INSTITUTIONALLY DESIGNATED SAFE SPACES:
UNDERSTANDING HOW BLACK STUDENTS UTILIZE AND
EXPERIENCE THESE SPACES TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF BELONGING

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experiences of twelve self-identified Black students at Middle State University (Middle State), a predominantly White institution (PWI). This research focused on understanding how institutionally designated safe spaces (IDSS) helped Black students develop a sense of belonging after experiencing a negative campus racial incident (NCRI). Using Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen’s (1999) campus racial climate model as a theoretical framework, this study developed a model to represent how Black students who utilize an IDSS to develop a sense of belonging with the broader campus community do so in concert with their engagement in both the academic and co-curricular realm. This research discovered that though NCRI had an immediate effect on participants, it did not rise to a threshold that would diminish their ability to develop a sense of belonging, nor did it enhance or reduce their level of engagement with the IDSS. Additionally, it was discovered that Black students participating in this study attributed their development of a sense of belonging to the ability of a specific areas (IDSS, curricular, or co-curricular) to meet their individual needs related to belonging.

Keywords: campus racial climate, sense of belonging, safe space, Black students.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This study focused on Black students enrolled at a predominantly White institution (PWI) and their experience with an institutionally designated safe space (IDSS). Specifically, this research explored whether IDSSs help Black students who have experienced a negative campus racial incident (NCRI) foster a sense of belonging with the larger campus community. The term “negative campus racial incident,” is used to refer to any experience a Black student indicates caused them to feel singled out, alienated, discriminated, or prejudiced against on account of their race, as is commonly found within the literature on Black student experiences within predominantly White institutions (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Smith et al., 2007; Wallace & Bell, 1999). The aim of this study was to extend the scholarship on safe spaces and sense of belonging for Black students at PWIs. Additionally, this research sought to add to literature informing student affairs professionals, university administrators, and students about the ways Black students develop a sense of belonging in predominantly White campus environments.

Statement of the problem

Myriad scholars have researched the climate for students of color at PWIs in an attempt to understand how these students interact, cope, and succeed within these environments (e.g., Bacor, 2002; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Grier-Reed, Buckley, & Schuh, 2008; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Patton, 2006; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997). Black students were found to be at a higher risk of withdrawing from PWIs compared to their White peers (Murtagh, Burns, and Schuster, 1999). Though Black students represent approximately 15% of the enrolled college or graduate school population (United States Census Bureau, 2013), the most up-to-date annual report from the American Council on Education’s (ACE) 24th status of minorities in higher
education noted that Black students “had the lowest persistence rates of all racial/ethnic groups” (Ryu, 2010, p. 39).

While there are a multitude of factors that contribute to the problem of persistence for Black college students, such as financial, personal, and even individual motivation (Rhee 2007; Tinto, 1993), the campus racial climate of an institution has a particularly influential effect on how Black students view their campuses (Hurtado et al., 1999; Rankin & Reason, 2005) and decide whether to persist through graduation (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rhee, 2007; Zea et al., 1997). Zea et al. (1997) noted that ethnic minority students are more prone than their White peers to depart the institution on account of negative experiences related to the campus climate. Of the many factors that influence the Black student experience of the campus racial climate, the history of both higher education in general, as well as the way specific institutions have or have not engendered feelings of inclusion for Black students has been and continues to be influential on their persistence decisions (Hurtado et al., 1999).

In brief, the history of Black students in higher education began with an extended period of time when Blacks were prohibited from pursuing advanced learning, primarily because, with few exceptions, higher education was considered a privilege reserved for Whites (Pounds, 1987). Upon their eventual admittance into postsecondary institutions and subsequent enrollment in PWIs (Jackson, 2001), White students and administrators outwardly promoted and behaved in ways that articulated to Black students that they were not welcome (Pratt, 2002; Stikes, 1984). These outward displays of racism, prejudice, and discrimination have been described as leading Black students to feel isolated, unwelcomed, and unvalued at predominantly White institutions (Ballard, 1973; Rogers, 2012; Samuels, 2004). Though these experiences were more readily apparent during the 1960s and 1970s, many Black students continue to experience racism and
prejudice as well as feel unwelcome in predominantly White environments (Chang, 2000; Chang, 2002).

One need only peruse the website of the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, specifically the “Campus Racial Incidents” tab, to read about the myriad documented incidents of racial prejudice that has occurred in recent years on college campuses across the country. In 2010, during African-American History month, Black students at the University of California-San Diego faced racial prejudice that started with a themed party encouraging students to dress in stereotypical “ghetto” apparel, followed by a campus run program broadcasting a racial slur against Black students, and ended with the uncovering of a noose found hanging from a bookcase in the campuses’ main library (Archibold, 2010). More recently, the college president at an institution in Michigan was documented on public record referencing all minority students at his institution as ‘dark ones’ (DeSanits, 2013). At another institution a White female student received campus wide backlash when she wrote a racially insensitive statement on her social media account asking “most of the Black community at Penn State” to stop singing and dancing (Fogarty, 2013).

Though acts of racial insensitivity continue to exist at many PWIs, Black students have still found ways to be successful. Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, and Wilson (1999) found that Black students were more likely to persist at PWIs when the students had significant levels of social support. Scholarship abounds regarding how support from community leaders, fellow students, and their institutions contributes to Black students’ success (e.g., Ballard, 1973; Petereson, et al., 1978; Rogers, 2012; Rojas, 2010; Stikes, 1984; Willie & McCord, 1972). What unites these different support structures is that they allowed Black students to feel comfortable and safe while attending predominantly White campuses that often had hostile racial climates.
(Hefner, 2002; Renn, 2011; Young, 1991; Young & Hannon, 2002). Support has also been manifested in the use of physical spaces, where these different support structures were able to be used as a meeting point. These spaces provided Black students with a physical location wherein they could feel safe and protected from the racism and prejudice they experienced daily (Bok, 2006; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

The physical spaces students relied on to combat the racial climate offered them a place to feel as if they belong on their campuses. However, though these spaces helped Black students feel safe, ACE data suggests that Blacks have not gained any “appreciable progress” (Ryu, 2010, p. xii,) toward being retained through graduation at these or other types of institutions across the country. Though it is false to presume that there is a direct correlation between Black students engaging in safe spaces and retention and graduation rates, some scholarship indicates that having a sense of belonging with the institution and persistence are related for students of color generally, and Black students, specifically (Finn, 1989; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Zea et al., 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) note that sense of belonging is important, as it indicates the level with which a student feels included in their community. Sense of belonging is also important because it is one of the main factors that can impact the likelihood that a student will persist at any given institution, and it is often touted as a shared responsibility of both the institution and the student (Johnson, et al., 2007).

Scholars who research and support the concept of sense of belonging assert that there must be mechanisms in place at PWIs that help Black students persist in spite of negative racial experiences (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Gloria et al., 1999). Based on the literature, the concept of sense of belonging and its potential to influence a student’s decision to withdraw from the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) may serve as one of these processes. However, research is
needed to determine how sense of belonging within a small social environment is related to persistence, especially in instances when students may not feel a sense of belonging with the overall institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This question has not yet been addressed within the literature, and it is important to better understand how IDSSs can help to either foster or further a sense of belonging for Black students and the potential effect this has on their persistence decisions.

**Purpose Statement**

With this study, I sought to further Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) work regarding sense of belonging by specifically examining their assertion that sense of belonging may support the persistence decisions of students when generated within a smaller social sphere. The purpose of this study was to understand whether and how IDSSs helped to foster a sense of belonging with Black students who experienced a negative campus racial incident at a predominantly White institution.

For the purposes of this study, “institutionally designated safe space” referred to the Black Cultural Center that existed at my study site. The Center’s history defined it as an institutional entity that was “created to ‘help alleviate the cultural shock of Black students...who were coming to what was perceived as an alien environment’” (Paul Robeson Cultural Center, 2014, p. 1). This study specifically used a phenomenological and grounded theory methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to examine how Black students interacted within an IDSS upon experiencing a negative campus racial incident and whether doing so helped the students generate a sense of belonging and subsequently either a renewed or continued desire to persist towards graduation. In an attempt to better understand this phenomenon, several research questions guided this study:
Research Questions

1. How do Black college students utilize and experience Institutionally Designated Safe Spaces (IDSS)?

2. How is the engagement of Black students in IDSSs related to their experiences with negative campus racial incidents and sense of belonging?

3. How are the interactions Black students have within IDSSs related to students’ persistence at the institution?

Significance

Although Black students are attending colleges and universities at higher rates than ever before, statistics indicate that Black collegians are not graduating at rates nearly equal to their White peers (Ryu, 2010). Statistics from the past two and a half decades of higher education institutions in the United States indicate that Black student enrollment in higher education is higher than it has ever been (Ryu, 2010); however similar data indicates that Black college student graduation rate is less than 50% and that this rate is about 20% lower than White college students (Anonymous, 2009a). In order to address the gap, scholars have identified ways to further increase the retention and persistence decisions of Black collegians. Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992), in their early research on persistence, noted that institutional researchers and policy makers would be better prepared to identify students who are at high risk of attrition by monitoring factors that focus on students’ intent to persist. While there are myriad factors that contribute to Black college student persistence, one factor has received limited attention: adjustment to the campus environment (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Attention to this factor may suggest some immediate ways to foster persistence for Black college students. Tracey and Sdlacek (1985) offered this same suggestion in their
early work on academic success. They asserted that while Black students are expected to adjust to the school environment after the first year of college, doing so on a predominantly White campus requires Black students to “look for support and [a] sense of belonging on the campus” (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985, p. 409). This study sought to further understand the spaces Black students turn to for support and how they contributed to the development of a sense of belonging with the campus community, ultimately promoting persistence.

Black students have a lot to gain from the findings of this study. Though the phrase “sense of belonging” may be foreign to some students, students are often reported to have the feeling or want to be included, valued, and supported (Allen & Solorzano, 2000; Stikes, 1984). Understanding how Black students develop a sense of belonging at PWIs may offer a way to increase the persistence decisions of Black college students. For Black students, their sense of belonging is often in relation to how they experience the different aspects of what Hurtado et al. (1999) termed the campus racial climate. Black students perceive the campus climate very differently than their White peers (Rankin & Reason, 2005), and experiences of being discriminated against contribute to their feelings of alienation (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). Often, when these students feel alienated and/or discriminated against, particularly at a PWI, the research suggests that they turn to spaces on campus that can provide a sense of comfort, safety, and belonging (Bok, 2006; Patton, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2000). This study sought to draw on this understanding of where these students turned to when they were in need of emotional, racial, or affective support as a means to understand how the spaces these students embraced aided them on their collegiate journey. As there are a number of Black students who are likely aware of these spaces and utilize them as a means to ensure their collegiate success, this study sought to examine their experiences to provide the data necessary to understand how best to support future
Black students who may endure negative campus racial incidents at similar PWIs across the country. It was the goal of this study to rely on the knowledge and lived experiences of these Black students as a means to offer data to administrators who engage this population so that they may better serve them.

This research is also important to institutional administrators who are committed to the retention and persistence of Black collegians. The stories shared by Black collegians will allow institutional administrators to hear whether and how IDSSs help students cope with negative campus racial incidents. Since there are still institutional administrators who are not ready to admit that racism and prejudice exist on their campuses (Chang, 2000), the fact that Black college students still experience acts of racial intolerance during their college tenure is something that benefits from additional scholarly attention. Though numerous studies and anecdotal accounts of successful Black college students who persist through graduation in spite of negative racial incidents exist (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Gloria et al., 1999; Wallace & Bell, 1999), this study sought to further the research on Black college student persistence by suggesting to administrators the importance of finding ways to use institutional resources to foster a sense of belonging for Black students as a new way to address the issue.

Lastly, this study has particular significance for current and future student affairs professionals who work with Black students in IDSSs. A recent debate in the scholarship regarding safe spaces, particularly Black cultural centers, has caused many scholars to weigh in regarding the importance of these spaces to today’s Black college students (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2011; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Renn, 2011). While some scholars question whether these spaces meet the needs of students they were developed for (Renn, 2011) others articulate that these
spaces are necessary because they provide students with a retreat from the historical racial and prejudicial tenets that exist within PWI environments (Patton, 2011; Young & Hannon, 2002). The findings of this study can contribute to this debate by offering further support for the notion that these spaces are important for the continued success of Black students as they help foster a sense of belonging. It is important for student affairs professionals to know that while the success of any student is related to how welcome they feel by their institution’s environment (Johnson et al., 2007), when Black students engage in spaces that support them and offer them the guidance and council they may require to navigate difficult campus climates, these environments also help Black students begin to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of identity with the institution which in turn can lead to a greater chance of persisting (Sedlacek, 1999).

**Definition of Key Terms**

Institutionally Designated Safe Space (IDSS) – The IDSS refers to the Black Cultural Center at Middle State that was formally designated, by the institution, as the entity to help Black students who might experience the general campus climate negatively.

Microaggressions – Microaggressions are daily forms of racism that while perceived as ambiguous are still experienced as hurtful.

Microassaults – Microassaults are described as explicit acts of racism that are verbal or nonverbal attacks intentionally meant to hurt somebody.

Microinsults – Microinsults are described as subtle insults that perpetrators may be unaware of but are apparent to the recipient.

Microinvalidations – Microinvalidations are statements that negate or minimize the feelings or experiences of a person of color.
Negative Campus Racial Incident (NCRI) – A NCRI is described as any experience a Black student encounters which caused them to feel singled out, alienated, discriminated, or prejudiced against on account of their race.

Safe Space – Safe space is defined as a location on campus that provides students with a place they find non-threatening, a place where they feel welcomed, and generally a location that can serve as an asylum from a harsh environment.

Sense of Belonging – Sense of belonging is referred to as the ways students feel valued on campus, feel as if they fit in with the broader campus community, and feel integrated into the social fabric of the institution.

Tokenism – A term coined by Kanter (1977) referring to members of underrepresented groups who are treated as representatives of their underrepresented group, such that they are not treated as individuals, but instead as symbols.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to appropriately understand why Black students might use an institutionally designated safe space (IDSS) in response to experiencing a negative campus racial incident (NCRI), it is important to understand how these students have been and currently are situated in the overall context of higher education as well as why their campus and interpersonal experiences are important. In an effort to present this understanding this chapter presents a broad analysis of the Black student experience in higher education. However, is important to know that much of the literature on the Black student experience in higher education is often referenced in comparison to White peers. As such research often depicts a monolithic view of the experiences of Black students and at times generalizes the behavior of all White students as well. Though the research presented below offers a Black versus White dichotomy in its review, it is presented in this way to appropriately communicate the extant research on the Black student experience in higher education. Following a presentation of the Black student experience in higher education, literature on the concept of sense of belonging generally, and specifically how it relates to the ability for Black students to be successful in higher education is presented. Finally this literature review concludes with an exploration of safe spaces for Black students in higher education along with an exploration of their potential to engender a sense of belonging for students.

Black Student Experience in Higher Education

Blacks have endured a difficult journey in the pursuit for higher education in the United States. In his book on desegregation in higher education, Samuels (2004) writes that “viewed from the perspective of 335 years of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, the tide of American history can be justly interpreted as a tale of [B]lack exclusion from the bounty of America” (p. 60). An earlier author who also focused on desegregation noted that the pursuit of education for
Black students is a tale of slow but persistent dedication over the past century and a half (Meyers, 1989).

Many scholars and researchers agree (e.g., Jackson, 2001; Meyers, 1989; Rogers, 2012; Samuels, 2004; United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1968;) that Brown vs. Board of Education I (1954) and II (1955), as well as the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964), marked a turning point in the pursuit for access to higher education for Black students, particularly by providing access to predominantly White institutions (PWI). However, once access was achieved, students faced problems including institutional and administrative disregard, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and a seeming lack of commitment to Black student success (Anthony, 1968; Ballard, 1973; Fleming, 1984; Pratt, 2002; Rogers, 2012; Stikes, 1984). In order to best understand the Black student experience at PWIs, 5 key areas need to be considered: historical context prior to government desegregation; general campus experience; personal experiences with racism; interpersonal engagement with White peers; and interpersonal engagement with Black peers.

**Historical Context Prior to Government Desegregation**

The story of the Black struggle for education in America dates back to the seventeenth century, when it was illegal in many southern and border states to teach Blacks how to read and write (Jackson, 2001; Myers, 1989). However, struggles that many Black students still endure while pursuing higher education are a result of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and the subsequent way courts across the country would interpret its ruling (Myers, 1989). The decision was based off of Homer Plessy’s purchasing and boarding of a first class train car designated by Louisiana state law as only for Whites (Jackson, 2001). Upon his arrest, citation, fine, and imprisonment, Plessy argued that his rights were being violated because his 7/8 White heritage
should provide him the affordances and privileges of any other member of the White race (Jackson, 2001). The Supreme Court decided that because there were separate but equal accommodations for Blacks available on the train, the state of Louisiana was not in violation of Plessy’s constitutional rights (Jackson, 2001).

This decision sparked the well known “separate but equal” clause that changed the way many educational communities would serve their students (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1968). The clause insinuated that institutions were not required to educate Blacks and Whites within the same setting, as long as appropriately “equal” accommodations were made (Myers, 1989). The Plessy decision also implied that by separating Blacks from Whites, Blacks would be free from prejudicial and vitriolic behaviors of Whites (Samuels, 2004). However, as history would show this presumption was never proven accurate and the years of Jim Crow practices and other prejudicial ideals resulted in Blacks continuing to be the victims of racially motivated discrimination by Whites (Pratt, 2002).

In 1954, nearly a half century after the Plessy decision, the United States Supreme Court ruled, in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education (Brown I), that “racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal and a denial of equal protection of the laws” (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1968, p. 41). Subsequently in 1955, the Supreme court also asserted that “lower courts should be responsible for making sure that school systems begin working towards full compliance with Brown I ‘with all deliberate speed’” (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1968, p. 42). These two decisions signified a pivotal change in the higher education landscape for Blacks. For the first time, PWIs were required to desegregate. Though there were Black students who had attended PWIs throughout the north in the United States, the retention rates of Blacks at these schools was often problematic (Rogers, 2012). As an
example, in the early twentieth century, an institution in upstate New York lost 100% of the entire entering cohort of Black students (Rogers, 2012). The passage of Brown I and Brown II signified that the federal government began taking more of an interest in the success of Black students in higher education, and the subsequent passing of the Civil Rights Act (1964) furthered this notion by threatening to withhold federal monies to institutions and states that continued to discriminate against Blacks (Myers, 1989; Rogers, 2012).

As a result of these policies, Black students had unprecedented means and access to PWIs (Rogers, 2012); however, many colleges and universities made limited attempts to accommodate Black students, make them feel welcome, or help them feel as if they belonged (Ballard, 1973, Myers, 1989; Pratt, 2002; Rogers, 2012). Though the law was that PWIs needed to desegregate, legal mandates did not change the feelings, perspectives, or behaviors of students, faculty, and staff. Historical accounts suggest that in the early stages of desegregation, Black students across the country were treated in hostile ways by their White peers (Rogers, 2012). During the 1950’s and 1960’s, Black students had their personal belongings defaced, their campus living quarters vandalized, hateful and prejudicial language yelled at them and etched into their personal effects (Pratt, 2002). At one university, there was documentation of a Black student’s car being set ablaze in protest (Pratt, 2002; Rogers, 2012). During this era, White students’ reluctant acceptance of Blacks who chose to integrate into PWIs resulted in Black students’ frequent encounters with rejection (Pratt, 2002).

**Experiences of Isolation and Marginalization**

In addition to the racism Black students experienced during the early stages of desegregation, personal feelings of isolation and marginalization proved to be the most common and unifying occurrence in PWIs for this population (Phillips, 2005; Rojas, 2010). Pratt (2002)
suggests that severe levels of ingrained and persistent racism on PWI campuses caused many of
the first Black students to feel isolated. Black students also felt marginalized and isolated for two
additional reasons: (1) the quandary their White peers faced should they choose to interact with
them, and (2) the lack of physical numeric representation of Black students at many PWIs (Pratt,
2002). White students who were caught fraternizing with Black students risked ostracism from
their White peers (Pratt, 2002), thus denying Black students the opportunity to engage across
difference. During these early stages of desegregation Black students also felt especially
marginalized when campuses proved more welcoming to international students than to Blacks
students (Pratt, 2002). Additionally, the paucity of Black students on campus complicated the
quality of life for many Black students. Willie and McCord (1972) asserted that the social life for
Black students on campus was highly influenced by their overall representation because Black
students, similarly to their White counterparts, desired to have close relationships with peers they
could relate to. However, the limited presence of Black students on campuses during this era
furthered Black students’ feeling of being lonely and isolated (Pounds, 1987).

Though the early experiences of isolation and marginalization that Pratt (2002) describes
happened in a time when racial conflict in the country was at its peak (Stikes, 1984; Wells,
1989), more recent research suggests Black students have since continued to feel isolated and
marginalized. In her seminal work comparing the experiences of Black students at predominantly
Black and at predominantly White institutions, Fleming (1984) noted that many of the problems
Black students believed they had were, among other things, a result of feeling isolated. Kraft
(1991) also noted that one of the primary problems Black students reported facing was the
feeling that not only were they not welcome by their White peers, but that often their White peers
did not even acknowledge their existence. Loo and Rolison (1986) found, in their research
investigating the alienation of underrepresented students at a PWI, that the feeling of being socially isolated on campus was a common experience for approximately 37% of the Black and Chicano students in their study (Loo & Rolison, 1986). Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002) found, in their case study looking at the experience of ethnic minorities at a PWI, that when ethnic minority students feel targeted, due to acts of overt racism, not only do they interpret these events as alienating, but they subsequently isolate themselves to escape the offending behavior. One of the major themes that Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) found in their research on Black males was that these students were stereotyped, and as a result, marginalized because of their gender and racial identity. Additionally, the authors found that the participants in their study often experienced their campuses as “outsiders who appeared to be out of place, and they were constantly reminded of this perception by ‘fitting the description’ of an unwanted element” (p. 562, Smith et al., 2007). This supports Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso’s (2000) earlier finding that a Black male in their study often felt isolated because his White peers doubted his intelligence, on account of his race. These feelings of being targeted, marginalized, and ostensibly invisible often encouraged the Black male students in Smith et al.’s study to realize that they were not appreciated or valued in the ways they desired.

McDonald and Vrana (2007) noted that having a positive regard for fellow Black peers helped to combat the troubling campus climate for Black students who feel alienated. However, Fries-Britt (1998) noted that in addition to the traditional feelings of isolation from Whites, high achieving Black students can experience feelings of isolation from members of the Black community as well. Kraft (1991) noted that Black students who were able to and often did develop relationships with their White colleagues ran the risk of being socially ostracized by other Black students. Additionally, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) found that high achieving
Black students expressed feelings of isolation from their Black peers when they portrayed themselves in non-stereotypical ways on campuses in an attempt to fit in with the dominant culture. The concept of having to choose either to assimilate to the dominant White culture or to run the risk of being isolated has caused many Black students anxiety (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

According to Fleming (1984), the problematic cross-racial interactions of Blacks and Whites have always been, and will likely continue to be, a strong characteristic of the American society. However, a more prevalent problem is the inability of Black students and institutional administrators at PWIs to agree on a strategy to help Black students adjust and adapt to the predominantly White institutional culture (Fleming, 1984; Wallace & Bell, 1999). Feelings of isolation and marginalization often occur due to the ways, or lack thereof rather, in which Black students have been and continue to be defined or supported in the mission, policies, or procedures of many institutions (Hughes, Anderson, Canon, Perez, & Moore, 1998; Jones et al., 2002; Stikes, 1984; Phillips, 2005). Willie and McCord (1972) offered that while PWIs have increased the number of Black students that were enrolled, few institutions have recognized that there are fundamental differences between Black and White students that cannot be ignored. Additionally, treating both races as if they were and are similar ignores the historical racial conflicts that have persisted in America for decades (Willie & McCord, 1972). Feagin and Sikes (1995) add that the alienating experience many Black students face in college is due to the lack of systemic change to the moral fiber or culture of the institution. In their study surveying the racial climate on campus between students of color and Whites at a PWI, Pewewardy and Frey (2002) noted that “while predominantly White institutions do not intentionally create unresponsive and unfriendly campus environments, they were not created for students of color”
Villalpando (2004) adds that some institutional policies, such as legacy status in college admission decisions, which are presented as race-neutral may actually perpetuate racism when the policies are viewed from a critical race theory lens.

