stories can be difficult to interpret” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 467). To minimize the opportunity for information overload, codes were used to create and organize themes.
excluding information that is not critical or adjacent to the specific research focus. Because “qualitative research is an ‘inductive practice,’ that is, theory emerges from the collected data and not a set hypothesis, analyses can include meticulous and extensive manipulation of data” (Banks, 2009, p. 150).

An additional limitation is that interviewing as a method of data collection relies on self-reporting rather than observation. The participant’s nature of truth and epistemology from the critical paradigm can be flawed due to the oppressive nature of society. This can limit the study by the researcher or participants only seeing barriers and hindering contributions to resolutions. The constructivist paradigm implies that the nature of truth is specific to individuals, this can result in limitations due to difficulty in the ability to identify generalizable themes.

**Recommendation & Implications for Future Research**

This study contributes to existing research as it focuses on a very specific population, which informs practice and future research. All participants experienced systemic oppression in some form leading to a less than positive perception of the institution. All participants discussed their engagement with the affinity-based organization as almost a saving grace yet a sometimes-overwhelming sense of responsibility. In addition to understanding how Black undergraduate women that are engaged in affinity-based organizations perceive institutional support at PWIs (especially when engaged in campus activism), and how said population describe their relationship with such institution, I hoped to unearth new findings that would shape practice of PWI administrators. Participants provided implications for future practice, all of which supported a claim by Anthony et al. (2021), who stated that “it’s time for legislators,
institutional leaders, and K-12 administrators to get serious about targeting resources, closing gaps, and improving opportunities for Black residents” (para. 5).

Administration should understand that “students can’t fight all the battles” (Dr. E. Ortiz, personal communication, June 1, 2023). Therefore, it is extremely important that PWIs implement hiring practices to recruit faculty and staff of color, and also train current white faculty and staff to better understand the importance of racial diversity and practices being more intentionally responsive to the needs of Black women.

De Witte-Stanford (2023) referred to an analogy regarding seed and soil, explaining that if a high-quality seed is placed in inhospitable soil, it will not grow. They went on to say that if that inhospitable soil is “racial, gender, or social class biases or other barriers” making it inhabitable for marginalized students, the “seed will wither” (para. 15). Representation, inclusive and equitable policies and practices and a welcoming campus environment fosters fertile soil. Hurd Anyaso-Nothwestern (2023) proclaimed that “researchers, educators, and policymakers should consider what sorts of systemic changes to the educational environment might provide these students for concrete routes to mobility that are viable for students from their backgrounds” (para. 10). This is true in thinking about not only routes to mobility, but also strategies for inclusive excellence that supports Black women in affinity based organizations.

To this end, stories of students leaving institutions with traumatic experiences, lack of credentials and debt because of the lack of support and inhospitable environments should be further explored. While the next recommendation is not new, there seems to be a disconnect and the need for it to be reiterated in this study. Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations have disadvantageous experiences at PWI.
I encourage future researchers to conduct a comparative analysis on African student organizations and African American student organizations. Much of the literature reviewed for this study is specific to African Americans considering the unique history with slavery in America. While this research did not focus on African student organizations, one participant participated in both BSU and African union and noted differences in level of support and perception. There is also a need to research Black men in affinity-based groups, and outside of athletics.

I also encourage future research to explore mentorship for Black undergraduate women in affinity-based organizations. Going beyond first year experiences, orientation and belonging activities could be facilitated with Black women in affinity-based organizations. Such research could focus on second- and third-year Black women as a lot of efforts are already devoted to first-year students and research has shown that retention generally decreases from the second to the third year (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Further research should be done on engagement of Black male undergraduate students in affinity-based organizations generally, and specifically as support for Black women in said organizations.

Additionally, eight of the nine participants listed other identities including first-gen, Muslim, queer, or mixed ethnicity. More research should be done on the experience of biracial, multiracial, and African (born in Africa or first generation American) women in affinity groups at PWIs. Although some intersections of identity were mentioned, this study focused on those identifying as Black women. This study did not consider cultural differences in Blackness, specifically regarding interactions with the institution. For example, Ida talked about how supportive the institution was towards the African Union,
however, experiences in the Black Student Union were different. Black Student Unions are thought of to be more focused on Blackness from an African American perspective while African unions are focused more on African cultural traditions.

While participants in this study identified as Black, several of them held other ethnic identities that contributed to their experience, unfortunately this was not the focal point of this study. Research should also be done on Black LGBTQ+ folk in affinity-based organizations as their intersecting identities could serve beneficial to the academy. Furthermore, I recommend that PWI institutions of postsecondary education, via administrators, take a hard look at their demographic makeup, policies, and practices and interrupt systemic oppression, and anti-Blackness in any form.