While the civil rights movement was an important time of progress for the United States as a whole and even more so for helping to include Blacks into the fabric of higher education, Black students would not begin to feel welcomed and supported until their numerical presence began to increase (Rojas, 2010). Though Black students had been voicing concerns about their experiences, the increase in numbers allowed them to profess to administrators that admitting Black students into PWIs and not providing them with the basic needs a college student requires to feel welcomed and accepted was inadequate (Ballard, 1973).

**Personal Experiences with Racism**

Researchers widely suggest that Black students experience their campus environments differently than their White peers (Bacor, 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cueller, 2008; Peterson et al., 1978; Pounds, 1987; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Wallace & Bell, 1999). As a result Black students’ development and experiences at PWIs was often reflective of an experience of marginalization, intolerance, and racism (Jones et al, 2002; Phillips, 2005; Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000; Wright, 1987). For many Black students, entering a PWI meant that their racial identity would be magnified as they recognized that in addition to the substantial physical numbers of White students, the overall campus culture was overwhelmingly White as well (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). According to Feagin and Sikes (1995), Black students frequently encounter incidents of discrimination in dominant White cultures, which may be based on historical tenets of racism (Fleming, 1984). Racism, in
this sense, would be defined as stemming “from the belief that a [person’s] racial designation or ethnic origin causes intellectual or moral inferiority. [The] inferiority of Afro-Americans is a racist belief that has persisted throughout America’s history” (Wells, 1989, p. 33; as cited by Myers, 1989), which is likely why Black students have noted that experiences with racism have been an ongoing and persistent problem (Sedlacek, 1999).

For some black students, racism on PWI campuses may be a part of their daily routine (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Students noted that being called a “nigger” from a passing truck or observing the covert anxiety a White woman might exude as she contemplates whether to risk being confined in an elevator with a Black man are common occurrences (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Smith et al. (2007), in their research, note that incidents of racial profiling of Black students by campus and local police happen frequently across the country. Specifically, the authors offer examples from Black students from the University of California Berkeley, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and the University of Illinois. In all situations, the Black students, primarily men, noted how they were unjustly stopped, told to disband from engaging in social activities with other Black men, or were treated differently when engaging in similar activities that their White colleagues participated in on a frequent basis.

Feagin and Sikes (1995) noted that life for Black students at a PWI is akin to “being at sea in a hostile environment” (p. 97). Schwitzer et al. (1999) also suggest that the White campus experience can be both hostile and uncomfortable for Black students. Fischer (2010), using the national longitudinal survey of freshman, found that Black students reported the highest average perception of a negative campus climate (5.7) compared to their White peers (1.8), on a scale of 0-6. Fischer (2007) notes this is problematic because more negative campus climate experiences lead to a lower level of satisfaction with college.
The negative experiences Black students endured would unfortunately continue, but provide many of them with the resilience they would need to persist. Willie and McCord (1972) discovered that a majority of Black students entering PWIs did not expect to experience the level of prejudice or discrimination they eventually encounter. Feagin and Sikes (1995) offered examples of White students telling racist jokes and stories in the presence of Black students as a means to inflict pain on them. However, Stikes (1984) noted that the eventual success of Black students was their ability to deal with and understand the racism they encountered while finding ways to fight the racist systems they existed within. Though the actions of some White students may have caused some Blacks to lose faith in trusting their White classmates (Willie & McCord, 1972), Black students would ultimately develop strategies that would lead to their academic success.

It is important to note that incidents of racism are not solely student-student based. One student in Davis et al.’s (2004) study noted that she had to leave the classroom when her professor’s comments and behavior became offensive. It also seemed that the university often did not immediately respond to examples of racial epithets being prominently displayed in campus building (Davis et al., 2004). Wright (1987) found that when Black students experienced racist environments, such as these, their overall development was affected due to their perception that their campuses were hostile and unsupportive.

The institutional racism Black students experienced is as important as the prejudicial treatment they endured from their White peers. Yosso and Lopez (2010) note many Black and Latina/o students experience negative racist treatments both on an interpersonal and institutional level. Sedlacek (1999) defines institutional racism as “policies and procedures, either formal or informal that result in negative outcomes for Blacks” (p. 541). For example, it would appear that
though the Brown I and II decisions required campuses to remove discriminatory and prejudicial signs from public places, many institutions kept some posted in places that were away from the public, but still had higher student traffic, such as residence halls (Rogers, 2012). According to Ballard (1973) very few PWIs, during the 1960’s, made any intentional efforts to eliminate racism from their campuses.

The institutional racism Black students have faced can also be linked to the historical understanding that many PWIs were simply not interested in making special arrangements for these students (Ballard, 1973). In his seminal piece, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) noted that some institutions “have had no time to deal with matters which concern the Negro especially” (p. 8). Instead institutions focus acutely on the problems of their primary constituency, White students, and seemingly operate under the assumption that the education of Black students is a secondary thought. Though Woodson’s comments and writings are dated, his sentiments continue to ring true as evidenced by more recent research. For example, Phillips (2005) noted that PWIs primarily focus on and reflect the values and norms of the dominant culture. While some scholars have suggested that this sort of behavior does not make PWIs intentionally racist (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002), it may instead show that some institutional administrators may not be aware of the needs and feelings of Black students (Wallace & Bell, 1999). This lack of awareness by some administrators may reflect why Jones et al. (2002) found that even when Black students experienced overt acts of racism, they did not feel safe to publicly oppose these sorts of incidents on their campus.

According to Wallace and Bell (1999), many who work in higher education might be guilty of being racist by their failure to recognize that not all Black students begin their higher educational journey on equal footing as their White peers. As such, it is important to keep Black
students’ individual and collective history in mind. One way to do this is to provide counseling services that target the specific needs of Black students at PWIs to discuss issues of racism and discrimination (Negga et al., 2007). This is especially important because Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) found that minority status stresses, which they define as the “unique stresses experienced by minority students that heighten feelings of not belonging and interfere with minority students’ effective integration into the university community…[i.e.] experiences with racism” (p. 435), adversely affect the academic achievement of minority students. Services that can help Black students be successful by allowing them to focus on the adjustment process to their White environments as they confront and deal with issues that their White peers rarely have to worry about (i.e. racially motivated incidents) can prove to be especially helpful (Schwitzer et al., 1999; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

**Interpersonal Engagement with White Peers**

Historically, many Blacks did not engage across difference at PWIs, as they lived segregated from their White peers (Rojas, 2010). During the early period of segregation, Pratt (2002) noted that White students at one PWI who were eager to join a Greek student community could potentially find themselves unable to complete the intake process if they were caught socializing with Black students. Stikes (1984) asserted that at many PWIs there was an aura of “superficial harmony between Blacks and Whites, and smoldering hostilities waiting to erupt” (p. 104). These hostilities tie into the focus of Peterson et al.’s (1978) book, *Black Students On White Campuses: The Impacts of Increased Black Enrollments*, which noted that incorporating Black students into higher education, particularly PWIs, has been a complicated matter since its inception.
During the post civil-rights era many campuses were under the false assumption that when Black students arrived onto their campuses, that the Black students would simply integrate into the campus environment (Peterson et al., 1978). Thus, the unique set of personalities, needs, and experiences that Black students brought produced unfavorable reactions by their White peers (Peterson et al., 1978). Over time, even with more modern racial practices and the changing racial composition and structural diversity of many PWIs, the level of cross-racial interaction has not increased to the levels many would deem appropriate (Chavous, 2005). However, this sort of belief has been contradicted in the literature as Schofield and colleagues (2010) suggest, that due to the inherent nature of Black students attending a PWI, Black students are often more likely to have cross-racial friendships, in comparison to their White peers.

In fact, it has been shown that it is important for Blacks to interact across difference; Schwitzer et al. (1999) note that having healthy interpersonal relationships within campus environments are associated with collegiate success. More recently, scholars have asserted that cross-racial interaction among undergraduate students positively affects “intellectual ability, civic interest, and social skills” (Chang et al., 2004, p. 536). Previous research indicated that cross-racial friendships can help to decrease Black students’ perception of racial hostility (Sigelman & Welch, 1993). This is important because a hostile racial climate at an institution can significantly hinder the ability of Black students to foster strong cross-racial interactions (Park, 2012). In their longitudinal study of ethnic attitudes, Levin, van Laar, and Sidanius (2003) found that some campus conditions such as perceptions of discrimination and a lack of institutional support, both of which are intricately connected to the campus climate, often led students to only seek in-group friends. This finding would suggest that when Black students perceive less racial hostility and a significant level of institutional support on their campuses, they may be more...
likely to interact with their White peers and subsequently experience a more positive racial climate.

Research has established a connection between cross racial interaction and Black students’ transitions to campus environments. For Black students these early social experiences and adjustments to a PWI are crucial to their success (Schwitzer et al., 1999), especially since for some Black students matriculating to a PWI is the first time they have ever been in a diverse community (Pounds, 1987). Interestingly, in a study examining the relationships between diverse peers, Locks et al. (2008) found one of the best predictors for cross-racial interaction was for Black students to have already been exposed to residing in a predominantly White environment. Stearns, Buchmann, and Bonneau (2009) also found that when Black students had cross-racial friends prior to entering college, they were more prone to having cross-racial friends by the end of their first year of college as well. Additionally, following up on Locks et al.’s (2008) study, Hall, Cabrera, and Milem (2011) found evidence to support the claim that interaction with diverse peers prior to college translated into more engagement with diverse peers by the end of their second year of college. It is thus apparent that pre-college interactions influence who students interact with, and how Black students will engage with their White peers.

**Interpersonal Engagement with Black Peers**

Sedlacek (1999) noted that racism has historically contributed to the exclusion of Blacks from many predominantly White communities and that as a result, Blacks have sought supportive groups and networks that help them navigate hostile environments. Black students, like any student, want to feel supported and as if they belong (Stikes, 1984; Tatum, 1999). Black students often find that by engaging with fellow Black peers they more easily achieve a genuine sense of community at a PWI (Willie & McCord, 1972). Allen et al. (1991) adds that many
Black students create a space for themselves because of the feeling, whether real or perceived, of being excluded from the institutional community. For example, in a qualitative exploration of the campus experience for high achieving Black students, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) suggest that the support Black students obtain from their Black peers helps in dealing with the dominant culture at PWIs.

This desire for people to seek out others who are like themselves is ubiquitous. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) in their research on how people seek out others like themselves, base their work off of the concept of homophily. Homophily “is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 415). The authors cite the work of Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) in describing the concept of status homophily, which includes demographic markers such as race and ethnicity. This concept and the need Black students have to socialize with similar demographic peers is supported by Sedlacek (1999), who offers that Black students have a need to be engaged in a community that will likely center around race or culture. Similarly, Wallace and Bell (1999) found that in residence halls, Black students had to create spaces for themselves that revolved around their culture out of a need to escape the dominant cultural expressions often experienced in PWI residence halls.

However, these students may find difficulty identifying similar others to interact and socialize with at PWIs with a small number of Black students (Pounds, 1987). Accordingly, Park (2012) suggests that propinquity at PWIs factors most heavily into how students interact with each other. As such, interpersonal relationships are reflective of the groups students spend most of their time with. However, while Black students may exist in campus environments that can foster cross-racial interaction, a likely reason for them not choosing to do so is due to a lack of
trust in their White colleagues (Fleming, 1987; Pounds, 1987; Willie & McCord, 1972). Fleming (1987) suggests that Black students do not seek to intentionally avoid their White peers, but instead they engage with fellow Black students out of a “semiconscious need to protect themselves from insults, ignorance, and prejudice” (p. 20). As a result, Blacks may interact with each other more often than with White peers out of a learned behavior that was established well before they matriculated to college (Hall et al., 2011).

Though history of race relations and the difficulties some Black students may encounter when adjusting to the predominantly White campus climate may serve as the impetus for the lack of cross-racial interactions (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, and Mugenda, 2001; Wallace & Bell, 1999), an alternative explanation may be that the level of support and comfort they experience from interacting with peers who they perceive as similar to them is just more helpful (Guiffrida, 2003). In a qualitative study that focused on Black student organizations and their impact on Black students’ sociocultural experiences at a PWI, Guiffrida (2003) found that Black students often sought out predominantly Black student organizations in response to either the discomfort experienced when attempting to engage with their White peers in a majority White student organization or the general anxiety of persisting in a predominantly White campus environment. Kuh and Love (2000) noted, in their theoretical reasoning for premature departure, that it is important for students to either acclimate to the dominant campus culture or join a subculture that is congruent with the students’ individual beliefs and values. This subculture, Museus (2008) noted, can be ethnic student organizations, which allow Black students to feel supported and accepted. As Antonio (2001) found, in-group friendships are more common for Black students, because it provides them with a level of support they do not receive when interacting across difference.
Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has influenced multiple fields of study including, nursing, psychology, sociology, and higher education (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; McDonald & Vrana, 2007). The roots of sense of belonging as a concept can be traced back to Spady’s (1970) interpretation of Emile Durkheim’s treatise on suicide. Durkheim (1951) asserted that people commit suicide for three primary reasons – egoistic, altruistic, and anomic. Egoistic suicide serves as the precursor for the idea of sense of belonging, as it occurred when there was “a lack of integration of the individual into society” (p.14). Spady (1970) furthered Durkheim’s notion of egoistic suicide by proffering that risks of suicide increase when there is a lack of normative congruence and friendship support. Spady (1970) suggested that individuals who committed social suicide and those who ultimately decided to leave their institution, thus committing academic suicide, were a result of the same cause, “a lack of consistent, intimate interactions with others, holding values and orientations that are dissimilar from those of the general social collectivity, and lacking a sense of compatibility with the immediate social system” (p. 78).

Durkheim’s (1951) understanding of social integration and suicide influenced Spady’s (1970) and many other scholars’ understanding of sense of belonging, suggesting people need to be able to have positive and productive interactions with others if they are to feel as though they belong within their environments. Baumeister and Leary (1995), with a primary background in psychology, extended Spady’s (1970) belonging assertion when they conducted their seminal meta-analysis of belonging literature based on the hypothesis that humans have a fundamental need to “form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). Their work has been significantly influential to scholars...
who agree that belonging is a basic human concept (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Hausmann et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000). Bauemeister and Leary (1995) suggest that human beings are driven by a need to belong which can be seen by their desire to develop and sustain long lasting interpersonal relationships.

Though Baumeister and Leary (1995) considered sense of belonging more holistically, others, like Hagerty et al. (1992) have focused specifically on the benefits of sense of belonging in different fields, such as psychiatric nursing. Hagerty and colleagues (1992), in their work considering the clinical benefits of sense of belonging, assert that sense of belonging is related to “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system” (p. 173). These authors suggested that sense of belonging was primarily related to the ability for individuals to feel as if they were part of the larger community. Though these findings were developed in the clinical psychology realm, they support much of the research that has been completed on students. In his work on how aspects of school effect psychological outcomes for adolescents, Anderman (2002) found that school settings wherein a majority of students feel as if they belong, those who do not share this feeling can experience social rejection. Anderman’s (2002) findings support claims proffered by Baumeister and Leary (1995) who indicated that because of group affinity and belonging, humans can exhibit prejudices against others from different social groups, such as on the basis of race or gender. Although it is important to acknowledge that prejudices are not always outwardly displayed, the feeling of not being welcomed or valued has been shown to impact an individual’s sense of belonging (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Walton and Cohen’s (2007) article detailing Black and White students’ experiences of belonging, found that when Black students in predominantly White environments experience an event that affirms their lack of connection to the greater
community, their sense of belonging is negatively affected. This, some scholars assert, is because schools represent chronically threatening environments that can cause Black students to feel that their sense of belonging is constantly at risk (Cook, Purdi-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012).

As presented above, sense of belonging has been interpreted in the literature in a multitude of ways. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that sense of belonging is a basic human concept, while Hagerty et al. (1992) indicate that sense of belonging is related to how integral a person feels within their larger social system. Though sense of belonging has been discussed in various ways, Bollen and Hoyle’s (1990) assertion that “sense of belonging is fundamental to members’ identification with a group” (p. 484) is why the definition that served to guide this research was that of Hurtado and Carter (1997) who offered that sense of belonging, “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (p. 327). This definition of sense of belonging is important because in addition to focusing on the college community, it extends beyond Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Hagerty et al.’s (1992) definitions to highlight the desire for individuals to identify with a larger community (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). For many students, sense of belonging is important because it influences how they engage in multiple aspects of their college community. Sense of belonging has been shown to play a role in student persistence, how students engage with their peers, as well as how they interact with specific spaces on campus. Therefore, what follows below is an analysis of sense of belonging and how it influences and is influenced by: persistence, engaging with peers, and physical campus space.

**Persistence**

The relationship between sense of belonging and persistence has been well researched (e.g., Finn, 1989; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hausmann,
This relationship is critical to the eventual success of college students. Finn (1989) suggested that students who do not feel as if they belong or feel welcomed at their institution begin a slow process of disengaging, which ultimately results in the student withdrawing. Zepke, Leach, and Prebble (2006) found, in their study aimed at improving student retention, that 41% of their respondents who considered withdrawing cited not feeling as if they belong as one of their primary reasons. Additionally, for those who ultimately did withdraw from the institution, feeling as if they did not belong represented the second highest reason at 18%. According to Rhee (2007), feeling a sense of belonging is as important to student persistence as is having sufficient economic means to finance a degree. Hausmann et al. (2007), in a study specifically researching sense of belonging and persistence for Black and White students found that though their measurements of sense of belonging showed not only significant predictive power of student persistence and institutional commitment, but also that after controlling for institutional commitment, sense of belonging still predicts a students’ initial intention to persist.

The way students engage in both the academic and social realm is critical to their sense of connectedness in the college or university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Goodenow and Grady (1993) note that students who have a high sense of belonging with their school are typically more engaged in their academics as compared to those whose sense of belonging is low. Maestas, Vaquera, and Zehr (2007) note that being both academically and socially integrated into the campus community not only increases a student’s sense of belonging, but also leads to greater student persistence.

Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan (1997) assert that social integration plays a role with sense of belonging and persistence, and that students who are socially integrated into the university are
also more committed to remaining in college. These authors purport that identification with the university is intrinsically connected to participation in school activities, which help students identify with the goals and norms of the institutions. This leads to greater persistence and retention. Zea and colleagues note that feeling unwelcomed and experiencing prejudice in the institutional environment endangers students of color, putting them at a higher risk for withdrawal. In their study of student retention, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) assert that adjusting socially on a campus is as important to persistence and retention as being academically successful. In other words feeling welcomed, respected, and valued, which are the central tenets of sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), are critically related to persistence.

Being academically and socially integrated into the collegiate community, as shown, is important to sense of belonging and persistence, but so is the day-to-day experience. In a study investigating undergraduate non-completion, Yorke (1999) proposed six factors to explain why students depart their institutions early. Of the six factors, two of the top three, “poor quality of the student experience” and “unhappiness with the social environment,” are directly related to sense of belonging (p. 41). Respondents noted that problems with making friends, anxiety about their safety, and feelings of homesickness were the primary reasons they were displeased with their social environment and ultimately left their respective programs. Based on Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) definition of sense of belonging, these students did not feel as if they fit in with the environment or that they were integrated into the larger community.

Engaging with Peers

Some Black students may experience challenges as they strive to develop a sense of belonging in a predominantly White environment (Guiffrida, 2003). Fleming (1984) suggested that some Black students enter college expecting to be socially integrated with the institution
while not facing any kind of prejudice or discrimination. If these expectations are not met, Black students may face frustration, which could contribute to their disengagement from their White peers (Fleming, 1984). Some scholars assert that this Black retreat from Whites is why it is important for some Black students to have positive feelings towards members of their own race, as it affords them the opportunity to engage with like others in order to endure a challenging campus environment (McDonald & Vrana, 2007).

Scholars have offered a variety of approaches on how best to promote a sense of belonging. The two most commonly researched practices are to encourage students of color to develop a sense of belonging by engaging across similarities (Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010; Kuh & Love, 2000), and differences (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, Strayhorn, 2008b). First, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) assert that educational counselors should encourage Black students to join and become active members in Black student organizations, which helps them connect with potential mentors and can provide them with a place to connect with others while being able to be themselves. The ability to be themselves and feel as if they belong allows students the opportunity to become members within a subculture of the institution which, Kuh and Love (2000) assert, is critical in increasing student persistence. Thomas (2002) noted that students from diverse backgrounds are more likely to persist within an institutional environment that mostly closely mirrors their personal value set. Thus, Black students from predominantly homogeneous backgrounds who enter PWIs may develop a sense of belonging and find themselves more supported by engaging solely with like peers. McDonald and Vrana (2007) found that when Black students are less comfortable with their White peers, having a sense of social comfort with fellow Black students encourages adjustment and success in college.
Additionally, DeFour and Hirsch (1990) assert that students who engage in activities outside of the classroom with similar peers are more likely to persist.

As previously noted, some scholars have found that interactions with diverse peers results in a greater sense of belonging for students of color (e.g., Locks, et al., & Oseguera, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, Strayhorn, 2008b). Locks et al. (2008) found that students who spend time having positive interactions with diverse peers had a higher sense of belonging in their second year of college. In his study on predicting sense of belonging for Latino students, Strayhorn (2008b) found that interaction across difference is important because it helps lead to sense of belonging, which can help to increase persistence. In general, however, the overall sentiment is that peer interaction is a precursor to helping students developing a sense of belonging (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010).

Space

Sense of belonging is integrally linked with increasing student persistence, particularly when those students engage with their peers in organizations (Kuh and Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). However, social organizations are not the only place where students have been able to develop a feeling of belonging. Scholarship suggests certain spaces can also help manage the difficult racial terrain, while providing students a place where they feel welcomed and valued (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rogers, 2012; Sotello, 1994).

Residence halls have received a great amount of attention in the area of developing a students’ sense of belonging to the campus community. Scholars have found that residence halls generally, and living learning communities specifically, are capable of fostering a sense of belonging for students (Browne & Minnick, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson, 2012;
Johnson, et al., 2007). Browne and Minnick (2005) note that the nature of living learning communities helps to retain students because of its ability to help build a sense of belonging by encouraging students to develop both personal and social skills. Gilliard (1996) found that residence halls provide students with a feeling of solidarity, which enables some students to connect to the larger campus community. Thus, it would appear that when students are able to build a community within a very small space, they feel encouraged and supported in developing a sense of belonging with the larger university.

Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen (2007) hypothesized that an individual class could become so salient to a student’s experience that it could help foster a sense of belonging with the rest of the collegiate environment. Though the authors were able to show that having a sense of belonging with the class was related to having a sense of belonging with the university, their results were insignificant due to multicollinearity problems when the concepts of social acceptance and professors caring about students were added into the final analyses (Freeman et al., 2007). However, that they were able to find a connection between students experiencing a sense of belonging in the class with the student’s feelings of a sense of belonging with the campus holds promise for the concept that a physical space can contribute to fostering institutional sense of belonging. The premise behind Freeman et al.’s (2007) work was that continual experiences with a common and consistent group of others on a regular basis in a specific environment may provide some students with the comfort they need to feel welcomed into the larger community.

Scholars have noted that the likelihood that students will develop a sense of belonging with the larger environment is often dependent on their own personal desire to belong and fit in with the campus community (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992).
Spady (1971) asserted that “students whose personal attributes are [already] compatible” (p. 42) with the university environment are the ones who are successful and ultimately develop a strong sense of identity with their institution. Pittman (1994) suggests that for Black students to successfully develop a sense of belonging, it is crucial to identify a space where they can interact with like peers outside of the academic environment.

While residence halls and classrooms have been studied previously to consider how Black students develop a sense of belonging in a physical space, both of these environments may prove to be problematic when incidents of prejudice or intolerance occur within these spaces. Gilliard (1996) measured the relationship between sense of belonging and living on campus and found that once student experience measures were entered into the model and the effect of their race-related experiences were taken into the account, “the social benefits associated with living in campus housing become non-significant” (p. 149). Unfortunately, this fits Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) assertion that sense of belonging is significantly reduced when students perceive their campus as unwelcoming.

**Safe Space**

Based upon Gilliard (1996) and Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) findings, Black students’ sense of belonging may be dependent upon the overall campus climate of the institution. Bok (2006) believes that Black students are often more relaxed when they are able to escape daily racial tensions and merely be with one another. Patton (2006) furthers Bok’s point, suggesting that students seek a specific space for this relief as that space allows them to find shelter from harsh racial interactions. These spaces are commonly referred to as “safe spaces.”

Holley and Steiner (2005), define safe space in terms of classroom environments as a “climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express views, and
share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors...[it] refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm” (p.50). Stengel and Weems (2010) note that these spaces are often necessary to help protect individuals from feeling psychologically threatened or socially excluded in their community. In depicting safe spaces for sexual minorities, Goode-Cross and Good (2008) assert that “safe spaces” help to shield individuals from being emotionally assaulted because of their minority group membership status. These authors, in their qualitative study of African American men who have sex with men, suggest that having a safe space for this group of men provides them the opportunity to receive support that they might not otherwise find in the collegiate community (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008). Other interpretations and definitions for safe space include Fox’s (2010) reiteration of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s description that “safe space” is a space wherein LGBT members “are free from homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism” (p.622). Collectively the aforementioned definitions suggest that a safe space represents an asylum from a harsh environment.

Although no specific definition of “safe space” with regards to Black students exists within the literature several scholars have referenced the concept of safe space for Black students by using the term “counter-space” (Allen & Solorzano, 2001; Grier-Reed, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Nunez, 2011; Park, 2012; Patton, 2006; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). Counter-spaces were first defined by Solorzano et al. (2000) as, “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established” (p. 70). These spaces can often be created in offices or organizations devoted to serving Black students, Black Greek letter organizations, and sometimes even in classrooms (Solorzano et al., 2000). Grier-Reed (2010) found, in her qualitative exploration of a Black networking group for undergraduates, that counter-spaces
provide support for Black students who feel that the White campus environment is stressful or hostile. In her study on whether Chicano studies courses could serve as counter-spaces, Nuñez (2011) confirmed her hypothesis by noting that specific courses could help Latino students by providing them with a space to deal with the negative stereotypes and isolation they experience.

Physical spaces may serve an important role for Black students because they offer students opportunities to form non-blood familial relationships with each other, which Herndon and Hirt (2004) term fictive kinship, which is a “network [which] may include neighbors, church members, and friends” (p. 493). The authors note that these relationships are developed as a means of achieving a sense of community among students. Though not blood-related, many of the students value these relationships nearly as much as they would their own family relationships (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Many of these interactions and familial feelings often occur within a specific context. Patton (2006) asserts the “safe spaces” or counter-spaces, which are perceived as a second home and are often instrumental in providing Black students with a sense of comfort, are this context and that at many PWIs these are often the Black Cultural Centers (BCC).

**Black Cultural Centers**

Black cultural centers were established in the late 1960s, often in response to the demands of Black students during the height of the civil rights movement (Patton, 2006; Shuford & Palmer, 2004; Young, 1986, 1991; Young & Hannon, 2002). Often, these students were advocating for a space where they could escape from the perceived alienation, isolation, and hostility they often felt at their predominantly White institutions (Princes, 1994; Renn, 2011; Young, 1991). Young (1986), in one of the earliest writings on BCCs, notes that in addition to the aforementioned reasons, BCCs were also created to help transition Black students into the
collegiate lifestyle. This was accomplished by committing to help Black students attain their educational goals, supporting their pursuit of excellence, and helping to “promote rather than impede [their] process of self-discovery” (p. 19). These ideals, which have been retained in both the literature and the field, are exemplified by new commitments to first and foremost “provide support to underrepresented ethnic groups” (Shuford & Palmer, 2004, p. 227) and “contribute to the identity development and validation” (Akbar, 1993; as cited by Patton & Hannon, 2008, p. 145) of each student. By adhering to these primary mission goals Young (1991) believed that students would come to view the center as a “protective cultural cocoon” (p.50) by which they would be able to escape from the remainder of campus.

In her book *Culture Centers in Higher Education*, Patton (2010) notes that Black Cultural Centers are typically identified as a “home away from home” (p. 65) for many Black students at PWIs. Another common way for students to refer to these centers are as “safe havens” on their campuses (Jones et al., 2002; Jones & Williams, 2006; Patton, 2006; Young, 1986; Young & Hannon, 2002). Though the centers have been charged with being exclusionary and promoting separatist ideals amongst the students (Hefner, 2002; Pittman, 1994; Renn, 2011), scholars such at Patton (2011) suggest that cultural centers help the overall mission of higher education institutions as they present as an ideal space to examine the construct of Whiteness, power, and privilege, especially since this sort of critical thought is least likely to occur elsewhere. This is because counter-spaces, in general, provide underrepresented students with a space to engage in dialogue about their problems on campus (Solorzano et al., 2000) which at a PWI often revolves around challenges they face with their White peers.

In addition to the Black cultural center serving as a space for Black students to seek refuge and find support in their personal development, some scholars even note that these centers
are crucial in helping with the recruitment and retention of students of color (Hefner, 2002; Patton & Hannon, 2008). Patton & Hannon (2008) note that when administrators in admissions offices partner with the cultural center, there are more opportunities to find ways to market the institution, specifically to underrepresented groups. Hefner (2002) offers several anecdotal quotes of Student Affairs administrators, proclaiming that the Black Cultural Center contributes significantly to the overall recruitment of Black students to their respective institutions. Patton (2006) suggests that many students note that they would not have been accepted into the larger community had it not been for the Black cultural center. Black cultural centers serve as the pinnacle of a “safe space” for many Black students.

**Chapter Summary**

The Black student experience in higher education has been shaped by a multitude of factors over the years. The most influential of these was the role the government played in the unintentional furtherance and eventual dissolution of segregationist ideals that existed at some PWIs throughout a little more than the first half of the twentieth century (Meyers, 1989). During this period Black students experienced more frequent and overt acts of prejudice and intolerance which resulted in feelings of isolation (Pratt, 2002). These early incidences of racism combined with institutional disregard to wholly incorporate Blacks into the overall mission of the institution (Stikes, 1984). As Hurtado and Carter (1997) note, feeling welcomed, respected, and valued within a setting engenders feelings belonging. Often, the lack of peer or institutional efforts to help foster a sense of belonging for Blacks students caused many of them to seek out spaces to acquire these feelings as well as serve as a central location wherein they could feel safe from a difficult campus racial climate (Patton, 2006, 2010; Solorzano et al., 2000). Though Black students identified places within the local community to develop feelings of belonging
(Pratt, 2002), the creation of Black cultural centers at PWIs came to serve as the institutional safe haven for these students (Young, 1986) and has continued to serve as the central location at many PWIs where Blacks would no longer feel isolated or alienated as they engage with peers who can understand and relate to daily lived experience (Patton, 2006).
CHAPTER III: FRAMEWORK

As a means to understand the experiences of Black students who attend a predominantly White institution (PWI), the Campus Racial Climate framework, as espoused by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999) guided this research. A further explication of the framework is offered below as well as an in depth look at the scholarship and research that supports the four internal dimensions of this framework within the institutional context, specifically the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate. Lastly, the means by which this framework was used to guide the exploration of this study’s intended population is offered.

Theoretical Framework

Campus racial climate is generally defined as the interactions students, faculty, and administrators have with members of different racial and ethnic groups as well as the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes surrounding the institution’s diversity initiatives (Hurtado et al., 1999). It is important to pay attention to the campus racial climate, particularly the ways in which students interact with diverse others, because doing so has been linked with greater educational benefits for all students (Hurtado et al., 1999; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Although many institutions have historically focused on increasing the numerical diversity on campus as a means to enhance the racial climate, Hurtado and colleagues (1999) espouse that additional elements are important to the development of a racially diverse campus. Campus racial climate is a multidimensional interaction between external factors -- “the influence of governmental policy, programs, and initiatives as well as the impact of sociohistorical forces” (p. 4, Hurtado et al., 1999) -- and the internal institutional context. The internal and external factors act together to shape the campus climate for all members of the
campus community. Examples of the external factors “include changing financial aid policies and programs…and court decisions related to desegregation of high education” (Hurtado et al., 1999, p. 4). While the external forces are important to the overall understanding of a campus racial climate, the scope of this study is guided primarily by Hurtado et al.’s (1999) perspective of the climate on an individual campus which is shaped through the interaction of four distinct internal dimensions: historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate. It is through an examination of the interaction of these four dimensions that this research seeks to understand the experience of Black students who have experienced a negative campus racial incident at a predominantly White institution.

**Historical Legacy of Inclusion/Exclusion**

Acknowledging the long-standing history of inclusion and exclusion in a particular institution is an important step in addressing the campus racial climate (Hutado et al 1999). Harper (2013) asserts that in order for institutions to begin to understand their own history, it is important to have an “understanding [of] ways in which various groups of people were excluded, the conditions under which they were eventually granted access, and myriad ways in which generations of them have been numerically and experientially minoritized” (p. 188). Different policies or institutional practices often plague predominantly White institutions, affecting the perception students have of the college or university (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1999). For example, after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, Black students at Missouri State would have experienced “Delta Sigma Epsilon sorority’s ‘Delta Darkey Minstrel Show’…as one of the biggest events of the year” (Rogers, 2012, p. 26). In 1963, then Governor George Wallace literally blocked the entryway doors at the University of Alabama in an attempt
to prevent the matriculation of the first two Black students to enter the institution (Jackson, 2001). Such examples continue to carry weight and significance years later.

Though public displays of intolerance still persist within higher education (Chang, 2000), it was once the case that some campus environments promoted an unspoken message that Black students were not welcomed, yet actively recruited them to their campuses (Pounds, 1987). This, adversely affected the holistic development of Black students because the mixed perceptions they had of how they were valued within their institution, caused some students to withdraw from college due to feelings of alienation and loneliness (Pounds, 1987). In her research on students of color at predominantly White institutions, Turner (1994) discovered that when institutions are perceived as having a continuous lack of commitment to students of color, both students and advocates of students within local communities advise potential Black applicants against applying to select institutions. Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that the Black undergraduates in their study were easily able to describe how poorly their institution was viewed within the Black community due to their exclusionary admission practices. Institutions that have yet to address their own historical legacy of exclusion are often described by students of color as lonely, unwelcoming, and dissatisfying (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Turner, 1994). Hurtado et al., (1999) assert that these institutions need to intentionally address the policies and practices which only serve the majority population on their campuses, with the hopes that by doing so campuses will improve upon the dimension of historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion.

**Structural Diversity**

Structural diversity refers to the actual number of different racial, ethnic, and gendered minorities on a college campus (Hurtado, et al., 1999). Higher education researchers generally claim that the campus climate on many predominantly White campuses can be improved by
increasing the amount of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in these environments (Chang, 1999; Chang, 2000; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004, Loo & Rolison, 1986). Loo and Rolison (1986) in their study on alienation at a predominantly White institution, upon noticing the discrepancy between the number of students of color in the state in relation to what was represented within the institution of study, suggesting that increasing the number of minority students would actually help provide students with a sense of belonging. Sedlacek (1999) suggests that this increase can provide students of color with a supportive group that can help them confront the potentially hostile campus climate.

While Hurtado et al. (1999) agree that increasing the number of students of color on campus is important for improving the learning environment, paying attention to the structural diversity in relation to the campus climate cannot and should not be the only step towards enhancing the campus racial climate. Institutions which proceed in this manner may fail to take into account additional problems which may affect the collegiate experience for students of color. For example, Park (2012) noted that the structural diversity of a campus is a strong determinant in whether students will engage across racial differences, particularly since historically PWIs that did not enroll a requisite amount of Black students were noted as creating environments that were not conducive to cross-racial interaction (Willie & McCord, 1972). Additionally, there was once a fear that increasing only the structural diversity could create an unfounded fear among White students that increased minority enrollment numbers will disrupt the balance of power on campus (Blumer, 1958). Furthering this line of thought, Blalock (1967) later suggested that increased enrollment numbers would generate more discriminatory behavior from majority students toward students of color than was normally expected, which could have a negative effect on cross-racial interactions. The though aforementioned research presents a
different era of Black student enrollment in higher education, Hurtado (1992) noted and addressed these possibilities and concerns in her early research on campus racial climate asserting that increases in minority student enrollment might account for the racial tension students experience today at these institutions. Her study found that in fact White students’ perception of racial tension was influenced by the increased enrollment of underrepresented students. However, she later explained that this phenomenon may have only been a factor of her study sites rather than a generalizable factor (Hurtado, 1992).

**Psychological Climate**

Though purely increasing the number of students of color can be problematic, doing so while also paying attention to the other dimensions of the campus racial climate framework can produce a more welcoming climate (Hurtado et al., 1999). Paying attention to the psychological climate of an institution is important because it helps address intergroup relations as well as improve racial attitudes among students (Hurtado, et al., 1999). Attending to psychological climate can also improve students’ experiences and outcomes, and is intimately related to the hostility students of color feel on campus as well as their experiences with racism. Hurtado et al. (1999) define the psychological climate as “individuals’ views of group relations, institutional responses to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, and attitudes held toward others from different racial/ethnic backgrounds” (p.25).

Scholars have suggested that for Black students, exposure to prejudice and discrimination affects their commitment to the institution (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn, 1999). Additionally, literature suggests that Black students, and students of color, perceive the campus climate differently than their White peers (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Douglas, 1998; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008; Mack, Tucker,
Archuleta, DeGroot, Hernandez, and Oh Cha, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005). In a multi-campus qualitative study on racial climates, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that the White student leaders they interviewed often incorrectly assumed that students of color on their campuses were as pleased with the campus environment as they were. Ancis et al. (2000) found that Black students consistently reported more negative experiences on their campuses. This is primarily in comparison to their White peers who were often more prone to report less racial tension in the campus environment. These examples provide the impetus for the observation Hurtado et al. (1999) made in their summative look on climate assessments in which they noted that research generally supports the claim that students of color experience their campus environments in very distinct ways.

According to Cabrera and Nora (1994) Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans are more likely to perceive prejudice at their institution than their White peers. These experiences and perceptions of discrimination often cause many Black students to view their overall campus climate as less inclusive and the administration as less supportive (Hughes, Anderson, Cannon, Perez, & Moore, 1998). Perceptions and experiences of discrimination also have a significant effect on Black students within the academic arena. Douglas (1998) notes that constant negative experience with Whites cause many Black students to become overly conscious of their racial identities. This heightened consciousness coupled with racial and ethnic hostility may offer credence to the study by Ancis et al. (2000) which found that Black students experience significant pressure to “conform to stereotypes” (p. 183).

Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that when minority students experienced discrimination in the academic realm, their academic and intellectual development suffered. Davis et al. (2004) note that when faculty who have negative stereotypic biases of students of color engage with
them in the classroom, the students often become demoralized. These discriminatory and
prejudicial experiences combined to negatively affect Black students and subject them to the
effects of stereotype threat, as proffered first by Steele and Aronson (1995). Stereotype threat is
commonly understood as the general threatening feelings that members of a group, for whom a
negative stereotype exists, may have when confronted with the potential of validating a negative
stereotype (e.g. “women are bad in math”) (p. 134, Kit, Tuokko, & Mateer, 2008). As Black
students spend time attempting to dispel stereotypes others may have about them, they
inadvertently take away energy that could otherwise be focused on their academics (Fries-Britt &
Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). In a study looking at successful Black college
students at a PWI and a historically black college or university, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002)
noted that students at the PWI gave examples of how their academic energies were often diverted
by the felt need to educate their White peers as well as represent the Black race. In other
instances, Black students discuss the need to prove their academic capableness in order to battle
stereotypical assumptions faculty and their White peers have about their academic abilities
(Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010).

**Behavioral Climate**

The behavioral climate is described by Hurtado et al. (1999) as “actual reports of general
social interaction, interaction between and among individuals from different racial/ethnic
backgrounds, and the nature of relations between and among groups on campus” (p. 37). It refers
to the frequency and quality of the interactions students have with both racially and ethnically
similar and dissimilar peers. In instances when the behavioral climate helps improve the overall
campus climate, students describe cross-racial interactions as life changing and memorable
(Park, 2012). However, when this is not the case, and students of color experience disrespect or
discrimination, in addition to describing the campus climate as uninviting and unwelcoming, these students are subsequently more likely to withdraw from their institution (Bacor, 2002; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997).

Though moderately dated, D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) found in their study that only 8 Black students out of a total of 73 reported never personally being exposed to negative remarks about Black students on campus. This is in addition to the two-thirds of Black students who reported that they were aware of Black students being mistreated because of their race. In Davis et al.’s (2004) qualitative study, wherein the authors were seeking to offer voice to the experiences of successful Black students at a PWI, they noted that all of their respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of “unfairness, sabotage, and condescension” (p. 427) due to their race. A participant in their study further elaborated and noted that the racist treatment they experience happens on a daily basis. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) noted that Black students are subject to racial and ethnic hostility more than other groups on campus. In a multi-institutional study seeking to identify how students of color and White students perceive the campus climate, Rankin and Reason (2005) found that 25% of all respondents indicated that they had been harassed on their campuses. When broken down by race, the authors discovered that students of color experienced harassment at greater rates compared to their White counterparts.

The harassment Black students experience is not only limited to their fellow peers. Davis (1994) notes that when Black students have negative experience with both majority faculty and peers in the classroom, they look to avoid further cross-racial interactions elsewhere on campus. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) note that some Black students do not engage with majority faculty because the faculty members are perceived as culturally insensitive, as evidenced by
stereotypical comments being made. This, Hurtado et al. (1999) would assert, is problematic, as a lack of interaction across difference is detrimental to improving the campus climate.

The behavioral climate, however, is not only about one-on-one interactions across racial difference. Hurtado et al. (2008) note that it is also about how institutions seek to facilitate interactions and engage students with diversity. According to Chang (2000) institutions need to be intentional in their efforts to combat the pervasive racism that occurs because of the ongoing racism in colleges and universities. Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, and Mugenda, (2001) further note that it is imperative that all major constituents in the university, students included, embrace cultural diversity in the institution in order to facilitate the successful integration of students of color into the campus climate. As such Holmes et al. (2001) created “a conceptual model of student involvement through validation” (p.50) that encourages institutions to foster environments that encourage and support the Black student experiences because it is the responsibility of university administrators to create a validating and supportive community due to the influence the institutional context has on a student’s college experience. Harper and Hurtado (2007) further this point by noting that if institutional leaders continue to espouse their commitment to diversity without fully engaging in practices that critically examine the campus racial climate, then students of color will continue to suffer. Additionally, Chang (2000) notes that higher educational institutions should define the role they will play in helping to shape racial dynamics, particularly since race and improving racial dynamics will remain a critical problem for higher education for the foreseeable future.

**Framework Usage**

In this study, the Campus Racial Climate framework was used to structure the analysis of whether and how institutionally designated safe spaces help to foster a sense of belonging for
Black students who experience a NCRI at their PWI. Specifically, this framework allowed this research to pay particular attention to how the four internal dimensions within the institutional context - historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate – enabled the institutionally designated safe space (IDSS), acting as an entity of the institution, to serve as a mediator for students in helping them develop a sense of belonging at the institution. The framework was used in an attempt to allow this research to suggest reasons Black students, who have experienced NCRI s, seek out the safe space, and perhaps the ways in which the IDSS serves as a tool used by students to help them persist.

Though literature abounds on the racial experiences of Black students (e.g. Allen et al., 1991; Ballard, 1973; Britts, 1974; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Meyers, 1989; Negga et al., 2007; Park, 2012; Peterson et al., 1978; Pratt, 2002; Willie & McCord, 1972) as well as Black student participation in safe spaces (e.g., Allen & Solorzano, 2000; Bok, 2006; Guffrida & Douthit, 2010; Patton, 2006; Patton, 2010; Solorazno et al., 2000; Solarzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002), the campus racial climate framework allowed this research to examine more clearly how the institution’s overall racial climate impacted the experience Black students had within the institutionally designated safe space. As such, the campus racial climate framework was used to guide the analysis of the individual interviews.
CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

This study contributes to the literature on safe spaces and sense of belonging by examining the lived experiences of Black students at a predominantly White institution. Specifically, this study explored how Black students, who have endured a negative campus racial incident, utilized an institutionally designated safe space (IDSS). The research questions proposed to guide this study were:

1. How do Black college students utilize and experience IDSSs?
2. How is the engagement of Black students in IDSSs related to their experiences with negative campus racial incidents and sense of belonging?
3. How are the interactions Black students have within IDSSs related to students’ persistence at the institution?

What follows below is an explanation of the value of using a qualitative research design along with a further explication of the phenomenological research approach that will be used to guide this study. Next, details regarding the site of the study, how participants were selected, how data was gathered, and analyzed are offered. Lastly, information regarding how this research sought to ensure validity as well as the role the researcher is offered.

Qualitative Research

Multiple interpretations of what typifies qualitative research exist within the literature. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) center their interpretation of qualitative research upon the understanding that it is concerned with drawing attention to the experiences people have within their environment. The authors propose that five features—naturalistic, descriptive data, concern with process, inductive, and meaning—comprise how qualitative research is often used to accomplish this task. For instance, descriptive data, such as pictures and words, are gathered and
used to substantiate claims in qualitative methods as they help to illuminate aspects of human behavior that others may take for granted (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Merriam and Associates (2002) offers a similar understanding, suggesting that qualitative research hinges on examining the way individuals construct meaning with the world. While the two aforementioned interpretations of qualitative research offer glimpses of a basic understanding of qualitative research, Creswell’s (2007) definition captures the essence of qualitative research with a more holistic and straightforward description. Creswell writes:

*Qualitative research* begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes (p. 37).

By integrating the three interpretations and definitions, a guiding rationale for using qualitative research method is the ability it offers to gather experiential data from participants’ daily lived experiences.

Scholars who use qualitative research methods have noted that it provides them the ability to access personal stories of their participants (e.g., Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Museus and Quaye (2009) used qualitative inquiry to examine the role culture had on minority students at PWIs. Additionally, Smith et al. (2007) used qualitative analyses to examine the lived experiences of Black male students and subsequently offer a descriptive and narrative based guide for helping to understand how these students experience the campus racial climate at a PWI. Thus, due to the inherent nature of qualitative research as a means to examine the lived
experiences and the use of this method by scholars to examine the personal stories of Black students at PWIs, qualitative research methods will be implemented to provide Black students the opportunity to offer their experiences of how engaging in an IDSS may help foster or further their sense of belonging.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is one of many research approaches used in qualitative methods (Creswell, 2007). With roots emanating from the fields of psychology and philosophy, phenomenology is most closely associated with the work of Edmund Husserl who proffered the concept of phenomenology in the early twentieth century (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Husserl’s (1931) book on the understanding and use of phenomenology as a means to understand what he termed, the “natural world,” highlighted several aspects of phenomenological induction that has persisted through the years. While all of the features of phenomenology warrant merit, two in particular, essence and epoche, continue to influence the work of philosophers and scholars who study and use phenomenology as a means to understand the world.