**Conclusion**

Chapter II began by discussing literature on the historical exclusion and oppression of Black students generally, and Black women specifically. Much of the literature found in Chapter II provides concrete evidence to support the experiences of the study participants unearthed in chapter IV which was the reason for this inquiry. Because institutions of postsecondary education were founded in hegemony, lacking critical perspectives and pedagogies, they were created in a way that has excluded Black women. This study confirms my observations experiencing PWIs as a student and as a professional. I’ve witnessed institutions and administrators attempting to silence, gaslight, and exploit the study population through policies, practices, and procedures that hinder at best, and setback at worst the success of this subset of students. De Witte-Stanford (2023) stated that “if colleges don’t offer students adequate opportunities to belong, then just working with students psychologically won’t move the needle-and we
need to create better settings” (para. 2). PWIs must move from transactional to transformational.

While one can argue that things have changed, much has remained the same evident in the storied experiences outlined in Chapter IV. Hearing many of these stories was triggering for me as they resurfaced memories about my own educational journey. Shirley provided stories of when professors would antagonize her by singling her out, calling her the wrong name, and just seemingly being particularly focused on her. She described it as “piling up,” like how the effects of microaggressions are described. What was triggering for me was, even though she didn’t fully articulate how she felt, I remember feeling the exact same way. We are persisting despite the adverse environments and systemic barriers we face. This research is my way of holding institutions accountable for the adverse experiences Black women engaged in affinity-based organizations have had to endure.
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION LETTER
Dear Student,

My name is Keyah (key-a) Levy, I am currently a 3rd year doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin La-Crosse in the Student Affairs Administration and Leadership program. I am looking for ten (10) Black women that attend/attended predominantly white institutions (PWI) to participate in my research study for my dissertation. This study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The research includes one 45-minute interview, and a narrative of your experience as a Black undergraduate woman at a PWI in Midwestern United States.

If you identify with the following, I'd love to have your participation:

- Identify as a Black woman
- Attend/attended a four-year predominantly white institution in Midwestern United States between 2017-2022
- Were/are pursuing your 1st degree (Bachelor’s) at the time of your attendance; undergraduate
- Participated as an active member of an affinity-based organization (Black student union. or multicultural student association)

Interviews will be held virtually via zoom (or other accessible options); they will be video/auto recorded for the purpose of this research. Information will be kept in a secure location, confidentiality is essential, participant identification will not be shared. Recordings are only used for this specific study and will be discarded upon completion of dissertation. Your participation is voluntary, however, students who complete the interview and narrative will receive a $50 Amazon gift card.

Interested parties, please complete the form found here and at the link below:
https://forms.gle/DdKkSQmuCJJ3KvP2A

I will contact selected participants to set up a time for interviews. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Keyah Levy via email at levy1599@uwlax.edu.

With compassion,

Keyah Levy
Ed. D. Candidate
University of Wisconsin La-Crosse
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
**Protocol Title:** Hear our Voices: Supporting Black Undergraduate Women in Affinity-Based Student Organizations at Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education in the Midwestern United States

**Principal Investigator:** Keyah Levy – levy1599@uw lax.edu

**Purpose of Interview**

You are invited to participate in an interview for partial fulfillment of dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership at the University of Wisconsin La-Crosse. The purpose of this interview is to collect qualitative data that contribute to the work being studied. This study aims to provide a student-centered narrative on the perceptions of support of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) for Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations (Black student unions, etc.), and the participant’s meaning making with said institutions.

**Interview Information and Participant Involvement**

I will be conducting one forty-five-minute interview with each study participant. Interviews will be held virtually via zoom; interviews will be video, and audio recorded and transcribed. If follow up is needed, interviewer will reach out to participants for clarification. Additionally, participants will have the option to submit a narrative as an opportunity to provide any information on their experience they deem important to the study and was not collected at the time of the interview.

**Potential Risks**

Because this study does not involve any physical experiments, risks of contamination or adverse health issues are extremely low. However, due to the sensitive nature of
information to be collected, one risk includes the protentional for subjects to be retraumatized by retelling their stories. There is also a low risk of breach of information in the incident the server is hacked or USB with information is lost or stolen. There may be a perceived risk associated in the case of the loss of information and retaliation from the institution if they obtain identifiable participant information.

Confidentiality Statement

All sensitive and identifiable participant information collected will be kept confidential. Sensitive and identifiable information includes but is not limited to participant name, age, and institution affiliation. Narratives of experiences collected for the study will be included in a dissertation and that dissertation will be published publicly. Direct quotes may be used; however, participants’ identity will not be disclosed.

Potential Benefits of Study

The largest benefit of this study is the opportunity to create transformative, systemic change regarding support styles for PWIs resulting from a student-centered narrative. Identifying promising practices that contribute to the positive experience, meaning making, and sense of belonging for the study population is a potential benefit.

Contact Information

If you have questions at any time, you may contact Dr. Tori Svoboda Associate Professor of Student Affairs Administration and chair of the SAA department by email at tsvoboda@uwlax.edu or by phone at 608.785.6759, or Keyah Levy, principal investigator by email at levy1599@uwlax.edu. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the UW La-Crosse Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, 608.785.8044 or irb@uwlax.edu.
PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this interview is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty or withdraw at any time.

__________________________________________________________

CONSENT

I have read the above formation and have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this project.

Participant’s signature: ________________________________

Date: _________

Investigator’s signature: ________________________________

Date: _____
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Protocol Title: Hear our Voices: Supporting Black Undergraduate Women in Affinity-Based Student Organizations at Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education in the Midwestern United States

Principal Investigator: Keyah Levy – levy1599@uwlax.edu

Purpose of Conversation: The purpose of this protocol is to establish a framework for conducting interviews. This protocol includes 6 questions that focus on gaining more information on the meaning making of experience and support for Black undergraduate women engaged in affinity-based organizations at PWIs. The goal is for the questions to elicit stories from interview participants around their perception of institutional support.

Role of Facilitator: The role of the facilitator is to ask questions, listen and provide guidance/prompt to gain as much information possible to answers the research question or problem posed. The first 15 minutes of the interview will collect quantitative data while the rest of the interview will collect qualitative data.

Qualitative Discussion Questions:

1. What went into your college going/choice decision?
2. Please tell me about how prepared you think you were for college.
3. What seemed easy for you in the first year and what did you struggle with?
4. Please tell me about your decision to join an affinity-based organization. What attracted you?
5. How much time do you invest in your organization (meetings, attend events, plan events, serve on executive board, etc.)?
6. Did your engagement in the student organization help with transition, how has/did your involvement in said organization help you with your college journey?
7. What do/did you hope to gain from being in an affinity-based organization?

8. What metrics are being impacted/enhanced (social, mental, physical, emotional, financial, etc.)?

9. What preconceived notions (positive or negative) did you have about student organizations prior to the joining? Have they changed and if so, in what ways?

10. What was/is your experience of engagement between your affinity-based organization and the institution?

11. In what ways do the racial identity of your organization impact the overall relationship with campus (positive and negative)?

12. What is your relationship with your institution, how do you define institutional support or lack thereof?

13. What perceptions do you hold regarding institutional support generally and for your organization specifically?

14. If you had to write a thank you note to your student organization about what aspects of it has impacted you most, what would you say?

15. Please talk about the most impactful social event, program, activity, or opportunity you had with the organization.

16. How were your expectations met? What did you gain from affiliation with the student organization?

17. How have you experienced campus outside of your organization? Please include faculty/staff/administration interactions, climate or incidents of bias experience due to race or ethnicity.
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
HEAR OUR VOICES: SUPPORTING BLACK UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN IN AFFINITY-BASED STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MINDWESTERN UNITED STATES

The purpose of this form is to gather additional participant narrative regarding their relationships with PWIs. Information collected is supplemental to information collected during the interview process. This is an opportunity to provide information on questions that were not asked, or any other relevant narrative contributions participants want to provide. This form is a part data collection for this study.

Pseudonym: __________________________________________________________

Ethnicity and Race:

(E.g. African-American, Black, Jamaican-American, etc.)

Age: ________________________________________________________________

Type of Institution:

(E.g. community college, private/public, liberal arts, etc.)

Location of Institution:

Midwest

(E.g. Midwest, southern, etc.)

Information collected is used only as a part of this study. Participant identity will not be published, if you choose to participate, your responses will remain confidential to any outside parties. Please refer to the IRB consent form for details of how confidentiality measures will be taken.

Use this blank space below to write your narrative/reflection (please attach second sheet if more room is needed)
APPENDIX E

SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHIC
HEAR OUR VOICES

I am looking for Black women to participate in a research study for my dissertation. If you identify with the following, I'd love to have your participation:

• Identify as a Black woman
• Attend/attended a predominantly white institution as an undergraduate in the Midwestern United States between 2017-2022
• Participated as an active member of an affinity-based organization (Black student union or multicultural student association)
• Available for one-to-two (1-2) 45-60 minute interview(s)

Interviews will be held virtually, $50 Amazon gift cards will be provided to selected participants.