One of the primary characteristics of phenomenological research is its ability to focus on the essence of the phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2007; Husserl, 1931; Merriam & Associates, 2002; van Manen, 1997). Husserl (1931) describes essence as the experiences, perceptions, and memories that belong to individuals. A more modern conception indicates that phenomenological research seeks to understand the specifics of the phenomenon that make it a unique experience for those who encounter it (van Manen, 1997). The essence, Moustakas (1994) asserts, is derived from understanding the experiences of participants by examining and
reflecting on what and how they experienced the phenomenon. Discovering and articulating the essence of a phenomenon is the ultimate goal of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007).

The process by which researchers engage in phenomenological research is guided by Hursells (1931) concept of epoche. Epoche encourages researchers to remove preconceived notions about what they may uncover prior to engaging in the work (Patton, 2006). It implores phenomenological researchers to avoid making a priori hypotheses and instead enter the study with a blank slate and allow the stories and narratives take what form they must in order to portray its true essence (Moustakas, 1994). By removing preconceived notions of what may transpire, phenomenology guides researchers towards the development of questions that are designed to uncover the meaning and significance of the phenomenon participants are experiencing (van Manen, 1997). This, van Manen (1997) asserts, enables phenomenological researchers the ability to develop a thorough understanding of the phenomenon so that they can react to the needs of those they are engaging with by preparing themselves or others to respond with directed guidance to specific situations.

Van Manen (1997) notes that “phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld…[it] aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). In phenomenological research, evidence to understand these experiences are gathered through first-hand accounts from those who have experienced the specific phenomenon. Therefore, the goal of this study was to use aspects of a phenomenological approach to uncover the essence or essences that help to explain the phenomenon.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a popular approach used in qualitative research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). It gains most of its popularity because it allows researchers the opportunity to inductively
develop a theory from data obtained during research, rather than relying on a pre-existing theory to explain a phenomenon (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Givens, 2008). With roots in sociology, grounded theory is most often associated with the historical work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who proffered that grounded theory was a way to discover theory “from data systematically obtained from social research” (p. 2). Creswell (2007) indicates that grounded theory is a useful research method when no theory to explain the process exists. Since its initial inception in the 1960s, grounded theory has evolved over time, however several features continue to persist and influence the ways current researchers utilize grounded theory. Specifically, three aspects of grounded theory, with slight revisions, have remained consistent over the years; the constant comparative method, coding, and memo writing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007).

One of the most important characteristics of grounded theory is that it encourages researchers to remain in constant contact with their data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This is typically accomplished by collecting and analyzing data simultaneously as a means to compare and identify similarities and differences within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Glaser and Strauss (1967) termed this strategy as the constant comparative method. Specifically they write that this method occurs in four stages: “comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). More recently scholars have interpreted Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) process and assert that the constant comparative method primarily encourages researchers to continue researching and interviewing participants until categories are saturated such that any new information does not offer additional insight (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). In general, the constant comparative method strives to ensure that researchers are indelibly connected to their data.
As part of the constant comparative process, researchers are encouraged to code their data to begin building connections between different aspects of the data that can help them uncover hidden meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), coding happens in the first stage of the constant comparative method as researchers code “each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category” (p. 105). Coding then continues throughout the next two stages as a way to help the researcher identify important categories and narrow down their findings to focus solely on those codes that have become saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Creswell (2007) suggests that coding happens in three stages; open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The first stage, open coding, encourages researchers to label broad concepts or categories while engaging in a detailed reading of their data (Benaquisto, 2008a). In the second stage, axial coding, researchers are encouraged to focus on specific concepts or phrases that are emerging in the data to begin identifying potential relationships within the data (Benaquisto, 2008b). The last stage, selective coding, encourages researchers to connect the categories as a means to begin to develop relationships between the coded categories (Creswell, 2007). Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that the process of coding is designed to further categorize and narrow down the data so that the researcher is able to ultimately present a theory that is grounded in research that helps to explain the phenomenon of study.

The next major feature of grounded theory that has persisted through the years is the use of memo writing throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). Memo writing is defined as “the act of recording reflective notes about what the researcher...is learning from the data...They are notes by the researcher to herself or himself about some hypothesis regarding a category or property and especially relationships between categories” (Groenwald,
Glaser and Straus (1967) suggested that the process of memo writing allows researchers the opportunity to immediately illustrate ideas about concepts or emerging themes as well as serving to help researchers generate their grounded theory.

Maxwell (2005) notes that grounded theory is “theory that is inductively developed during a study...and in constant interaction with the data from that study” (p. 42). In grounded theory research, a theory is developed as a means to offer a process by which a shared phenomenon could be understood. Therefore, the goal of this study was to use aspects of a grounded theory approach to develop a process that helped explain how safe spaces on predominantly White campuses helped Black students developed a sense of belonging.

**Methods**

**Site**

This study was conducted at Middle State University (Middle State). Middle State is a nationally renowned university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States and receives both global and national rankings for the institution as well as the varying colleges and departments that exist within it (Penn State, 2014b). Founded in 1855, Middle State has strong agricultural roots and would eventually become the state’s land grant institution during the 1880’s (Penn State, 2014a).

Middle State as an institution is geographically dispersed across the state and is comprised of over twenty campuses and 100,000 students (Penn State, 2014c). This study’s attention focused specifically on the central campus location which, according to National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2014), in the fall of 2012 enrolled over 40,000 students. The NCES website indicated that the ethnic breakdown for the central campus, in the Fall of 2013, enrolled an undergraduate population which was nearly 72% (71.9%) White, while Black
students represented less than 5% (4.3%) of the same student population. In raw numbers, this indicated that out of over 40,000 undergraduate students, a little more than 1,700 of them self reported as being Black.

Given the support over the years Middle State had shown for Black students at its central campus location, this site presented as an ideal location to understand the lived experiences of Black students who seek out specific locations for support upon experiencing a negative campus racial incident. Middle State situated itself as an institution that had been well ahead of the national curve for the support of Black students. Middle State admitted its first Black student, Calvin H. Waller, in 1899, who would graduate and become Middle State’s first Black alumn in 1905 (Blackhistory, 2014). Thirty years later, in 1929, Middle State would admit its first Black woman, Mildred Bunton, who would become Middle State’s first Black female graduate in 1932 (Blackhistory, 2014). Middle State also hosted a number of important Black public figures over the years including: Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Muhammad Ali, and President Barack Obama (Blackhistory, 2014). Additionally, with the recording of the first Black Cultural Center being established in 1967 at Rutgers University (Patton, 2010), the creation of Middle State’s Paul Robeson Cultural Center in 1972 (Blackhistory, 2014) situated Middle State as part of the earliest trends to establish Black Cultural Centers on predominantly White campuses.

Middle State’s central campus presented itself as an ideal location to conduct this research because of the knowledge I had with the institution and the Black Cultural Center. Though I never worked directly with the Cultural Center or the students who utilized it, I was aware of its intended purpose as well as the support it purported to offer to Black students at Middle State. While working at Middle State, the Cultural Center was always presented as one of
the primary spaces on campus that supported Black students. It is because of this level of support that this location presented itself as the ideal location wherein Black students may seek out if they were to experience a negative campus racial incident.

**Data Collection Procedures**

This study sought to identify ten to fifteen Black students to participate in this study. Thomas et al. (2007) noted that in a phenomenological study, the actual number of participants is often not known. However, research has suggested that as little as six and as many as twelve participants are all that is needed for data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Data saturation, Glasser and Strauss (1967) define, is the point in which “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the research becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated” (p.61). Therefore, it was the goal of this study to begin by soliciting participation from at least ten Black students and to continue to the maximum of fifteen until the thematic representation and overall essence of the phenomenon had become saturated.

For the purposes of this study Black students were considered eligible to participate if they: 1) self identified as a Black student; 2) were a traditional aged college student (i.e., 17-24 years of age); 3) were enrolled as a full time student, such that they had a course load of 12 or more credit hours; 4) engaged in the Cultural Center on a regular occurrence throughout the course of the semester (i.e., visited the center two or more separate days per week); and 5) had experienced a negative campus racial incident, as was previously defined. The final sample for this study was comprised of 6 men and 6 women, representing all undergraduate class years (1 first-year student, 1 sophomore, 4 juniors, and 6 seniors). Participants’ ages ranged from 18-24, with an average of 21 years of age.
Prior to recruiting Black students, the researcher completed the required training for Social and Behavioral Human Subjects Research and subsequently sought the approval of Middle State’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research. After receiving approval from Middle State’s IRB, the researcher implemented several recruiting strategies to identify Black students who fit the aforementioned criteria. The first strategy utilized was a purposive sampling strategy that allowed me to target specific students who fit the eligibility criteria. Purposive sampling has been offered as a way to achieve appropriate representation of individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). This strategy occurred by first contacting the professional staff in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center to inform them of the study and to receive their permission and support to conduct this research. Upon approval from the staff, the researcher requested from them the names and email addresses for Black students who met the aforementioned criteria for participation in this study. In addition to requesting information, the researcher also asked the staff to send out an email inviting students who utilized the Cultural Center to participate in the study. Due to the number of eligible participants that were obtained with the help of the staff, a snowball sampling technique was also employed. Snowball sampling generally utilizes the knowledge and social capital of those who have already participated in the research as a way to recruit additional participants, who they feel, might also meet the eligibility criteria (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such a number of participants were recruited through the snowball sampling strategy. Lastly, the researcher personally reached out to Black students whose organizations were situated within the Cultural Center to inquire whether they or other members of their organizations were interested and willing to participate in this study.
An email invitation was extended to all potential student participants (see Appendix A). Upon a student’s agreement and subsequent participation in this study, they were provided with a $10 campus dining gift card to be used at a number of campus eateries at Middle State. During the conversation, students were provided a brief demographic survey to fill out that was used to collect general information such as age, class year standing, social network, and other potentially useful information (see Appendix B). Once students completed the demographic survey, students were asked a number of semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix C). Semi-structured questions are being used because they provide the researcher the opportunity, as Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) note, to gather depth and detail to some of the responses participants might offer. As a result, and as is typical in qualitative research, the information gathered by way of the narrative stories of the participants served as the data for this research. The average time it took students to fill out the demographic questionnaire and respond to all of the semi-structured questions was approximately 80 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to accurately capture the narratives of each participant.

**Maintaining confidentiality.** As a means to maintain the confidentiality of the participants of this study, several methods were employed to ensure student identities would remain anonymous. First, all of the digital recordings and transcriptions were maintained on a secured drive to ensure only the primary researcher had access to the information. Next, students were provided with pseudonyms that were used when analyzing and reporting data. Additionally, other identifiable information that could lead to the recognition of a particular student such as individual executive positions in campus organizations, specific future goal aspirations, and others were removed or provided with a pseudonym to ensure the privacy of the students.
Data Analysis

While scholars (e.g. Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Associates, 2002) offer a variety of techniques to use when conducting qualitative research, such as narrative research, ethnographic research, or case study research, this study relied on the use of phenomenology and grounded theory to inform its work. These two qualitative methods were combined as a way to fit the needs of this study. This approach was used because, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest, scholars should be flexible in their use of qualitative analytical tools as they are extensions of the researcher’s abilities. Therefore a blend of analytical strategies from both phenomenology and grounded theory were used to analyze the data in this research.

Phenomenological research aims to uncover the essence of a specific phenomenon (Husserl, 1931). However, before phenomenological researchers can begin this process, Van Manen (1997) asserts that researchers must begin by “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world” (p. 30). In following this assertion, this research began by first identifying a specific phenomenon of interest to the Principal Investigator (PI). The study of how Black students use IDSSs and how their experiences within the IDSS influence their sense of belonging served as the phenomenon of interest in this study.

One of the main tenets of phenomenological data analysis requires researchers enter their study without prejudices or expectations of what may occur (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). However, though entering into research with a blank slate is ideal in phenomenological research, other scholars have indicated that doing so is impossible because researchers are often unaware of the unconscious biases they bring into their research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, as the PI entered into the data analysis, he acknowledged his biases and experiences as a Black man who had experienced NCRIIs while enrolled at a predominantly White institution.
The PI recognized that these biases influenced his desire to engage in this work as well as his preconceptions about where Black students went for support at Middle State University. As a means to counteract his biases in analyzing the data, the PI relied on the practice of memo writing to ensure that his analyses were focused on what he was observing versus what he wanted to find. Given (2008) noted that writing memos helps add to the credibility of the research being conducted by ensuring that the researcher is rooted in their data.

Following acknowledging his bias, the data analysis proceeded by utilizing the practice of coding, as suggested in grounded theory. It is important to note that this research did not adhere to the constant comparative method that is typically found in grounded theory work (Creswell, 2007), but instead relied on select aspects related to the data analysis used in grounded theory. One of the primary values of the constant comparative method is the ability to help the researcher become saturated in their data. As this is a shared desire of both phenomenology and grounded theory, the PI continued interviewing participants until data saturation was achieved.

Another value of the constant comparative method is the ability to generate codes and themes that emerge from the data. Because this study used Hurtado et al.’s (1999) four internal components of the campus racial climate-historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate-as a means to help determine what statements might help illuminate the phenomenon in question codes that were developed were strongly influenced by concepts related to the campus racial climate framework. Additionally, because this research considered how Black students developed sense of belonging and considered their ability to persist, codes focused on these aspects of the narratives were also given extra attention.
As a means to stay connected with the data the PI read through each narrative multiple times. While initially reading through the narratives, themes and concepts related to the campus racial climate, sense of belonging, and persistence that emerged in each student’s narrative were written down to determine if the theme or concept was something shared by all participants. Following Creswell’s (2007) assertion, all significant statements of a particular theme were grouped together as a way to help further illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. Van Manen (1997) notes that though theme generation is often misunderstood as merely a frequency count of the occurrences of selected words or descriptions in text; themes actually help to describe and get at the essence of the phenomenon of study. These grouped themes and concepts became the codes that the PI used to analyze the data. After a list of codes was created, a codebook was generated as a means to consistently categorize participant narratives during the coding process. After coding each narrative, memos were written as a way to begin considering shared themes and experiences that would help inform the development of the grounded theory. This process was completed twice, such that the data was coded two times and two sets of memos for each narrative were written. The themes generated from the coding process and the memo writing helped explicate how Black students who experienced a negative campus racial incident utilized the IDSS.

Upon completion of the coding and memo writing process, preliminary findings were drafted and an initial theory was developed based on the emerging themes. The theory developed attempted to provide a framework to understand participant experiences related to their development of a sense of belonging. This concept was subsequently discussed with faculty and participants and subsequently revised to present a model that suggests how Black students develop a sense of belonging at a PWI.
Ensuring Trustworthiness

As a qualitative study, the question of trustworthiness of the data and the analysis warrants some initial concern. Merriam and Associates (2002) notes that qualitative researchers faces difficulty ensuring trustworthiness because the data that is gathered and presented is an analysis of another person’s interpretation of an experienced phenomenon. It is because of this that scholars have offered strategies to implement to help ensure trustworthiness. The first strategy used in this research was the verbatim transcriptions of each interview. Maxwell (2005) comments that this form of rich data collection helps provide a complete picture of what was discussed. During the course of the interviews the PI digitally recorded the conversations so that the interviews could be transcribed word for word to help ensure that he was able to accurately capture the experiences of each participant.

A second strategy that was used to help provide trustworthiness was member checking or respondent validation (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam & Associates, 2002). This strategy relies on researchers sharing their preliminary findings with research participants to ensure they are accurately representing their words, experiences, and ultimately the essence of their lived experience. The PI used this member checking strategy after transcribing the data and drafting some preliminary findings. Early in the fall 2014 semester an email invitation was extended to all research participants inviting them to review the transcriptions as well as my initial reflections and summary of their experiences. At that point, participants were provided the option to modify, clarify, or delete aspects of their interview transcripts to ensure that the PI accurately captured their voices and experiences. This member checking strategy was used again in the development of the model to explain the shared phenomenon. The PI reached out specifically to participants who, during the previous member checking stage, expressed an interest in viewing the emerging
concept. Research participants were invited to offer any suggestions that might help add clarity to the theory to ensure it accurately represented their lived experiences.

A third strategy that was used to help provide trustworthiness was searching for and acknowledging of negative instances within the data (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). In this form of validation the researcher is encouraged to revise thoughts about an emerging theme until all cases fit (Creswell, 2007). This strategy was primarily used in the development of the theory to explain how Black students develop a sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution. Initially eight of the twelve participants fit the theory while the remaining four participants were perceived to be outliers. However, by adhering to this validation strategy, the data was further analyzed and outliers were able to be included as they helped add an additional layer to the model.

**Researcher’s Role**

Before I began to engage in this work, I believed it was important to acknowledge the potential biases and lack of objectivity I may bring in to this work. Studying how Black students experience and utilize IDSSs within predominantly White campus environments is something that I, as a Black student affairs practitioner, believe to be extremely important to understand. As a former full-time employee in student affairs, it was often difficult for me to interact with Black undergraduates who struggled to call the campus their home. They would often confide to me that they did not feel as if they belonged, were a part of the campus community, or as if the university cared about them.

These conversations, in conjunction with some later acquired academic knowledge about creating a welcoming environment in one’s office, encouraged me to convert my work space into a space where Black students could feel comfortable, safe, and know that there was at least one
person at the institution that cared about them. In my office students laughed, cried, and vented about their feelings and frustrations concerning their experience at a PWI. However, though many of the students lamented different aspects of their experience, many if not most of them continued to persist through graduation. While I did not know if my individual efforts had any effect on their decision to persist, I often wondered about the many Black students who sought out other spaces on campus that provided them with the necessary space to feel welcomed and comfortable.

As I have come to learn that the educational environment at PWIs for many Black students is sometimes riddled with prejudice and discrimination, I have often wondered how those students overcame these experiences and what space, if any, they sought out for help with this concern. As such, my research was driven off of both my personal and professional desire to understand how the spaces administrators create for Black students on campus aid them in their educational journey by helping to either foster or further their sense of belonging toward the campus community. Though I have a personal belief that many PWI administrators offer the IDSS as a way to placate the Black community, for both current and former students, my hope was that the data revealed that students viewed the IDSS as a place they called their own.
Chapter V: FINDINGS

The three research questions that guided this study were: 1) how do Black college students utilize and experience institutionally designated safe spaces? 2) how is the engagement of Black students in institutionally designated safe spaces related to their experiences with negative campus racial incidents and sense of belonging? And, 3) how are the interactions Black students have within the institutionally designated safe spaces related to students’ persistence at the institution? The following chapter is divided by the research question. Data from student voices and narratives have been analyzed and are used to explicate each question, as well as provide support for the findings. However, it should be noted that question 3 was dropped from this findings analysis due to insufficient data.

The Use of and Experience in Institutionally Designated Safe Spaces

Participants described a number of ways in which they both utilized and experienced the institutionally designated safe space (IDSS). Examples ranged from using it as a space to study, work, and nap, to using it as a place for their student organizations to meet and sell tickets for programs and events. While students offered a wide range of specific uses, several consistent themes emerged reflecting how they experienced the space. The first theme was that the IDSS was a safe space. Students shared that the IDSS was an environment where they felt comfortable, reminded them of home, and provided them with a space where they could be themselves. The second theme that emerged was that the IDSS was the primary location on campus where Black students congregated with one another. The last theme that emerged was that the IDSS was a space that allowed students to engage in both casual and critical conversations around various topics and not worry that their opinions or words would be misconstrued. What follows below is an exploration of these themes with select narratives highlighting how students discussed them.
Safe Space

Participants used a number of different words and phrases to describe the IDSS on campus. One of the most common was the term “safe space.” For example, Janet noted that the IDSS was a “safe space for minorities in general,” and did a great job at making the campus feel smaller, more comfortable, and like home. Clark described the IDSS as the place for students to socialize; specifically he said it was a “safe space to just chill out.”

Other participants provided more detail for why the IDSS was a “safe space.” Students like Diego articulated that for him it was a “home away from home.” He noted that since he is over 1,000 miles away from his home, he does not have the opportunity to travel home every weekend to be with his family. The IDSS became a second family for him and provided him with the encouragement he needed to be successful. The notion that the IDSS served as a surrogate family was something another participant expressed, as well. Vincent, whose hometown was less than 100 miles away, described the IDSS as a “family away from [his] family.” It would appear that for many students the IDSS was both utilized and experienced as a safe space because of the feeling it engendered. Particularly for Diego and Vincent the IDSS reminded them of home, family, and a sense of comfort.

In addition to providing feelings of familiarity some students also stated that the IDSS was a safe space because it represented an environment where they could be themselves. This was expressed best by Diego when he said:

You don’t have to worry about how you’re going to be perceived or how you’re going to be received. It’s, it’s a lot of you know multicultural students you know who just want to breathe you know. Not being surrounded by a sea of White and have to feel like they’re drowning.
Diego’s notion that the IDSS was a place where multicultural students do not have to feel confined or restricted suggests that in other locations on campus some students do not feel this way. This feeling is something Marilyn elaborated on when she described the IDSS as “freedom.” She noted the due to her level of comfort within the IDSS, she felt she could say what she wanted and not feel judged. This, she pointed out, was not the case in other spaces on campus she was “not familiar with.” According to these participants the IDSS is perceived as a safe space because it provides them with the same notion of familiarity other students spoke about, but also with the “freedom” to be a “multicultural student” in an environment they feel is not always as supportive in this regard. It would appear that notion that the IDSS is a safe space revolves around the concept that it provides Black students with an escape from areas on campus they may not feel completely comfortable with.

The concept of the IDSS being utilized and experienced as an escape was spoken about using the term “safe haven.” Olivia noted that the IDSS was a “safe haven...on campus” because it represented an environment where Black students could gather and convene outside of their White peers. Olivia’s comments highlight Marilyn and Diego’s sentiments regarding their experiences in a predominantly White environment. This feeling of needing a “safe haven” on campus may be why Amber offered that the IDSS was the “chill place where you go when you [want to] see people that look like you.” Amber offered this sentiment particularly in comparison to her experience in the campus student union, where the IDSS was housed. She noted that in student union “it’s loud, it’s noisy...It’s just like too much going on at one time for some people.” Other participants, such as Clark, who also compared the IDSS with his overall experience of the student union, added that the IDSS is “quieter than the outside” student union. For Janet the IDSS was a “like a quiet getaway” inside the student union. These selection of student narratives
suggested that for many participants the IDSS was experienced and utilized as a safe space in two primary ways; it provided them with an environment where they could engage primarily with fellow Black peers, and it provided them a space away from the noise of the student union.

Overall the student narratives primarily portray the IDSS as a safe space because it provided them with a retreat. It offered students a quiet respite from the loud and for some, overwhelming, nature of campus. In doing so the IDSS provided students with a safe space that was more personal and intimate. Angelique suggested this when she said “it can be an intimate spot if you want it to be.” It is likely this ability to have a space at Middle State that was smaller, quieter, and more intimate, in a campus environment that did not regularly afford them this opportunity that caused participants to express that the IDSS was above all a safe space for them. It allowed them the opportunity to engage with racially and ethnically similar peers, it provided them with a retreat from the White campus environment, and it engendered in some students a feeling of familiarity.

Black Student Hangout

Participants utilized the IDSS as a location to congregate and socialize with their peers. For participants, the IDSS was the place they went when they wanted to hangout, relax, and socialize with other Black students. As such, for Clark, the IDSS was “the socialize spot.” Janet noted that the IDSS “is like the Black hangout.” She said that on any given day, especially between the hours of 12:00 pm and 2:00 pm “it’s a party. Like everyone’s sitting there and everyone might have their laptops open but nobody’s doing work.” Other participants, like Eva, noted that she knows she can always go to the IDSS to relax and meet up with others. She said “if I just want to hang out and talk to some of the other people I know in other orgs I know to go to the [IDSS at] 12:00 pm in the [student union]. Just go in there, hang out.”
Some participants noted that they routinely checked inside the IDSS to see who among their friends were present, because they knew that at some point during the day their friends would return to the space. Levin provided the best example of this behavior when he said “I peek in there to see if somebody I know is in there. Like, oh man it’s empty, everybody must be at class...I should probably come back up at 11:00 am.” Levin’s comment suggests that he and other Black students who use the IDSS have set routines when they meet up with one another and can anticipate when they will be able to socialize with their peers. Other participants who also suggested that they had routines offered that they expected to spend lengthy breaks either after or in between class within the space. Amber said

I think this year probably I’ll, I’ll hang out in the [IDSS] more probably ‘cause I have more time like in between breaks and stuff...I just go in there typically for at least maybe an hour or two a day like between classes or like when I’m not doing anything. It’s like I might as well go to the [IDSS].

While Amber utilized the space to hang out, others like Vincent suggested that being in the IDSS provided him with a space to stay focused enough to complete his academic work. Vincent said that the IDSS “started out as just a place for me to be in between my classes just because I don’t really get work done in my room.” He admitted that because of his continued involvement with some of the programs and initiatives offered by the IDSS that he eventually found himself “in there every day or every other day in between [his] classes” because it was a great place for him to interact with his friends. Marilyn expressed this same sentiment and said “I’ll go to the [IDSS] most time[s] because I can get work done or I can see a couple of my friends before classes.”

The narratives of Marilyn, Vincent, and others suggest that the IDSS was seen as a hub for Black student interaction. Levin offered that the IDSS is where “Black people meet dot com
... it’s like you go in there and it’s like literally every demographic of Black you can find.” Eva indicated that she perceived the IDSS as a “community oriented” environment that provided Black students the opportunity to engage with each other. As such participants seem to agree that the IDSS is a central hub for them to meet and engage with their Black peers.

Participants also noted that the IDSS was a place where Black students spent a lot of time during the day. Rashad shared that his constant presence in the space had become a running joke among his peers, who teased him that he was the living equivalent to the artistic bust of the IDSS’s namesake that sits at the space’s entrance. Students engaging in the space as often as Rashad shared similar sentiments. Angelique shared, “well I’m a regular...you know you become a regular when people say oh I know you from, I find you in here.” For both Rashad and Angelique, their frequent interactions within the space caused their peers to associate each of them as being a permanent fixture within the environment. For other students, spending time within the space was just a part of their daily routine. Levin shared, “a day don’t go by where I can’t, it’s like I almost have to stop in [the IDSS]...one day I caught myself...I wasn’t feeling well but like I got dressed and I went to the [IDSS].”

Several other students expressed a similar sentiment suggesting that the IDSS serves as a Black student hangout because it provides these students the ability to connect with their peers through frequent interactions. Visiting the space provided an opportunity to consistently see similar faces. Tayon shared that “you don’t really see like too many like new faces...usually it’s like the same group of people that comes in and stays there all day.” Vincent added, “you’ll pretty much see the same people every day, you know, either in there doing work, or just hanging out in between their classes.” Similar to Levin’s earlier statement shared earlier, Amber asserted that many students who engaged in the space did so, on routine schedules.
The IDSS provided Black students with an opportunity to congregate, socialize, and be in each other’s company. It allowed participants the ability to develop close, personal, and familiar relationships with their peers. This familiarity and ability to have constant and positive social interactions with their peers caused students to feel a sense of belonging within the space. Eva explained that being in the space created a feeling that even though students may not have had the opportunity to meet one another, there was still a sense of familiarity. She said:

I feel like I know pretty much anyone that’s in there. Like even if I’m not with my close, close friends I’ll just bring my lunch in there and just go sit and eat and talk and I’ll meet somebody new. But it won’t feel like they’re somebody new. It’s probably someone who’s in an org and I didn’t know their name. They didn’t know mine. But we knew who we were.

This was an important feeling for Eva because it suggests that the IDSS engenders a feeling of familiarity for students such that they can feel comfortable engaging with others who utilize the IDSS. Eva noted that the feeling she had within the IDSS was in stark contrast to her sense of comfort in her academic college’s office, where she did not feel comfortable. In her academic setting she feels as if she is a stranger, but when she enters the IDSS, she feels as if she is “part of the family.” The constant engagement students like Eva had within the IDSS allowed for her to have a place on campus she could feel as if she was known.

In general, the participants noted that they rely and utilize the IDSS as a place to convene with their peers, hang out, get work done, or as some like Marilyn noted, “sometimes even catch a nap.” Based on participant narratives, the IDSS was used as a meeting ground for Black students to convene in a central location. It was the space they actively sought when attempting to find their Black peers. It was the space where they did not have to worry about being a
stranger, being unrecognized or unknown. It was the space they used to catch up or get ahead on some work. And, while participants such as Janet noted that it is important for students to “monitor how much time you spend in the [IDSS]” because it can easily detract away from time spent studying or in class, the IDSS provided participants with an opportunity to engage with each other.

**Conversations**

Participants also indicated that they utilized the space to engage in both casual and deep critical conversations. Angelique noted that she often visited the space to help relieve stress or have light and casual conversations with the staff. She also added that “every once in a while...those deep conversations that you wanted to have” would occur and that she valued those as well. Though she did not go into detail about what types of conversations these may have been, other participants, like Levin, said that he actively sought out the IDSS when he wanted to “talk about race” or when he was searching for additional knowledge on something related to Black history. For Levin, the IDSS provided him with the opportunity to engage in conversations with his peers about issues he felt all Black students should be aware of. He described this using the example of when he first learned about the Tuskegee Syphilis study. He said

> I go, so anytime I feel like, I don’t know, I want to talk about race or when I found out about the Tuskegee Syphilis trials, I looked that up...didn’t even know about that...But I went right to the [IDSS]. I’m like yo somebody somewhere had to hear this and if you all didn’t you all need to wake up.

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1 The Tuskegee Syphilis study entailed an experiment spanning 40 years (1932-1942) wherein 600 Black men, of which 399 were documented as having syphilis, had treatment withheld from them by the researchers in the U.S. government (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). ADD CITATION IN REFERENCES (http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/index.html.)
Levin’s narrative suggests that when he would search for deeper understanding or additional information on a particular race related topic, he would turn to the IDSS as a space to engage in those conversations with his peers. Students like Tayon, who worked in the IDSS, observed that these sorts of conversations happened often. He noted that while he chose not to “participate in [those] discussions,” he believed that students utilized the IDSS to engage in conversations “about...race and like everything” because the IDSS was perceived as the place for students to have these sort of conversations.

In providing students with a safe space and the opportunity to congregate with each other, the IDSS also presented students with the ability to engage in critical discussions on topics or issues they did feel comfortable having in other spaces on campus. Some participants noted that they while they felt comfortable engaging in conversations within the IDSS, this was only because they felt safe to express their beliefs without judgment. In this regard, Vincent said he believed that the IDSS was a “great common area for [Black students] to just kind of just relax and unwind and talk about whatever and not feel like [they’re] being judged.” He also noted that while students may not always agree with one another, there is a level of respect which exists within the IDSS such that all opinions are welcomed. One example of this level of respect was observed by Olivia, who shared that a fellow student made a racially insensitive comment during a George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin\(^2\) discussion within the space. Olivia recalled that the student, when discussing the testimony of Rachel Jeantel, said “most Black people aren’t as intelligent as White people.” Olivia indicated that rather than negatively reacting to her peer’s statement, she instead spoke with staff in the center and found ways to engage in other conversations around power and privilege. These shared experiences suggest that the ability to

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\(^2\) Trayvon Martin was an unarmed Black teenager who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a volunteer on the neighborhood crime watch (Alvarez, 2012).
have open and judgment-free conversations within the IDSS ranging from casual conversations to critical dialogue was an important facet of the use of the space.

Based on participant narratives the IDSS provided students with a venue to engage in conversations of importance to each of them. Similar to how Levin sought out the IDSS for individual guidance relative to his interests, other students like Olivia also sought the space out for personal conversational reasons. Olivia noted that she actively sought out the IDSS when she needed to talk to somebody. She said “if I’m feeling like I want to talk, I’ll sit down and be like [Amanda] my day is this...And then [Steven] will come in and spit some knowledge and I’ll be like wow mind blown.” Olivia’s comments highlight ways in which the IDSS provides individual meaning for each student. It seems that while students seek out the space to have conversations, it is not so much the nature of the conversation that is important, but instead the fact that they are able to have discussions with people they trust and in a space wherein their opinions will be validated. The IDSS created a space where Black students felt free to investigate knowledge and share personal learning experiences with both their peers and the staff within the space.

Summary

Participants utilized and experienced the IDSS in a multitude of ways. The first and perhaps most important was to use the space as an “oasis.” Young (1991) wrote that cultural centers typically take on two distinct identities, a “safe haven” or an “oasis.” Safe havens create spaces for underrepresented students who feel isolated in their environment and feel as if they must “huddle together to ward off any intruders” (Young, 199, p. 52). The alternative, an oasis, provides an open and welcoming space for anybody who is interested in utilizing its resources and serves as “a place of relief from the surrounding sameness” of the everyday experience for
underrepresented students (Young, 1991, p. 52). Although participants used the word “safe haven” to describe the IDSS, student narratives suggested that students perceived the IDSS as an oasis, or a place to retreat from their White counterparts and engage with one another. This, Young (1991) asserts is one of the core premises of an IDSS serving as an oasis. Their stories presented a consistent message that the IDSS represented the antithesis of the student union. It presented an environment where they could be surrounded by their Black peers, in absence of their White counterparts. Students also suggested that the IDSS provided them the ability to see and engage with each other on a consistent and constant basis. As Levin indicated the IDSS was truly defined as where “Black students meet dot com.” Based on participant narratives it may be concluded that above all, Black students participating in this study utilize and experience the IDSS as a central location for them to have the opportunity to interact and socialize with others who look like them.

**IDSS Engagement and Relationship to NCRIs and Sense of Belonging**

In order to understand how the engagement of Black students in IDSSs is related to a negative campus racial incident (NCRI) or sense of belonging, it is first necessary to unpack these two concepts. The following section draws specific attention to Black students’ NCRI experiences. These experiences are then considered in relation to how they affected Black students’ level of engagement with the IDSS. Lastly, this section addresses Black students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging and how they described its relationship to their level of engagement with the IDSS.

**Black Student Experiences with NCRIs**

For the purposes of this study NCRIs were defined as experiences Black students had which caused them to feel singled out, alienated, or discriminated against on account of their
race. Participant narratives suggest that all of their NCRI experiences came in the form of microaggressions, which are described as everyday forms of racism that, while often perceived as ambiguous in nature, are experienced as hurtful (Grier-Reed, 2010). Participant narratives can best be understood by categorizing them according to the form of microaggression they experienced. Sue et al. (2007) suggests microaggressions have three distinct identifiable forms: microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. What follows below are the narratives of the NCRI experiences disaggregated based on the respective form of Sue et al.’s (2007) microaggression.

**Microinsults.** Sue et al. (2007) define microinsults as “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color” (p. 274). Clark’s NCRI microinsult experience involved his academic advisor. While participating in a program designed to prepare students interested in working on Wall Street, he quickly realized that did not have enough time to dedicate to the program. He decided to step away from the program so that he could focus more on his academics. He noted that while this decision was hard to make, it was also supported by the program administrator. After making his decision, he later had a conversation with his academic advisor. Clark shared his academic advisor said something that he believed to be unintentionally hurtful: “She said since I’m the only Black person there, do I think that I would be the best representation of the Black community?” Even though Clark had already left the program, his academic advisor insinuated that he should withdraw from the program because he was not the best representation of the Black community at Middle State. Clark recalled how the incident made him question himself, his intelligence, and even some of his mannerisms:
And I still try to not think about that day because it just seriously it just affects me...when she said that, I started thinking about, I guess, my life. I’m like, okay am I stupid? Is it because it’s GPA? Is it cause of the way I talk? Of course it’s my skin color cause I’m like the only Black person that was in it...and at times like I would record myself, I’m like wow why do I sound like that? Like why?

Clark never told his academic advisor how she made him feel because, in his words, “she’s really cool” and as he noted previously, he does not believe she intentionally meant to insult him. Although the intention of Clark’s academic advisor cannot be known, Clark interpreted her words as a question of his capabilities and level of potential. This microaggression caused Clark to not only feel hurt but also caused him to feel somewhat uncomfortable with the way he presented himself to others.

Diego’s NCRI was a microinsult he experienced in a conversation with a White residence hall floor mate. He noted that his peer was “a very nice guy,” but that “he tends to make racial jokes.” Diego went on to describe one racial joke he found particularly problematic, where a seemingly autistic White friend repeatedly called his Black friend, “Ginger.” The Black friend thinks nothing of it until he learns that the White friend is not autistic, but instead dyslexic, and that the White friend was not calling the Black friend “Ginger,” but was actually calling him “Nigger.” Diego said that his peer “plays off that joke kind of a little bit,” and that because of that, Diego questioned his peer’s underlying intent. Diego offered that he was anxious about having that conversation because “that can make things disheartening and dis-comfortable and [he doesn’t] want that.” Similar to Clark, Diego valued the relationship he had with this person, but that he questioned why when he and his White friends were together they always made
“racial jokes.” Diego noted that he pondered if “that’s him trying to you know say I accept you for who you are or something like that.”

As was suggested in Sue et al.’s (2007) definition, microinsults are often unknown to the offender. Both Diego and Clark indicated that that they didn’t believe their offender had any ill-intent in their statements, but the comments still affected them. The comments were somewhat ambiguous, yet they still caused these students to ponder, much like Diego did, “why would you tell me that?” and, “what’s the real meaning behind that?” Although participants did not suggest they had an answer to these questions, it was evident that the experiences troubled them and possibly affected the way they continued to engage with their respective offenders moving forward.

**Microassaults.** Sue et al. (2007) defines microassaults as “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (p. 274). Though there are limited ways to accurately determine whether a verbal or nonverbal attack was meant to hurt a victim, the student narratives used to exemplify this form of microaggression focus on how students interpreted the intentions of their offenders’ behaviors.

Amber’s microassault experience occurred while walking downtown late one evening. She said:

Yeah so you know everyone’s like drunk and stuff. And it’s me, two other girls, and two guys. We’re all black, well one’s Hispanic, and these, there’s an Asian guy, I think like two or three White guys, walked by us and they said, “What’s up Niggers?” Not Niggahs, but Niggers.
Upon hearing the word Nigger, Amber said, “for a moment I was just frozen,” questioning whether what she heard really just happened. Her group chose to confront their offenders, but that the individual who had actually spoken ran away. Marilyn experienced a similar microassault, and described how a truck full White people passed by her and her friends and yelled out of the window “stupid Niggers.” Similarly to Amber, Marilyn was a bit shocked; “it was kind of like wait a minute did I just get called a Nigger? Like in 2014? Like it kind of took me for a loop.” Much like Amber, Marilyn had no way to know the actual intent behind the comments made towards her, but received the message as a form of intentional malice.

Overall eight of twelve of the participants indicated that the type of NCRI microaggression they experienced was a microassault. It would seem that experiencing this form of microaggression in their environment is more commonplace than experiencing another form. Amber, in responding to a question of whether other Black students at Middle State would ever have an experience similar to her own said “it’s more of a matter of time type thing...it’s just like it will happen, just wait.” Several other participants, including Janet, Vincent, and Levin offered that the NCRI they experienced was a microassault that involved them being called the word “Nigger.” Many of these incidents happened off-campus, occurred later into the evening/early morning hours, were mostly (seven out of eight) committed by a White offender, and often involved individuals who appeared to be intoxicated.

Microinvalidations. Microinvalidations are “characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). This form of microaggression differs from the previous two because rather than being an attack or a subtle insult, microinvalidations represent a proverbial denial of racism and racialized experiences. Two participants offered examples of
microinvalidations. Rashad described an instance when a campus text alert, which is a system used to notify the campus community of emergency situations which community members should be aware of (PSU Alert, 2014), inadvertently singled out all Black male students at Middle State. Rashad noted:

When [Middle State] sent out that message about a Black male causing a disturbance in the [student union] or something like that where they gave the most general description they can possibly give in regards to a Black male. Like between the ages of like 18 and 30, between 5’8” tall and it was like 6’4” or something like that, which is literally every Black man on this campus. You know so like just different things like that although I wasn’t directly involved, it still had something of an impact on me because it’s like really? This is what we’re doing right now?

Of particular interest in Rashad’s narrative are his final two sentences in which he noted that the offending action, the campus text alert, was not meant to directly involve him or for that matter other Black male students on campus, but that the vagueness of the information seemed to indirectly suggest that nearly every college-aged Black male on campus could be a threat.

Olivia’s example of a microinvalidation happened during a class discussion focusing on affirmative action. She was “the only Black student in that class of 30,” and the remarks that were made by her peers seemed to suggest that Blacks, as an entire race, should get over the perceived gap between Blacks and Whites in America. Olivia said that upon listening to the comments she “got really upset and [she] said you know we’re assuming that affirmative action [is] given to people who aren’t deserving of it.” Olivia went on to inform her classmates that she is present in their honors classroom discussion because she deserves what she has and because she has worked hard. She noted that she felt that “the comments were very like sort of negative
and things like that. So I think that was something that made me feel a little out of place.” Olivia’s NCRI experience caused her to feel that she had to validate her feelings to her White peers, why she was in the class, and why she was deserving of the things she had accomplished.

Though the offending parties in Rashad and Olivia’s narratives differed from being unknown and known, each of their experiences offer examples of language that did not take into account the lived experiences of Black students. For Rashad it was the unknown campus administrator who reviewed the language for the text alert and did not seemingly expect that providing the description offered of a Black male as a potential threat to a majority White community would cause a problem. While for Olivia it was the student who believed that Black students were only present at Middle State because of affirmative action.

**Summary.** Overall, the majority of NCRI experiences students recalled were examples of microassaults, and their unified experiences suggest that microaggressions may be a regular part of their daily-lived experiences at Middle State. Although there is no way to identify the frequency by which microaggressions occurred within the confines of this study or whether participants are only prone to recall extremely negative experiences, the narratives provide a unique picture of the lived experiences of these participants.

**NCRI Experiences and IDSS Engagement**

Following sharing their NCRI experiences, students were asked where on campus, if any where, they went for support. Students offered three distinct responses: seeking support from the IDSS, seeking support from their peers, and seeking no support. Although the ways in which students either sought support from their peers or sought no support after experiencing a NCRI provided a wealth of information, that information is not offered here because it was outside the scope of this study. What is presented below is an analysis of participants’ experiences with
NCRI relative to the level of support they, or their peers, received from the institutionally designated safe space.

**Support from IDSS.** Of the twelve participants in the study, only one student, Olivia, noted that she actively sought out the IDSS for support upon experiencing her NCRI, the microinvalidation from the students who believed that affirmative action was the reason Blacks were at Middle State. Interestingly Olivia had initially forgotten she reached out to the IDSS, as she initially noted that she sought the support and comfort of her family. Then she said “I remember going to the [IDSS] and talking to [Amanda] and [Steven] about it cause before that I was like ‘[Steven] I need some ammo to go into this class because I already know it’s going to be nonsense.’” Olivia’s comment suggests that the primary reason why she returned back to the IDSS after experiencing her NCRI was more to provide an update on what transpired during her classroom discussion on affirmative action, instead of actively looking for support from any of the staff there. However, in considering where she believed her peers would go after experiencing a negative campus racial incident, she responded saying “I don’t think that they really go anywhere for support.”

Although Olivia was the only participant to indicate that she actually sought out the IDSS for support after her NCRI, five out of twelve of her peers believed their peers would seek out support from the IDSS after NCRI. Diego said “I know for a fact they go to the [IDSS] because that’s like their escape just for multicultural students.” Angelique affirmed Diego’s point and said “[IDSS] definitely. There are individuals in the [IDSS] that have great insight on those things...So yeah I’ve definitely heard stories in the [IDSS] about that. And it’s like a place for like comfort.” Diego and Angelique’s assertion that they have witnessed their peers utilize the IDSS for support after a NCRI is interesting since both of these participants noted that neither of
them had ever shared their NCRI experience with anybody else. Marilyn also suggested that the IDSS was a place she believed her peers sought out for support because of the staff. Marilyn said “I’ve heard [students] talk about you know things like these with people they kind of talk to like from in the [IDSS]. I know there is [Lisa] and [Steven] and they’ll talk to [students] about things that happened.” Marilyn’s comments suggest that students actively sought out staff within the space because of their knowledge on topics related to diversity and because of the level of rapport the staff had with students within that space.

Two other participants also offered that generally students sought out the IDSS as a place to go after experiencing a negative campus racial incident. However, it is important to note they both worked in the IDSS and, similar to many of their colleagues, did not seek out the space after their own experiences. Both of these participants also offered that typically their peers would seek out the support of their friends before the IDSS. When asked where his peers go, Rashad initially responded by saying to “each other.” He did however, follow this up by saying, “if they’re a little bit more in the know they may go speak to [Steven]” in the IDSS or another multicultural location on campus. Tayon’s initial response was quite similar to Rashad’s, he said “I think they would probably go to their friends.” And, he too, also later added that the IDSS would be a good place for students to go because of the “deep conversations” students and staff had in the space around race.

**Summary.** Participants’ responses regarding where they believed their peers went for support offers an interesting take on the perceived versus documented use of the IDSS after a negative campus racial incident. While five respondents indicated that they believed the IDSS was a place for Black students to receive support after experiencing a NCRI, each of these five respondents admitted that they did not to utilize the IDSS in this regard. While it is unknown if
either of these students ever sought out support from the IDSS after experiencing a NCRI at Middle State, based on their narratives it would seem this was not the case. As such, it would appear that while the IDSS serves as a place for Black students to congregate, socialize, engage in conversations, and generally hang out with other Black students, there is a mismatch in how Black students report they use the space and how they believe it is used. Therefore, for these students, it would seem that their engagement with the IDSS was not directly linked to their experiences with negative campus racial incidents.

**Black Students’ Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging has been defined by Hurtado and Carter (1997) as a phenomenon which “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (p. 327). Using this definition as a guide, participant narratives suggested that their sense of belonging reflected their experiences and perceptions of feeling acknowledged and welcomed. They commented on how the institution helped to make them feel valued on campus. Students also discussed their level of belongingness in relation to how supported they felt on campus. They discussed this support in relation to how campus administrators supported them and other Black students on campus. Lastly, the participants discussed their sense of belonging in relation to how they believed Black students fit on campus. They offered that many of their feelings surrounding personal fit were related to how well they believed they fit in with the campus community versus a small niche. Due to how students expressed their overall sense of belonging with Middle State, what follows below is an exploration of each of the aforementioned items and how participants offered it tied in with their general sense of belonging with the institution.
**Black as Invisible.** Participants presented stories relating to how they believe the institution contributed to making them and their Black colleagues feel welcomed, valued, or appreciated. Several participants expressed that they did not believe that Middle State was supportive of Black students. Clark believed campus community members publicly supported majority student organizations, but, as he said “when it comes to a Black org I don’t see that much support.” Others, like Vincent, offered that though the institution “can be at times…it’s not the most supportive.” Vincent explained his perception that only predominantly White student organizations were highlighted in campus-wide events, and that he defined support as the institution showcasing Black students during campus-wide student functions as often as their White colleagues. Vincent offered the example of an annual campus event that hundreds of students participate in. Even though students from various racial and ethnic communities actively participate, he perceived institution selectively choosing who to broadcast:

> You see a predominantly White kid dancing on the floor or when they pan out to the crowd you see the [predominantly White] Greeks and the other student organizations. But rarely do you see like the NAACP who works with [the overall program], the [BSO], NPHC, you know, rarely do you see them highlighted.

Vincent’s comment suggests that he felt the institution shies away from drawing attention to Black students who are active and as engaged as their White peers.

This perception that the Black student experience is hidden may be the reason why some participants indicated that Black students do not feel connected or involved with the Middle State culture. Olivia said “many Black students that [she] talk[ed] with don’t feel like they’re a part of [Middle State].” Rashad echoed this point adding that many Black students are waiting for the institution to “show that they give a damn” about them and their experience.
While several participants offered that the institution was not supportive, one participant held a mid-line view regarding Middle State’s level of support. Janet said “[Middle State] can be very supportive. But I feel like it’s a fight.” She saw Middle State as willing to support Black students. She exclaimed that if Black students were to push, the institution would give. However, in a moment of reflective thought while responding to this question, Janet then said “but then on the other side, it’s kind of like, why do we have to push?” Janet’s final thought may highlight why many of her peers felt as though Middle State was not supportive of the Black student experience. While Middle State has the ability and, at times, willingness to support Black students, participants believed that they had to advocate for themselves in order to see this happen. Participants expressed frustration regarding the perceived intent to not acknowledge Black students’ existence in the larger student population and noted that they are waiting for the institution to take proactive measures to show them that they are valued in the institutional community.

**Finding Support.** Participants suggested that there are pockets of support for Black students at the institution. However, as Janet expressed, there seems to be a “disconnect between [the administration] and students in general, particularly Black students.” The majority of support structures identified within the administration are select administrators or other entities that have been designated as “multicultural” support. Rashad noted that it would be “really refreshing to receive correspondence [from] someone who doesn’t have multicultural or equity or any of those kind of buzzwords...in their name, coming to speak out to you. And they’re a high ranking person in the university.” Levin shared a similar perspective when comparing the level of support he received at a campus prior to attending Middle State. He felt there was a wealth of support from all levels at his previous institution, but that at Middle State, the support
is “mainly driven by Black faculty...or people who just share the love for the (Black) community and students.” Eva added that Black students wanted “more visibility from the administration.” These narratives suggest students’ definitions of a supportive campus environment would encompass administrators and other senior leaders of the institution that go beyond Black administrators or those hired to be multicultural representatives. Amber articulated this exact sentiment when she said “I won’t say like the support that you have is not from [Middle State]; it’s like from specific organizations or programs at [Middle State]...I don’t think that the university in general you know supports us.” Amber’s comment highlights much of what her peers previously expressed, which is that while select offices or programs offer support for Black students, students did not perceive an overarching culture of support for the Black student community.

Several students offered stories of close, personal relationships with Black faculty or staff as sources of support. These individuals represented a small community of support in an otherwise relatively unsupportive campus environment. Diego spoke about his most important relationships with individuals on campus and noted that his connections with two Black male staff members have been instrumental. As a young Black man from over 1,000 miles away from home, he said the Black staff members “definitely can identify with my issues and where I stand. Both of them are from out of state. So they know how, how it is here.” For Diego the ability to establish a close rapport with a Black man in an administrative role provided him with a level of support from the institution he did not indicate receiving elsewhere. Olivia developed a close bond with her multicultural dean when she searched for a mentor. She expressed that he is “sort of like [her] lifeline here on campus.” The ability for Diego and Olivia to connect with these
individuals helped both of them develop a level of belonging because they had people that understood their experience and served as a dedicated source of support.

Narratives suggest support for Black students was largely from Black leaders, Black administrators, and other individuals who, according to Black students, have a prescribed responsibility to advocate for Black students. The lack of broad institutional advocacy from leaders and administrators seems to suggest to participants that the Black student experience is not valued. Based on the guiding definition of sense of belonging, these students did not indicate that their sense of belonging was informed by the level of support they received from the overall campus community.

**Personal Fit.** Students also explained whether and how they fit within the overall institutional community. According to participants’ narratives, they primarily found their fit within smaller communities around campus or by being active and engaging in activities that are seen as important to the broad campus community. Levin, for instance, shared the importance of small communities in his sense of fit: “I feel like I fit in good. I don’t know ... I fit in good in terms of the community I want to fit into.” The distinction Levin makes between general fit and feeling that there were smaller communities he could connect to, however, was quite important. Although he proffered that he could inherently choose what community he wanted to fit into, this did not include the broad Middle State community. Regarding this specific notion he said, “I feel more comfortable inside of my community inside of [Middle State] in comparison like fitting in the [Middle State] as a whole. Like if this was dodge ball would [Middle State] choose me? Like I don’t know.” Levin offered that the “community” he fit in with was primarily his Black community. His uncertainty with whether Middle State would choose him suggests that while he
possessed a sense of fit and belonging within his smaller community, this was not present in the overall campus community.

Feeling a fit through sub-communities was also salient for other participants. Eva said “I think [Black students] feel like they fit in amongst the Black community. But they may not feel like they fit in at large, like, in general.” Rashad said that Black students feel as they belong “through Black things quite frankly and quite bluntly.” Both of these comments suggest that Levin’s experience was not unique. The notion that he fit within the small communities he chose to belong to, indicates that he, like many of his fellow Black peers, may have had a hard time feeling a sense of belonging with the overall campus community.

Though Levin and several of his peers shared that there was a sense of fitting in only within smaller communities, other participants expressed that by expanding their social circle or even by interacting in different communities, they experienced an overall sense of belonging on campus. Eva said “I don’t really feel like I don’t belong here or that anyone has made me feel like I don’t belong here...because I’ve had interactions with other student leaders that aren’t within the black community.” Eva noted that she often observed that her peers did not want to make connections across racial lines. In her experience, being able to make those connections had positive outcomes, resulting in her feeling general sense of belonging. She said:

I’ve had interactions with other [White] orgs and it’s been relatively positive, the ones who have reached out or who I’ve reached out to. I feel like because that’s possible that I do belong, and that I’m not really made to feel that I don’t know, that I don’t belong here or that I don’t belong in their process... For some people that may not be the case, and I know it’s not the case for some people, but for me I don’t really feel like I’ve been made to feel I don’t belong.
Vincent shared a similar perspective. He indicated that he fit in with the overall campus because he did “a decent job of you know being diverse and interacting with different organizations around campus.” Vincent described his involvement with athletics, different clubs and organizations, as well as with the student radio station as ways in which he was rooted in different pieces of the mainstream Middle State culture. In speaking specifically about one of his involvement activities Vincent said “I also have a radio show on the, on the student radio station here which allows me to be very diverse...and fit in amongst the university as a whole.” Both Vincent and Eva seem to suggest that they fit in with the university because of their involvement in their co-curricular endeavors. Their respective stories indicated that because they either directly engaged with diverse others or, in Vincent’s case, had the ability for diverse populations to listen to him, they felt as though they belonged at Middle State.

This concept of a having a sense of fit because of the ability to engage in or with activities that are central to the university was shared by other students. Several participants shared Diego’s perspective, who noted Black students “feel most like they belong when they [Middle State] have collaborative events. Things where everybody [who is] a [Middle State] student can be involved...you know things for the general body.” Angelique added to this sentiment and said “so I mean like there are different things that occur in [Middle State] tradition, like you know within the community, that makes everyone feel included despite race.”

These activities, for some participants, took different forms. Amber, when elaborating on what helped her to feel as if she fit at Middle State said “I think that like different organizations or programs would kind of you know make me feel that way.” Amber noted that her involvement in high profile academic programs such as the honors college and other highly competitive academic opportunities helped her to feel as if she fit with the overall university community.
Specifically she said “like if people see [Middle State] as like you know this scholarly you know university or place or whatever I’m like oh yeah I definitely fit in.” It would appear that Amber’s involvement in smaller communities, which in her case were academically oriented, resulted in her feeling as if she fit within the institution. For Amber being involved and connected to aspects of Middle State that she believed her peers valued caused her to associate her sense of fit with her sense of belonging.

Although the experience for Amber and others may have been positive, many participants agreed that they believed their peers did not feel as though Black students belonged on campus. Clark noted “they probably think they don’t fit in.” Those that do fit in, as Marilyn offered “feel like they belong in terms of staying in their comfort zone, which is probably being ... close [to] Black people or staying in you know the whole group of Blacks.” Marilyn believed that Black students only feel like they belong when they are with other Black students on campus. According to Levin, there are different levels to the Black student experience at Middle State. He said “that’s why I always differentiate like it’s [Middle State], Black [Middle State], and then there’s the [IDSS].” For Levin, this breakdown is important because similar to his experience, it suggests that there could be levels of belonging or fit for Black students as well. Though students offered many examples suggesting that they felt as though they fit with the broad Middle State community, as noted by Marilyn and others, there is a sense that other Black students may struggle to find this same sense of fit and belonging with the overall campus community.

**Sense of Belonging and IDSS Engagement**

Although students offered a mixed view regarding how they and their peers felt about the level of inclusion they felt on campus, whether they felt supported, and if they believed they fit in, it should be noted that all participants in the study indicated that they had a sense of
belonging with the overall campus community. This sense of belonging was primarily developed by their engagement in smaller sub-communities, like the IDSS. However, it should be noted that while the IDSS played a role in the development of each of their feelings of belonging, it did not completely generate a sense of belonging by itself. Instead students discussed their development of a sense of belonging, in relation to their engagement in the IDSS, in two distinct ways. The first was that the IDSS was the primary reason for them developing a sense of belonging.

Students suggested that engaging in the space helped them learn how to navigate the campus climate, engage across difference with their non-Black peers, and helped fulfill other personal needs they required to feel welcomed. The second of these themes was that though students felt welcomed and felt as if they belonged within the IDSS, they believed they developed their sense of belonging with the larger campus environment through their involvement in activities not related to the IDSS. Although the latter theme could be argued as being beyond the scope of this research, this theme is discussed and presented below because it allows for the documentation of supporting and opposing viewpoints on how IDSSs may help Black students foster a sense of belonging.

**Because of the IDSS**

As participants considered their overall sense of fit with the institution, they were asked to consider whether they felt if the sense of belonging they had for the broad campus community was due to their engagement in the institutionally designated safe space. Eight of the twelve students indicated that the IDSS was the main reason they had a sense of belonging in the overall campus community. The reasons they offered for how the IDSS helped them to foster a sense of belonging with the broader campus community differed. Two distinct differences emerged. One of these distinctions was that students felt supported through the IDSS in ways that helped them
navigate the campus climate. Specifically students drew attention to the knowledge they learned while in the space as being pivotal in this role. The second distinction was that students felt supported through their involvement with the IDSS to engage with their non-Black peers. Students shared that their involvement in the IDSS helped them to be more outgoing and open towards engaging with their White counterparts.

Navigating the campus climate. Two students indicated that they believed the IDSS helped them foster a sense of belonging with the broad campus community because of what they learned in the space about the campus culture. Diego offered that he believed he had a sense of belonging with the overall campus because of the staff’s honesty about the racial climate and the tools they provided him to help him navigate the racial environment. He said, “they explained to [me] that, hey, you know, we are the minority here. So there are some things that you may not feel comfortable [with]. You may not feel safe sometimes. But...they give you some, some ways to combat that.” He continued and noted that the tools he received were “ammo to feed your confidence” and “a lot of ways to, to not feel like you want to go back home all the time.” It would seem that for Diego it was important for him to have a realistic view of the campus racial environment and to be able to understand how to navigate it, particularly since he came to the University from a relatively homogenous Black neighborhood. Diego offered that he felt most alone on campus when he contemplated how far away from home he was and how different his home community was from his collegiate community. It is likely because of this that the ability for the IDSS to provide him with skills, tools, and “ammo” to feel confident and welcomed on campus was important to his sense of belonging. The ability for the IDSS to create a familial environment engendered feelings of home for Diego seem to be what caused Diego to feel
comfortable and confident engaging in the broader campus community and what likely led to his development of a sense of belonging.

Levin offered that the IDSS helped him to feel a sense of belonging with the broader campus community because, as he says, “I got a lot of my Middle State pride from it.” Levin noted that while in the IDSS, he learned the historical meaning of his institution’s call and response chant. By discovering that the chant was rooted in activism, such that one of the college’s major sports team refused to compete if two of their Black players were not allowed to play, reminded Levin of one of Langston Hughes’s poems. Levin paraphrased Hughes’s, “I, Too”, poem saying “like one day they’re going to sit me at this table and we all going to eat and you’ll be ashamed for like not letting me eat before.” Levin attributed the actions of those who stood by their Black teammates as providing them with a seat at the table and as making a stance so that the opposing team understood that all students, White and Black, represented Middle State. The IDSS helped put this into perspective for Levin. His comments suggest that the knowledge he received from the IDSS helped provide him with a sense of belonging because he realized that he, too, was Middle State. Although Levin previously questioned whether Middle State would “choose” him, here he shared that he did not need to feel chosen in order to feel a sense of belonging. Levin suggested that by knowing the historical roots of the school chant, he could “feel comfortable enough displaying [his] pride” with his majority peers. As such the IDSS was instrumental in helping Levin develop a sense of belonging with the overall campus community because it provided him with support and knowledge that empowered him to feel proud among and with majority peers.

**Engaging across difference.** Other participants noted the IDSS helped them develop a sense of belonging with the overall campus community by providing them with opportunities
and the necessary support to step outside of their respective comfort zones to engage and interact with their majority peers. Though the act of simply engaging across difference is not typically considered a form of belonging, the saliency by which this theme emerged throughout participant narratives suggested that for many of them, being supported and encouraged to interact across difference was an important step in the belonging process.

Angelique recalled a specific incident when she was in the IDSS wherein she was approached by several White individuals who were interested in talking with Black students within the space:

And like these are individuals that normally aren’t in the [IDSS] and probably individuals that I never would have spoken to had it not been for like [that] study. But like I definitely chatted up with them and I mean it took me out of my comfort zone like I’m not really into that type of thing like small talk, that type of thing. I ended up seeing one of them again. He turned out to be like a coordinator or something in my dorm. So it’s like small world like you know. But so like then I had that connection that I never would have had before.

By being present in the IDSS at that moment in time Angelique was not only pushed out of her comfort zone, but she was able to build connections she may not have previously had the opportunity to do. Though this was one specific incident Angelique recalled, she also suggested that this was not the only time the IDSS provided her the opportunity to build relationships with others who were different than her. She added that her engagement in the IDSS provided her with other opportunities to foster relationships with student leaders from some predominantly White student organizations as well. Specifically, she credited the IDSS as helping her to build the “slight connection” with individuals in the undergraduate student government who engaged
in the space. The IDSS provided Angelique with a space to feel comfortable engaging with people who she might not normally interact with. By providing her the space to step out of her comfort zone in an environment she felt comfortable in, she seems to have been empowered to continue doing so in the larger campus community. She ultimately assumed the presidential leadership role in her prominent Black student organization, which would require her to engage with her majority counterparts on a consistent basis. In articulating her expression of readiness to take on this role, she said “I’m prepared to do that now. I, I think I’ve had enough time to grow and become comfortable with the idea (of interacting across difference) that you know by my senior year I’m okay with doing that.” Angelique attributed her seniority on campus to this readiness as well as developed level of comfort engaging across difference.

Marilyn also indicated that the IDSS helped with her sense of belonging, providing her the confidence she needed to begin being her authentic self. Marilyn indicated that prior to engaging in the IDSS she had been hesitant to interact and engage with her White peers because of a negative experience she had in high school. She said that the IDSS helped her to realize that “I don’t need to be as confined as I was trying to be just because I don’t know certain people.” She attributed her ability to be her true self with others on campus to the IDSS because she indicated that she learned “I shouldn’t try to be a quiet person when I know deep inside I’m not a quiet person. So I need to just be me, talk to people, be the social butterfly that I am.” Marilyn’s quote suggests that the IDSS provided her the opportunity to be the extrovert she believed she naturally was. Her sense of belonging on campus was connected to how she felt about her ability to have genuine interactions with people and based on her narrative the IDSS provided her the space, the guidance, and the support she needed to allow her to be an extrovert all over campus.
Vincent offered that the IDSS encouraged him to experience new things, as well. Vincent said with the IDSS “being diverse and you know...always preaching about being cultured and, and experiencing different things and, and interacting with different people has definitely opened me up to doing it more willingly than I would have in the past.” Vincent noted that as a result of engaging in the IDSS, he was more likely to attend different events or participate in different activities across campus. Vincent’s sense of belonging with the overall campus was connected to how readily he wanted to interact and engage with his peers outside of the IDSS. He indicated that while some activities or events previously may have peaked his interest, he would normally have passed it over to be alone. However the IDSS instilled in him the desire to interact with different people and experience new things that has allowed him to feel as if he belonged on campus. This belonging seems to derive from Vincent’s ability and willingness to explore his campus community and to feel supported and encouraged by the IDSS in doing so.

**Summary.** The two distinctions offered for how participants suggested that the IDSS helped them to develop a sense of belonging with the overall campus community could best be described using the words support and encouragement. However, what is also important to note is that while the student narratives could be grouped into themes, none of their experiences completely mirrored one another. Angelique, Marilyn, and Vincent’s narratives suggested that the support they received from the IDSS helped to inform their personal level of engagement with the broader campus community. But, the difference between Marilyn’s proclamation that the IDSS helped her to feel comfortable and encouraged her to open up to others is different than Vincent's belief that the IDSS encouraged him to take advantage of diverse engagement opportunities. The same was true for Diego and Levin who both felt supported by the IDSS. Diego found comfort in the familial environment offered by the IDSS and supported in ways that
provided him “ammo” to navigate the campus racial climate. On the contrary, Levin attributed his belonging to the support he received in developing a Middle State pride which allowed him to feel connected to his White peers.

Participant narratives suggest that as the IDSS helps them develop a sense of belonging with the broad campus community, it caters to some of their individual belonging needs. It provided students with personal skills, tools, knowledge, encouragement, and the support they required to aid in their development of a sense of belonging. This was also true for other students, such as Clark who indicated that the first-year mentoring program that was hosted within the space provided him with opportunities to experience aspects of campus he believed were celebrated as an institutional activity rather than simply a Black student activity. For Clark, his sense of belonging was connected to ways that enabled him engage in activities his peers in shared experiences, and as such the IDSS was instrumental in providing those opportunities. Thus, how the IDSS helps to foster Black students’ sense of belonging may best be understood as supporting each of them individually by providing them skills, resources, or opportunities they need in order to help them engage in the broader campus environment.

**Beyond the Safe Space**

While the majority of participants offered that the IDSS helped them develop a sense of belonging with the broad campus community, four respondents expressed that this was not the case for them. These participants expressed a conflicted feeling of belonging on account of the institutionally designate safe space. Eva and Janet noted that the IDSS was helpful for them to develop a sense of belonging within the space and with some of their Black peers, but that their reason for belonging in the general campus environment extended beyond the space’s walls. Eva, when responding to whether the IDSS helped her foster a sense of belonging with the overall
campus community, said “I think it’s two separate things because you kind of have to develop a relationship with a lot of these different resources to get that feeling.” Eva explained that the IDSS does an excellent job at helping Black students feel comfortable and welcomed in its own space as it “reaches out to [them] and makes sure that [they] know that they exist and that they’re there as a resource for [them].” However, she asserted, this feeling does not extend to the other resources on campus. Eva’s narrative suggests that while she felt welcomed and supported within the IDSS, she did not feel this way in other areas on campus. Eva attributed her sense of belonging to her ability to interact with student leaders outside of the Black community, and while some of her peers offered that the IDSS helped them to do that, Eva experienced the space differently.

Janet, who also noted that the IDSS was not responsible for her feeling of a sense of belonging, spoke about this feeling primarily in relation to the larger Black community. She described the IDSS’s influence as a sort of tug of war. She said “I can think of like a, a pulling and pushing. So I feel like in some aspects the [IDSS] pushed me further away from the Black community...but then in another way kind of pushed me closer to it.” Janet offered that the IDSS was particularly helpful in allowing her to develop some close relationships with her Black peers through some of the programs that the space offered, but that because of what she called a “very negative and drama filled” environment, she also distanced herself from the space and from some of her peers. Janet, in considering where her sense of belonging came from, said “I guess I found comfort elsewhere.” She indicated that her involvement in service learning activities was central to her feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Because of this, she attributed much of her belonging to the office that organized and structured many of these activities.
Both Eva and Janet’s descriptions of how the IDSS was responsible for helping them develop a sense of belonging have pieces that suggest that they still valued some of the resources or skills they received from the institutionally designated safe space. Eva’s notion of the IDSS helping Black students feel comfortable and welcomed matches well with Janet’s “pulling and pushing” analogy, because she noted that the IDSS helped to bring her closer to the Black community.

Similar to her peers, Amber also indicated that the while the IDSS is a valuable resource for Black students, it did not play a major role in helping her develop a sense of belonging with the broad campus community. Much like Janet, Amber indicated that her involvement in activities outside of the IDSS helped her to feel connected to campus:

For people who never felt like they fit in at [Middle State] and then realized, you know, there are places, you know, at [Middle State] for people like me and they might, [the IDSS] might help them you know perceive themselves to fit you know into the university more... but I never, I never felt like I didn’t fit in here.

Amber’s quote suggests that she did not believe she needed the IDSS to help her fit in on campus. This, as she would later note, was because her sense of belonging was tied to being a “part of things that are like so integral to like the success of [Middle State].” Amber’s involvement in what she termed “scholarly” activities from her onset at Middle State is likely what made her feel as if she always belonged. She indicated that being involved in aspects of the university that hold significant academic prestige, such as receiving prestigious fellowships and being an honors student, have been what caused her to feel as if she has always belonged.

**Sense of Belonging and IDSS Engagement Summary**
Janet and Amber’s narratives suggest that while the IDSS was an important part of their collegiate experience, it was not as salient as other activities they were involved in. For both of them, engaging in either service activities or scholarship was more crucial to their individual development of a sense of belonging. Though the IDSS offered an environment of support and encouragement that was valuable to many other Black students, both Janet and Amber’s narratives suggest that they found this support in other activities.

The ways Janet and Amber expressed developing a sense of belonging suggests that students have individual sense of belonging needs that while can be helped and supported by spaces such as the IDSS, are sometimes met elsewhere. As an example, Angelique’s sense of belonging was connected to her need to feel comfortable engaging with diverse others. Because the IDSS provided her with opportunities to fulfill this need and others, the IDSS became the medium by which she developed a sense of belonging for the broader campus community. For Diego, his sense of belonging was connected to his need to be connected to a group of people that resembled his family. The IDSS was able to provide this familial feeling as well as “ammo to feed [his] confidence” to reassure him that he belonged at Middle State. As such, though some students had their individual sense of belonging needs filled by the IDSS, others had their needs met elsewhere. Janet indicated that though the IDSS provided her the ability to better connect with some of her Black peers, she felt that what was most important for her was the ability to engage in service opportunities. As such, Janet attributed her sense of comfort and belonging to the office that met this need. For the Black students in this study, the ability for a space, academic department, or specific office to satisfy their specific need helped them to feel welcomed and valued while engaging in the broad campus community. Though the majority of
students developed these feelings by engaging in the IDSS, it is clear that other entities or activities on campus can help students develop a sense of belonging as well.

Findings Summary

These findings allow for deeper understanding of how participants used and experienced an IDSS, sought out support upon experiencing a NCRI, and how they developed a sense of belonging on a predominantly White campus. While it was helpful to learn that Black students believed the IDSS was a safe space, it was more important to discover that this belief coincided with an assertion that the IDSS was possibly the only place on campus they felt they could be their “multicultural” selves. This finding helps to explain why students offered that they utilized the IDSS as the Black hangout. By noting that the IDSS provided them with a central location on campus that gave them the opportunity to be around other Black students on a consistent basis, the IDSS served as one of the main spaces Black students felt they could be themselves. Because of these beliefs it is easier to understand why these students indicated they frequently visited the space and/or spent a great deal of time in the space. The IDSS provided participants with the support they needed on campus by providing them the ability to engage with peers who were racially/ethnically similar to themselves without fear of being judged. Generally participants agreed that the IDSS served as a primary source of support for them on campus.

Interestingly, though the IDSS served as the locus of support for many of the participants, another important finding was that these students did not rely on the IDSS as a central space of support upon experiencing a negative campus racial incident. Only one student in this research sought support from the IDSS after experiencing a NCRI, and of the remaining eleven participants, most (9/11) indicated that they did not reach out to anybody for support. Unfortunately understanding why participants did not reach out to anybody for support was
outside of the scope of this study. However, while member checking with one participant, he stated that he did not believe that experiencing NCRIs was a conversation Black students needed to have since it was something that was understood as expected to occur. His words suggest that the support students relied on from IDSS was not related to the NCRIs they encountered because these incidents represented a common lived experience. Though students utilized the IDSS as a place to arm themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills they needed to be successful in the majority White campus environment, their lack of using the IDSS as a place of support upon experiencing a NCRI may suggest that students do not believe they need assistance with negative racial experiences. Instead, as offered in the aforementioned narratives, there were other aspects students relied on the IDSS as a source of support and encouragement. Their needs encompassed the ability to freely express themselves, to engage in casual and critical conversations, and the desire to engage with others who looked like them. These findings suggest that the IDSS provides students with positive opportunities to keep them moving forward rather than focusing on negative past experiences.

Irrespective of their NCRI experiences, many students noted that they used the IDSS as a primary source of support on campus. For many of the participants, the IDSS was also instrumental in helping them develop a sense of belonging. Students indicated that because they did not always feel a part of the larger Middle State community, their ability to find support in smaller environments, like the IDSS, was especially helpful towards developing a sense of belonging. Generally these findings suggest that those who receive support and encouragement within a smaller community such as the IDSS, curricular activities, or clubs and organizations are able to develop a sense of belonging within these small niches which then flows over into the larger campus community. This sense of belonging is developed because of how these smaller
communities help meet the individual needs of students. The ability of their small community to help satisfy and fill an individual need is what was shown to be paramount to helping participants develop a sense of belonging. Though not all participants indicated the IDSS was the sub-community that helped them develop a sense of belonging, it became clear through this research that the IDSS played some role in how each of them developed a sense of belonging.

The findings of this research suggest that the IDSS was an important aspect of the collegiate experience of these Black students. They relied on the space to provide them with a sense of community with their Black peers, the knowledge they needed to help navigate the campus racial climate, the courage and opportunities they needed to engage with dissimilar others, and as a home base. As such, these findings also suggest that the small community environment that the IDSS offered helped some Black participants develop a sense of belonging on campus by identifying ways to attend to their individual needs.
Chapter VI: EMERGENT MODEL OF DEVELOPING BELONGING

The model offered in this chapter presents a way of understanding how Black students developed a sense of belonging at Middle State University. The model that emerged suggests that though the lived experiences of participants were personally unique, how the students developed a sense of belonging with the broad campus community had many commonalities between them. According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory provides a process to help encourage understanding of the shared phenomenon under study. As a means to ensure that the model was trustworthy, the Principal Investigator (PI) implemented several strategies to determine if the model met Creswell’s definition. First, the PI shared a graphic representation and an explanation of the model with an alumna of a predominantly White institution (PWI), who shared similar characteristics to the study participants (e.g. Black, engaged in their IDSS on two or more occasions per week, and experienced a NCRI). This informant agreed that the model captured her undergraduate experience. The PI then engaged in member checking with four of the twelve participants of the study. These participants agreed that the model helped to illuminate their experience of engaging in the institutionally designate safe space (IDSS) and developing a sense of belonging on campus. Based on these accounts, it is believed that the model and graphical depiction presented below does, in fact, offer an understanding of this particular shared phenomenon, and as such meets Creswell’s (2007) criteria for grounded theory.

All participants in the study indicated they had a sense of belonging with the broad campus environment. In developing the model it was discovered that individual needs and experiences shaped how the Black students developed a sense of belonging. The model in figure 1 represents how Black students in this study developed a sense of belonging at Middle State. As shown by the circle outside of the box, all of these Black students entered the same campus
environment. The four internal dimensions of the campus racial climate model shaped how students interpreted and subsequently engaged in their college environment. The three overlapping circles represent the areas all participants indicated helped them develop a sense of belonging. The permeable outer shell of the circles indicate that aspects of the campus racial climate had an influence on how students interacted and engaged in specific areas.

Though all of the participants inhabited the same campus, their individual backgrounds, life experiences, and family dynamics shaped the way they experienced and interpreted aspects of the campus racial climate. Participants indicated that three distinct aspects of their collegiate environment had the greatest effect on their development of a sense of belonging. The three components, which are represented by the three overlapping circles in figure 1, were their engagement within the IDSS, their engagement in their academics, and their engagement in co-curricular activities. The highlighted black section of the diagram indicates how these three
components worked together to help foster a sense of belonging for students. It should be noted that though the diagram presents a well-balanced distribution of the three components, this is an ideal representation. In reality the shaded circle in the middle is more densely populated with whichever component students assert is responsible for helping them develop a sense of belonging.

The model presented above consists of two broad, yet interconnecting ideas. The first is that the campus racial climate plays a role in how students experience their college environment. This aspect of the graphic draws particular attention to how students’ experiences affect which areas on campus participants most relied on to help them develop a sense of belonging. The second idea relates specifically to how students developed a sense of belonging. Each of these two broad concepts are discussed in further detail and offer analytical evidence to support their significance in the development of the theory.

**Campus Racial Climate**

According to students’ narratives, the campus racial climate influenced the way students interacted and engaged with different aspects of the campus community. As Hurtado et al. (1999) asserted, an institution’s ability to sustain an environment that promotes learning and student interaction is important for students’ holistic development. Though Hurtado and colleagues’ (1999) concept of holistic development may not have explicitly included sense of belonging, the same sentiment was shown to be true for how students developed a sense of belonging. The ability of the campus to maintain an environment conducive to learning, which includes a community that is supportive, respectful, and engaging, is important for the development of a sense of belonging (Sedlacek, 1999). It is because of this that further articulating how students experienced different dimensions of the campus racial climate is important to understanding how
they developed a sense of belonging. The four internal dimensions of campus racial climate include: historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, behavioral climate, and psychological climate. Each aspect is presented below with supporting narratives to illustrate how they affected the way students engaged within their campus environment and ultimately their sense of belonging.

**Historical legacy of Inclusion/Exclusion**

Although the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion has an impact on the lived experiences of Black students, this dimension typically focuses on institutional actions. Scholars suggest that the policies or practices PWIs enforce and implement often affect the perceptions students have of the campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For the students in this study, institutional administrators were the primary individuals implementing and enforcing policies. As a result, students’ perceptions of the institution’s legacy of inclusion/exclusion were primarily based on their interactions with administrators.

Overall, participants noted that there was a lack of trust between Black students and campus administrators. A few students indicated that they trusted members of the administration as they had never witnessed instances where administrators had let them down. Others indicated that their level of trust was low to non-existent. Some participants also noted that they had mixed feelings regarding their level of trust of campus administrators because they believed that they could only trust select administrators. These students indicated that the trust was often based on pre-established relationships with certain administrators who, either formally or informally, had supported the Black community.

Students shared that they had a scale by which they measured their level of trust with campus administrators. Participants expressed this was because if they knew the administrator
then the level of trust was high, but that generally there was anxiety trusting administrators who represented a system that had previously “done wrong consistently.” A few participants indicated that their continued interactions with some administrators made it hard for them to feel they could ever establish a sense of trust. One former Black student organization executive leader explained that Black students were often disappointed with the administration because of the lack of action taken to show Black students that their concerns were valid and/or valued.

While participants may not have reflected directly on policies or practices that they felt sustained a campus culture of exclusion, they were also not able to readily indicate many instances wherein they felt included by the administration. The lack of trust with their institutional leaders led many of the participants to believe that they had few advocates on campus. Though they noted that they could find support if they required it, their overall experience was not one of mutual trust. Even students who indicated that they had trust in the administration noted that many of their peers did not feel the same way. Participant narratives suggest that these students are at an institution that has potentially not taken a critical look at its own historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion to make Black students feel welcomed. The experiences for many of these students caused them to not feel valued, included, welcomed, or appreciated by senior most leaders of the institution. These experiences may be the reason why students sought out environments, such as the IDSS, to find ways to feel appreciated and accepted.

**Structural Diversity**

The structural diversity dimension of the campus racial climate model draws attention to the number of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds on campus (Hurtado et al., 1999). For many of the participants, their experiences on campus as a numerical minority were
particularly salient. Several participants drew attention towards the limited number of diverse students in their environment.

Students indicated that they experienced what has been termed in the literature as “tokenism.” Kanter (1977) defined tokens as “the few of another type in a skewed group ... [who] are often treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals” (p. 966). Minorities without significant representation within a majority environment can experience feelings of tokenism (Park, 2009). One student expressed this sentiment when he said “1 Black person in a pool of 200” is not a good representation of diversity. Many students shared experiences of being a token in their classroom environment, particularly when they were the only Black person in a room full of 300 students. Students explained that the only escape from being the “token” in the classroom they could experience was when they enrolled in classes they could expect to have more Black students, such as African American studies courses.

Many of these participants felt that the lack of structural diversity among the student body was an important aspect of their collegiate experiences. Though some students pondered whether more Black students on campus would actually fix their problems, others believed that there was a need to have more diverse representation in the student body. As Park (2009) noted in her study on satisfaction with demographic diversity, the diversity of the student body is linked to the perceptions students have about diversity and the way in which they experience the campus racial climate. As such, student experiences with this dimension of the framework suggests that these students sought out places, spaces, or activities where the experience of being underrepresented did not bother them or where they could engage with Black students to escape this continued feeling of tokenism. More often the Black students indicated that they sought out places like the IDSS because it provided them with the opportunity to engage with their Black
peers. Students utilized the IDSS as the Black student hangout as a way to escape their feelings of isolation in other areas on campus, because within the IDSS they were not treated as a representative of a category, but instead as an individual.

**Behavioral Climate**

The behavioral climate considers the ways students interact with those who are both racially and ethnically similar and dissimilar from themselves (Hurtado et al., 1999). These interactions were most often discussed in relation to other diverse students who engaged in the IDSS and White students in the broad campus environment. Guiffrida (2003) suggests many Black students eagerly seek out communities of comfort to engage with upon entering a predominantly White environment. Similarly, for many of the participants in this study, the IDSS provided them with this outlet to not only engage with peers who looked like them, but to also find a space that provided them with the comfort they needed.

Participants generally offered stories that suggested that they and their colleagues actively chose to engage with their Black peers on campus because they saw themselves as having more in common with them. Students regularly shared their need to engage with racially similar peers because of shared experiences. The ability to engage with those who shared their racial identity simply felt more comfortable. Additionally students noted that they primarily engaged with their Black peers because this, they perceived, was the way all students on campuses engaged. Some students noted that upon immediately arriving to Middle State it was evident that there were “little niches that don’t really interact” with each other. Often times these niches were separated based on race or ethnicity. Thus, it seemed to be relatively uncommon for students at Middle State to engage across difference in meaningful ways.
It should be noted that while many participants sought to actively engage with like others, some students noted that they did so because they were specifically uncomfortable engaging across difference. Students who exhibited this sort of behavior did so out of either anxiety in confirming negative stereotypes of Black people or because of previous negative experiences with White students. Though these two students did not represent a major contingent of participant experiences, their narratives suggest that there are Black students who engage across similarity as way to not engage difference.

Participants demonstrated a strong desire for students to interact and engage with those who are most like them. While there were exceptions to this, with some students who actively chose to engage in co-curricular activities with White students and predominantly White student organizations, many of the student narratives suggested that the behavioral dimension of the campus climate highlights that Black students are uncomfortable engaging with their majority peers “simply because of ethnic racial background” differences. Though there was no data within the interviews to illuminate why this discomfort existed, Hall et al. (2011) have proposed that engagement is a learned behavior and thus this component of the campus racial climate may have simply brought more attention towards the notion that these Black students have either not been presented with or did not participate in opportunities to engage across difference. Student narratives indicate that though the IDSS created some opportunities for students to engage across difference, it more readily provided Black students with the ability to continue engaging solely with their racially/ethnically similar peers.

**Psychological Climate**

The psychological climate dimension of the campus racial climate model deals with how an institution responds to diversity, the enmity students of color on predominantly White
campuses experience, as well as the experiences of prejudice, discrimination, and racism (Hurtado et al., 1999). In this research, this component of the framework was given extra attention because of the desire to understand how Black students experienced negative campus racial incidents.

Students expressed that they did not believe that their institution was “genuinely interested in diversity.” Some students believed that while their institution talked about the concept of diversity the institution did not embody the “essence of diversity.” Students felt that the institution only went through the motions of talking about and addressing diversity, rather than intentionally implementing activities to enact diversity on campus. Some students suggested that while they believe Middle State is capable of doing more because they “have the ingredients; [they’re] just not putting it all together.” This was exemplified in the NCRI experience of the participant who indicated that she had a NCRI experience during a class discussion on affirmative action. Though it is laudable to engage a classroom in such a controversial topic, instead of having a positive experience in healthy discourse with her peers, she felt she had to defend herself and her existence in the classroom to her White classmates. She noted that there was a definite feeling of “racial tension” in the room due to the conversation. This student’s experience highlights ways that Middle State, but more specifically select Faculty, attempt to engage students in conversations around topics related to diversity, but based on the participant’s narrative may not truly be equipped to lead a discussion that would cause some Black students not to feel singled out. Though this was only one example, student narratives related to their NCRI experiences suggest that there were times when Middle State fell short of meeting their expectations related to understanding how to embody the essence of diversity.
Students also expressed their concerns of the institution’s commitment to diversity by noting that while the campus professes to be diverse on paper, their lived experiences suggest otherwise. While all students had experienced a NCRI, as was required in order to participate in this research, often the type of NCRI students experienced was overt racial insensitivity often in the form of being called a “Nigger.” One participant shared that while walking downtown late one evening she remembers people yelling at her and her friends saying “go home Niggers…you all don’t belong here.” As unfortunate an experience as this was, other students who had similar encounters noted that these experiences are common at Middle State. What is uncommon, however, is the dearth of resources readily available for these students. While participants shared that the IDSS could serve as a place of support after experiencing a NCRI, they had difficulty offering other areas of support for Black students aside from their Black peers.

The lack of apparent resources, aside from the IDSS, for Black students also caused them to question how the institution responded to diversity. Participants highlighted that there were a wealth of resources available for other sorts of diverse students. Examples students offered included the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) center, the women’s center, the multi-cultural center, and various other departments or entities that exist. Though the prevalence of these resources might indicate Middle State was committed to diversity, participants expressed that the institution does a poor job of communicating the existence of these resources to students. One student in particular said “I didn’t know about a lot of the resources that are very specific to minority groups until maybe my junior year.” For these participants, the institution does little more than the minimum in promoting spaces on campus that are tailored to their racial/ethnic diversity. Though there are centers and resources on campus for diverse students of all kinds to utilize, students believe that the institution did not do
enough to actively promote them on campus to students who could benefit from the office’s services. This perceived unwillingness of the university to promote the resources for diverse students caused many participants to feel like the institution was not truly committed to diversity.

In addition to feeling as if the institution was not committed to diversity, students cited examples of how they believed the campus regularly adopted a reactive versus proactive approach to diversity. Participants indicated that their campus only gets worried about diversity when it has to. This was exemplified in the NCRI experience of one participant as he shared his feelings regarding a text alert that was sent out to the entire campus community inadvertently singling out all Black men. Though Middle State later sent out an apology for the broad description used in the notification, the need to apologize and react for an act of insensitivity caused the student to feel that the only reason Middle State commented on a diversity related topic was because of their need to react to a situation they created. Another student said “if there’s a huge cry for [diversity], Middle State works on it. If it’s not, they assume that everything’s okay.” Though students acknowledged that Middle State did not deserve all of the blame and Black students could stand to be more vocal about their concerns to help mold Middle State into the institution they want it to be, the students still pondered why Black students should have to be diversity advocates for the university.

Students indicated that in their experience at Middle State, diversity was simply a “buzz word.” Though there was sometimes talk about diversity around campus, or even diversity summits that some participants participated in, there was a shared belief among the participants that the institution either refused or was not ready to confront diversity issues head-on. Student narratives suggested that their lived experiences, relative to the psychological component of the campus racial climate model, are such that they engage in a campus environment that they do not
truly believe is committed to or interested in developing a commitment to diversity. The notion that the majority of the participant’s NCRI experiences were direct acts of racial intolerance suggests that there are deep levels of racial tension at Middle State that students do not feel the institution is doing much to address. While different aspects of the campus may provide diverse students with some of the resources they need, there was not a general feeling that the institution was outwardly committed to developing proactive ways to promote diversity. As such student experiences with this component of the framework suggest that these students believed they existed in an environment that does not readily respond to or acknowledge diversity on campus.

**Sense of Belonging**

The original intent of this study was to focus primarily on how IDSSs helped to foster sense of belonging with Black students at PWIs who experienced negative campus racial incidents. What emerged from the data was that, although NCRIIs had an effect on Black students’ lived experiences within the campus racial climate, these incidents rarely caused Black students to further intentionally engage with the institutionally designated safe space. The impact the IDSS had on their development of a sense of belonging was more focused on meeting their individual needs, relative to sense of belonging, rather than serving as a place of support upon experiencing a negative campus racial incident. However, it is important to note that the IDSS did not meet each student’s needs by itself; instead as portrayed in Figures 1 and 2, these needs were met in concert with the student’s level of academic and co-curricular engagement.

Students’ experiences with campus racial climate draw attention to the individual experiences students have within the campus environment. Though students shared common experiences with regards to level of trust in the administration, tokenism, peer engagement, and perceived institutional commitment, students interpreted their experiences on campus differently.
While students had similar experiences, they way they responded to these experiences helped to dictate their needs for sense of belonging at the individual level. For example, the varying levels of trust participants had with campus administrators affected the way students engaged with other student organizations and their peers. Also, their NCRI experiences affected what resources students used on campus, as well the level of engagement they had in different areas on campus, including the institutionally designated safe space.

For the students who did not believe that they were valued or welcomed on campus, their need to identify spaces or places that would help to combat those feelings were important for them to feel as if they belonged on campus. While many of the students were able to develop this feeling within the IDSS, others experienced this support in either their academic or co-curricular spaces. The same was true for students who experienced feelings of tokenism. For example, students who experienced feelings of tokenism in the academic realm primarily employed two strategies to find ways to feel less excluded. One student viewed the experience as an opportunity to further engage with her classmates to prove that she was not just a representative of her group, but instead just another Middle State student. Her need to feel connected to her classmates in the academic arena was important to her feeling of belonging. However, another student who experienced a similar feeling of tokenism actively sought out the IDSS on campus out of the need to be surrounded by Black peers. Therefore although students have shared experiences within the contexts of the campus racial climate, how they interpret these experiences and respond suggests that they created their own sense of belonging on campus. The operational definition of sense of belonging guiding this research focused on ways students felt valued, felt a sense of fit, and felt integrated into the social fabric of the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Their ability to respond to each incident in a way that will ultimately engender
these feelings suggests that students have significant control on how they develop their own sense of belonging. As such, while students are ultimately in control of how they develop a sense of belonging, their belonging is shaped by the mechanisms the institution has in place to aid them while they engage in the college environment and experience the campus racial climate.

The different areas of the campus environment and the way students rely on them to help fulfill their sense of belonging is perhaps the most important aspect of the theory because it accounts for the individual differences students experienced and how these differences ultimately helped each of them develop a sense of belonging. Though all students discussed their engagement in their academics, the importance of their co-curricular activities, and their level of engagement with the IDSS, all students did not develop a sense of belonging in the same way. Instead, students developed a sense of belonging through various combinations of these three entities. In the graphics below (see figure 2 and 3), the entities that helped to satisfy these student’s unique needs for developing a sense of belonging inhabit both the upper layer of the circle and also occupy the most space.
The examples offered in figures 2 and 3 offer a representation of the black circle in figure 1 to indicate how the innermost circle of the three interlocking circles may look for a student who attributes their sense of belonging to the IDSS. The sense of belonging the student in figure 2 generated was based on the ability of the different entities to fulfill their needs. This student articulated that they had a need to engage with like peers in an environment away from their White counterparts, wanted the ability to have intentional conversations about issues regarding race relations on campus, and needed a location on campus that felt like home. Because of this, the example offered in figure 2 shows the IDSS portion of the sphere occupying both the most space as well being located on top because it fulfilled most of the student’s sense of belonging needs and it has the most saliency to the student. It is because of this saliency and meaning the IDSS has to the student that they were able to have a sense of belonging with the broader campus community.

**Chapter Summary**

The model presented in figure 1 offers a way to understand how Black students at Middle State were able to develop a sense of belonging. Their experiences with different dimensions of the campus racial climate influenced how they engaged with the three primary areas they suggested. For students who experienced the limited structural diversity at Middle State as a problem, the IDSS became a place of support. These students utilized the IDSS as a place to interact and engage with other Black peers. However, though this was true for some students who felt underrepresented in the campus community, some students who had the same concern regarding the structural diversity saw this issue as an opportunity to further engage with their non-Black peers either in the academic or co-curricular area. As such, though students shared many similar experiences related to the campus racial climate, how they interpreted and
ultimately acted upon these experiences is what influenced their development of a sense of belonging.

It was the individual needs of the students that played a significant role in determining where participants attributed their sense of belonging. Though figure 2 is only a representation of one student, it is likely that the eight students who indicated that the IDSS was critical in their development of a sense of belonging would have a similar distribution. However, the reasons behind that distribution would be different for each student. Some students relied on the IDSS to help fulfill their need to belong because of their desire to have open, honest, and critical conversations with peers where they would not feel judged. Others indicated so because of the IDSSs ability to fulfill their desire to have a sub-community on campus that provided them a space to engage with a small, consistent, and familiar group of friends. Whether students attributed their development of a sense of belonging to the IDSS, to their engagement in their academics, or their interactions in co-curricular initiatives, the ability of one of the aforementioned areas to meet the student’s unique needs is ultimately what helped them develop a sense a belonging. As such, the model developed and depicted in Figures 1 offers a way to understand how these Black students developed a sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution.
Chapter VII: Discussion

The winter issue of the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education reported that the Black college student graduation rate was 45% (Anonymous, 2009b). In 2010, the American Council on Education’s 24th status of minorities in higher education noted that compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Black college student attrition is still a problem in higher education. As such, research that helps to inform future scholarship, institutional policies, and administrative practices that may help improve persistence for Black collegians is needed.

Scholars have studied and written on many aspects of the Black college student experience, ranging from historical framing of their initial entrance into higher education (e.g., Meyers, 1989; Samuels, 2004), to more current examinations of their experiences within their collegiate environments (Bacor, 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Many of these scholars have written about the negative experiences Black students have had at predominantly White institutions (PWI) (e.g. Cabrera & Nora, 1994; McDonald & Vrana, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Specifically, scholars have indicated that negative experiences which cause students to not feel valued, welcomed, or integrated into the social fabric of the institution, can lead to diminished feelings of a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 19997). However, while scholars have researched and documented aspects of a Black collegian’s experience which may lead to a sense of belonging, there is limited research considering specifically how negative campus racial incident (NCRI) experiences are related to the ways Black students utilize institutional resources, such as institutionally designated safe spaces (IDSSs), to help develop a sense of belonging.

This research aspired to more deeply examine the interaction between Black students who experienced a NCRI and their engagement within an IDSS, and whether these spaces help to
foster a sense of belonging for Black students. Specifically, this study was an analysis of whether and how 12 Black college students developed a sense of belonging through their engagement with the IDDS at a predominantly White institution. The sample was comprised of 6 men and 6 women, representing all undergraduate class years. All participants self-identified as Black, indicated they had experienced a NCRI while enrolled at Middle State University (Middle State), were traditional college age (i.e., 17-24 years of age), were enrolled as a full time student (i.e., 12 or more credit course load), and engaged in the Cultural Center two or more separate days per week.

This chapter offers a brief summary of the study, as well as an overview of the methods used. Subsequently a discussion of key findings is presented, followed by implications for research, policy, and practice.

**Study Overview**

Scholars have done extensive research on the experience of Black students in higher education, often focused on their experiences and interactions at predominantly White campuses (e.g. Allen et al., 1991; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Mingle, 1981; Peterson et al., 1978; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Pounds, 1987; Pratt, 2002; Schofield et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2007; Willie & McCord, 1972). They also provided detail regarding what aspects of the college environment affect Black student persistence in predominantly White environments. Generally, researchers suggest that Black student persistence is impacted by the support structures available on campus, the sense of comfort students feel in these environments, financial or personal motivations and problems, sense of belonging, and the campus racial climate (Gloria et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1999; Rhee, 2007; Tinto, 1993).
Scholars have begun to look differently at the experiences of Black students in PWIs by drawing attention to the relationship between sense of belonging and persistence (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Hausmann et al., 2007; and Hausmann et al., 2009). Some note encouraging Black students to participate in specific activities to help them develop a sense of belonging at their institution may influence their intent to persist (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Others indicate that sense of belonging for Black students could not be artificially created because of its relationship with persistence and meeting specific needs (Hausmann et al., 2009). One such need for Black students was the ability to interact with their Black peers. Scholars discovered that when Black students were less comfortable with their White peers, being able to interact with their Black peers helped engender a sense of belonging as well as helped to facilitate their success in college (McDonald & Vrana, 2007).

Black cultural centers can offer Black students the opportunity to engage with their Black peers on predominantly White campuses (Patton, 2006; Young, 1991). In many cases, cultural centers serve as safe spaces, serving as a place of refuge for Black students and helping to provide them with a sense of belonging (Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994). However, there was little mention to how or why this was the case. By understanding what mechanisms may be occurring within the college environment and by taking a closer look at the way students perceive an IDSS, practitioners may be better equipped to prepare strategies that will help facilitate a sense of belonging for Black students at predominantly White institutions.

This work was informed by the campus racial climate framework (Hurtado et al., 1999), which encourages scholars and practitioners to examine the ways community members experience and perceive their institutions’ diversity initiatives. Campus racial climate encompasses the interactions all members of the community have with different racial and ethnic
groups, as well the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding diversity and the institution’s diversity initiatives. Campus racial climate is multidimensional, created through an interaction of external and internal institutional factors (Hurtado et al., 1999). Although the external factors are important (e.g., federal and state policy changes which impact higher education institutions), this study focuses on the internal institutional factors:

- an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups,
- its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, the psychological climate, which includes perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and a behavioral dimension that is characterized by relations among groups on campus (Hurtado, et al., p. 6-7).

Through this study, I sought to better understand how IDSSs fostered a sense of belonging for Black students at a PWI, particularly when faced with an instance of a negative campus racial incident. Initially three research questions were used to guide this work; however, due to the lack of sufficient data necessary to answer one of the research questions, presented below are the two remaining questions that were presented in the findings:

1. How do Black college students utilize and experience IDSSs?
2. How is the engagement of Black students in IDSSs related to their experiences with negative campus racial incidents and sense of belonging?

The two forms of qualitative inquiry implemented in this work were phenomenology and grounded theory. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study helps the researcher understand the lived experiences for multiple people around a specific phenomenon or concept. This approach helps the researcher uncover the “essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The grounded theory approach has, as its primary goal, the ability for a
researcher to develop an explanation or understanding that is grounded in the data collected (Merriam, 2002). In this form of research, the researcher develops a theory to help make meaning and provide a process by which the shared experience of multiple individuals can best be understood (Creswell, 2007). The combination of these two qualitative approaches allowed me to draw attention to the lived experiences of the participants and develop a theory to help make meaning of their shared experience.

This study was conducted at Middle State, a research university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Data were collected during the Spring term of the 2013-2014 academic year. Students were recruited with the help of current and former IDSS staff members. Students were emailed formal invitations asking if they would be interested in participating in the study. Additionally, I reached out directly to students within the IDSS. Finally, a snowball sampling strategy was used, and participants were encouraged to recommend peers interested in participating.

Using a combination of qualitative approaches drawn from phenomenology and grounded theory, interviews were analyzed by first generating a list of emerging experiences, then by generating a code book to consistently categorize participant narratives. Upon coding each student narrative, I wrote a memo highlighting any emerging or unique themes I perceived to be emanating from the data. After coding the data and writing memos for each narrative the codebook was revised and the process was repeated, such that narratives were once again coded and memos were once again written. After the second round of coding, student narratives were separated out and analyzed to develop themes by which to articulate their shared experiences. After drafting some preliminary findings, a grounded theory was developed through an analysis of the emergent themes. When reviewing the themes and the narratives students offered, an
initial theory was generated in an attempt to provide a framework to understand all participant experiences. The grounded theory was then discussed with participants and faculty involved in this research and revised to present the current theory for how Black students in this study developed a sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

The recommendations on how to promote a sense of belonging for Black students at PWIs often falls into two categories: have them engage more often with students across similarities (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Kuh & Love, 2000) or across difference (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a). Pittman (1994) and others (e.g., Patton, 2006, 2010; Young, 1991) suggest it is important that Black students have a space where they can engage with racially similar peers. Similarly, participants in the current study generally shared that the ability for Black students to interact, engage, and socialize with their racially/ethnically similar peers in the IDSS helped them to feel as if they belonged on campus.

In considering the sense of belonging Black students were able to generate with the broader campus community, there were two key findings that resulted from this study. The first is that the NCRIs Black students experienced did not prevent them from developing a sense of belonging with their college community. Instead, this research suggests that spaces like the IDSS help minimize the effect of an NCRI experience. The second key finding of this research is that individual differences, needs, and experiences are more important for helping Black students develop a sense of belonging rather than a specific space. This research uncovered that the way individual students perceive shared experiences within the campus racial climate affect what aspects of their college environment they rely on to help develop a sense of belonging.
Sense of Belonging not Diminished by NCRI

One of the key findings of this study was that Black students’ experiences with NCRIIs did not coincide with a decreased sense of belonging to the overall campus environment. The IDSS offered Black students a space where they could hang out, engage with their peers, have intentional dialogues with other students and staff within the center, and generally serve as a safe space for Black students to exist. Participants did not seek out the IDSS as a source of support after experiencing a negative campus racial incident; however, the IDSS did serve as a base of support for their overall campus experience. Solarzano et al. (2000) noted that campus counter-spaces like multicultural centers provide Black students with a place to engage in conversations about their problems. Young and Hannon (2002) indicated that these spaces provide Black students with a type of sanctuary in an otherwise hostile environment. Williamson (1999) offered that these spaces were originally created with the idea that Black students needed a space that served as a safe haven in difficult environments. As such, the aforementioned research suggests that Black students use spaces like the IDSS as a source of support generally, rather than for specific incidents of prejudice or discrimination.

This research furthers findings documented in extant research, acknowledging that although the IDSS was not the location on campus students sought out immediately after experiencing a NCRI, it did serve as a space where students could gain knowledge to help prepare them for how to deal with incidents in the future. In her research, Patton (2006) found that these spaces help prepare Black students for continual engagement in racially hostile environments, rather than specific engagement after they experience a negative campus racial incident. Participants in this study noted that the ability of the IDSS to help them engage in both casual and critical conversations, to help provide them with tools needed to engage in the broader
campus community, and the general support they experienced from the IDSS was more important to helping them develop a sense of belonging than utilizing the IDSS as a specific source of support upon experiencing a negative campus racial incident.

These findings support much of what has been written in the literature regarding Black student usage of spaces like the IDSS. This study also furthers Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso’s (2000) work which suggests that though microaggressions, such as NCRI s, can have negative academic and social consequences for Black students, the ability for students to have spaces like the IDSS help to foster a positive collegiate experience. Therefore, though the NCRI s were unique stressors which could ultimately diminish Black students’ sense of belonging with the overall campus environment, Black students involvement in the IDSS indirectly acted as a buffer to help mitigate this negative effect. In discussing this key finding with one participant, primarily the notion that Black students did not seek out the IDSS for support after experiencing an NCRI, he said Black students do not talk about these experiences because “what is understood, need not be spoken.” In further discussing his meaning, he shared that because NCRI s are a common occurrence for students on campus, there is no need to engage in conversations about each incident. As such, Black students focused and relied on the IDSS to help fulfill their individual needs, relative to sense of belonging, rather than drawing attention to instances that made them feel as if they did not belong at Middle State.

**Sense of Belonging as an Individual Need**

While participants were able to develop a sense of belonging with the broader campus community, the ways in which each person did so were unique based on each student’s individual needs. Based on student narratives, the individual needs of a student and the ability of an office, an activity, or another entity on campus to fulfill those needs helped contribute to their
sense of belonging. Though all students offered that they engaged in similar aspects of the campus environment (i.e. engaging in the IDSS, academics, or co-curricular activities), the way they perceived their interactions within these different aspects of the college community helped to shape how they developed a sense of belonging. For instance, students who experienced feelings of tokenism (Kanter, 1977) in the classroom, such that they felt isolated or had to speak on behalf of their entire Black race, reacted to these feelings in very different ways. While one student interpreted these feelings as a need to engage more in their academics so that they could feel like a “regular” Middle State student, another decided that they needed to engage more with their Black peers, in a designated space, as a way to combat these feelings of tokenism.

These findings also support previous research which suggests that various campus communities can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging for Black students. Browne and Minnick (2005) found that living learning communities can help Black students develop a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions. Similarly, residence halls provided the appropriate level of support needed to develop a sense of belonging for racially diverse women in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors (Johnson, 2012). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who engaged in academically oriented activities outside of the classroom developed a higher level of sense of belonging as compared to those who did not do the same.

While the findings of this research generally support the literature, scholars have not truly considered how Black students’ personal needs are met by different aspects of their college environment and how this is related to their development of a sense of belonging. Johnson et al.’s (2007) work on sense of belonging for diverse first-year students found that the sense of belonging of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds differed based on the aspect
of the college environment they interacted with. More specifically, their research offered that engaging in co-curricular activities was significantly related to White and Asian Pacific American students developing a sense of belonging. Though Johnson and colleagues do not indicate the significance of co-curricular involvement and sense of belonging for Black students, their finding do suggest that students develop their sense of belonging in different ways.

Participants’ narratives highlight the uniqueness of each student’s process in developing a sense of belonging. For some, sense of belonging in the broader campus community was developed through their engagement in the IDSS. However, the reasons these students offered for why the space was able to help them achieve this belonging varied and were based on their unique needs, as well as the ability of the campus entity to help meet those needs. For instance, one male participant felt relatively valued in his academic arena and felt supported in his co-curricular activities. While both of these contributed to his development of a sense of belonging, it was the ability of the IDSS to provide him with a sense of family and support to continue pushing forward in his campus environment that ultimately provided him a sense of belonging with the broader campus community. As another example, one female participant felt supported and valued in her academic arena as well as feeling welcomed and comfortable in the IDSS. While being valued and welcomed contributed to her sense of belonging, it was her desire to engage in service oriented activities that provided her opportunities to be active in local communities around Middle State that ultimately provided her with a sense of belonging. As such, the experience of developing a sense of belonging was unique to each student because of their personal background, their personal experiences, and the ways they individually perceived their interactions with and engaged in their academics, their co-curricular activities, and their involvement in the IDSS. Students attributed their sense of belonging to the different aspects of
the campus that helped meet their unique belonging need. For some this would be the IDSS and for others this would be their co-curricular involvement, however all participants indicated that the three areas (IDSS, co-curricular, and academic engagement) combined to play a role in shaping how they developed their sense of belonging on campus.

Previous research suggests that Black students were able to develop a sense of belonging by engaging in specific communities (Browne & Minnick, 2005; Johnson, 2012); however, because many of these sense of belonging studies utilized quantitative analysis measures, scholars did not explore specific within group differences of Black students. Further, quantitative work would not be able to uncover what led students to indicate which specific spaces helped them develop a sense of belonging nor what the spaces offered in terms of support. Instead, what may have happened is what was presented in figure 2 of the grounded theory, which illustrates that the area on campus that meets most of the individual student’s sense of belonging need and is most salient to them is what they assert helped them develop a sense of belonging with the overall campus environment. This research offers a different finding than what is common in this literature by focusing on qualitative aspects of how and why campus environments help Black students develop sense of belonging.

**Limitations**

This research, must like any good qualitative research, suffers from a few limitations. One of the first limitations of this study was its small sample size. Though phenomenological research espouses that data saturation can occur with as little as six participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), the minimum number often suggested in grounded theory is twenty (Creswell, 2007). As the PI was only able to recruit twelve students to participate in this study, future studies with a more robust sample size might yield data that can better help inform the theory
presented. Additionally, though the sample was evenly distributed by gender, it was weighted heavily by seniors who represented 50% of all study participants. As such a larger sample size which intentionally includes a greater variety of Black students from class years could help identify potential differences in how Black students develop a sense of belonging.

A second limitation of this study was that this research did not include interviews with staff within the institutionally designated safe space. Conducting interviews with staff who work in the IDSS could help add extra validity to the research by helping to triangulate data. Creswell (2007) suggests that triangulation involves the use of various forms of data to help corroborate themes that are emerging in the research. Interviewing staff in the IDSS could help illuminate other ways Black students utilize and experience the safe space as well as provide further insight on ways Black students seek out support upon experiencing negative campus racial incidents.

The third limitation of this study was the generalizability of the findings. Mariam and Associates (2002) suggest that a standard concern in qualitative research is the ability for the findings of the study to be generalized to other sites. Because this research was conducted on a single campus with a relatively small sample size, the ability to generalize these findings across similar institutional types or similar groups of Black students who engage in IDSSs at these respective institutions is a limitation. Although a rich data collection strategy was used as a means to combat this external validity concern (Mariam & Associates, 2002), a more robust sample which incorporates the lived experiences of Black students from similar institutional types across the country could help increase the generalizability of the findings.

Implications

There is an abundance of literature on the benefits of sense of belonging for undergraduate students (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007; Hagerty et al., 2002; Hoffman et al., 2002;
Maestas et al., 2007; Spady, 1971; Zepke et al., 2006) and an equal amount of literature discussing the implications sense of belonging has for students of color (e.g., Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007; Nora, 2004). However, few studies consider how institutionally created spaces help students of color foster a sense of belonging. This study opens the door for research on this issue by focusing on how an IDSS, in conjunction with other campus entities, helped cultivate sense of belonging for Black students at predominantly White institutions.

Implications for Research

This study is unique in its attention to assessing sense of belonging among Black students who engage in institutionally designated safe spaces. Patton (2006) comes closest to this concept in her work by indicating that Black students who utilized the Black cultural center were able to achieve “a sense of ownership, association, and belonging on campus” (p. 642). However, her work was focused primarily on the significance of Black cultural centers on college campuses and her findings only offered a cursory understanding of the ability of Black cultural centers to help Black students develop a sense of belong. Research specifically focused on Black cultural centers, IDSSs, or other safe spaces students identify on campus and how they help facilitate their sense of belonging is still needed as a way to further the retention of Black college students.

Considering how Black students’ lived experiences at Middle State compare to those of their peers at other institutions also merits further research. Scholars suggest there are distinctions in lived experiences of Black students at different institutional types. For example, Seifert, Drummond, and Pascarella (2006) found that institutional type was an important component for Black students’ experiences of good practices relative to the academic learning environment. DeSousa and Kuh (1996) offered four propositions regarding the difference
between Black students at PWIs versus those at historically Black institutions. These propositions suggested that there were several major differences between the learning environment and the amount of effort Black students dedicated to their academics. Research that considers how Black students develop sense of belonging across various institutional types seems to be an area worthy of further investigation.

Another area of research should also include the differences within the Black student experience as well. Though this research welcomed all students who self-identified as Black to participate in the study, it is possibly the case that students who identified as Black may have grown up in a household where either one or both parents were immigrants. Recent research into this topic (Griffin, Cunningham, and Mwangi, under review) suggests that some Black immigrant students perceive the campus racial climate differently than their Black native peers. Thus research that is able to draw attention to the intersections of students’ racial and ethnic identities, similar to Johnson et al. (2007), will be important to further understanding how Black students develop a sense of belonging at White institutions. Research focusing specifically on these different intersections may uncover that the shared experiences of Black immigrant students versus that of Black native students may cause each group to rely on different aspects of their college environment to help them develop a sense of belonging.

**Implications for Theory**

Hurtado et al.’s (1999) campus racial climate framework provided a helpful lens to investigate the lived experiences of Black students at a predominantly White institution. The different components of the institutional context, such as the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate, allowed for consideration of how students’ individual views of the campus racial climate affected their
ability to develop a sense of belonging with the larger campus community. While Johnson and colleagues’ (2007) findings suggest that a positive campus racial climate perception is indicative of a sense of belonging, the findings of this research add a nuanced layer of understanding to this statement. The students in this study indicated that they did not have a positive perception of the campus racial climate, but that they did have a sense of belonging with the overall campus environment. Therefore, students can develop a sense of belonging in a more challenging climate when they receive the necessary support. This finding suggests that though Hurtado et al.’s (1999) framework can be helpful in determining how students perceive different aspects of the campus racial climate, it is likely that the relationship between campus racial climate and sense of belonging is more complex than Johnson et al. (2007) may have suggested. Because of this it will be important for future theories to consider a model that highlights how students who perceive the campus racial climate negatively can still develop a sense of belonging. Theories that can establish a more direct connection between campus racial climate and sense of belonging are needed to further help explore and understand the lived experiences of Black students at PWIs and how they develop sense of belonging.

It is also important to note that while Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested that feeling welcomed, respected, and valued at the institution is indicative of a sense belonging, their definition does not account for how students develop a sense of belonging through their engagement in smaller sub-communities. Research that has considered how sense of belonging is developed through engaging in specific sub-communities (e.g., Browne & Minnick, 2005; Freeman et al., 2007; Gilliard, 1996), has often only focused on the student’s engagement within a single sub-community, rather than engaging in multiple communities on campus. Considering this research found that Black students utilize various communities on campus to meet their
individual belonging needs, future theories on sense of belonging that can better consider the
how interactions in multiple sub-communities help to foster a sense of belonging is also needed.

**Recommendations and Implications for Practice**

The narratives offered by students within this study draw attention to ways Black students who engage with an IDSS develop a sense of belonging on a predominantly White campus. This research and its findings regarding the lived experiences of Black students are important for institutional administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty because they highlight ways institutions can further support students. Though the IDSS was able to provide a safe space for a number of these students and served as the entity that helped most of them develop a sense of belonging, there are still aspects of their college experience that could be improved upon. The following recommendations are based on students’ perceptions of how they believe their institution could better enhance the Black student experience.

**Administrative Intentionality.** Students participating in this study mentioned that one of the major ways their institution could enhance the Black student experience was through better communication of care about the Black student voice and experience by administrators. Museus and Harris (2010) noted that when students believe campus officials only profess a commitment to diversity and do not enact these same values, those actions are seen as artificial. Participants in this research often noted that they wanted their administrators to be “real” with them and have honest conversations. However, it was not only the need to have honest conversations, but students also wanted to have continual conversations with campus officials. Students asserted that by being able to engage in a constant dialogue with administrators regarding the campus’s diversity, there would be more opportunities to share their concerns as well as develop a sense of trust that does not currently exist.
Harper and Hurtado (2007) assert that it is important for campus administrators to both espouse a commitment to diversity and engage in a process that allows them to review their campus racial climates. This research found that doing so would cause students to feel valued and to feel as if the institution is proactively taking measures to continually examine the Black student experience. Rhee (2008) suggests that students who have an increased perception of a commitment to diversity from their institution are more likely to be retained. As such, administrators in higher education would do well to find ways to continually examine their campus’s racial climate and ensure Black students are engaged in these conversations. These conversations should include a wide range of campus leaders, such as the Provost, Vice President for Business and Finance, Vice President for Student Affairs, and/or the President. This, students shared, sends more of a message to the diverse student body that the institution is committed to diversity.

Black Student Orientation. Participants in this research also noted that while there are pockets of support for Black students on campus, they were often disaggregated or students were not aware of them. To combat this and provide Black students with a way to feel supported in the college community upon their matriculation, many students suggested that a separate orientation for Black students was needed. Patton (2006) offered that campus wide orientation programs are often ill-equipped to provide Black students with the specific resources they need to be successful in their new environment. Participants in this research echoed this concern and asserted that having a separate orientation would provide them the ability to learn about helpful resources on campus that are designed to enhance and support the Black student experience.

Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) shared this same recommendation, noting that by having a Black student orientation, Black students could learn of common problems other Black students
on campus have faced and have the opportunity to identify faculty and staff within the institution who both understand their needs and will serve as a resource to support them. Though students in this research shared that they recognized the dilemma this would put the institution in by separating students at a time where they could be learning about one another, the shared experiences many of them have had regarding the lack of knowledge about where to go for help warrants the need for such a practice to begin. Also, though this recommendation is something that has been made by other researchers, it warrants mentioning again as Black students at Middle State and other PWIs across the country could benefit from the individual attention and support.

**Conclusion**

Research that has called attention to the ways in which Black students develop a sense of belonging in predominantly White environments (e.g. Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Johnson et al., 2007) often compares the experiences of Black students and their White counterparts. Hausmann et al. (2009) suggested that Black students have specific needs that differ from their White peers relative to the development of a sense of belonging. While Hausmann et al. (2009) and others have been helpful in understanding sense of belonging as a general concept, they have not delved deep into the specific experiences of Black students. Additionally, the importance of the IDSS for Black students has been previously researched (see Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006, 2010, 2011; Pittman, 1994; and Renn, 2011), this work has not led to a clear understanding of how these spaces help to facilitate a sense of belonging.

This research provides a deeper look into how Black students who engage with an IDSS are able to develop a sense of belonging in a predominantly White environment. Findings suggest that Black students rely on IDSSs for support and encouragement. The support and
encouragement participants receive from an IDSS allows them to feel visible, prepared to engage in a potentially hostile environment, and helps them to feel as if they are valued members of the campus community.

The IDSS in this research served as an oasis for Black students, providing them with a space where they could engage, socialize, and interact with their Black peers. Student narratives suggested that having a central location they could inhabit which was situated away from a space their White peers used was important in helping them feel belonging. Though this research did not find a significant relationship between the negative campus racial incidents (NCRI) students experienced and the support they received or sought from the IDSS, it is possible that the support and encouragement Black students received in other ways from the IDSS helped to diminish the effect of a NCRI such that students did not rely on the IDSS for help in this regard.

By understanding the general experience Black students have with their campus racial climate, predominantly White institutions can better understand Black students’ needs and ensure there are mechanisms in place to help meet them. This study suggests Black students developed a sense of belonging with the overall campus community based on their individual needs and their interactions with multiple sub-communities. One of the three communities students indicated was important to their development of a sense of belonging was the IDSS; however, students suggested that there has been little effort on behalf of non-Black institutional administrators to better understand their experience. Black students participating in this study offered myriad examples highlighting their disconnection from, or times they felt forgotten by, non-Black institutional administrators. As such it will be important that institutional leaders begin to identify ways to better examine the Black student experience, especially in relation to their engagement in spaces like IDSS. The findings of this research can provide scholars and
practitioners alike with a new way to begin investigating how IDSSs help meet the sense of belonging needs of Black students at predominantly white institutions.
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doi:10.1177/0002764207307742


doi:10.1080/03075070600923418
Hello!

I hope your Spring semester thus far has been a wonderful experience. My name is Emil L. Cunningham, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education’s, Higher Education program. You are receiving this notice today because you were mentioned as somebody who might be interested in participating in a study I am doing on Black students and their experiences on campus generally and in the PRCC specifically. As compensation for your willingness to participate in this study, you will receive a $10 LionCash+ gift card to be used at a number of locations both on and off campus.

This letter serves as your official invitation to participate in my study. This study has been approved by The Pennsylvania State University’s Office of Research Protection Institutional Review Board. Participating consists of completing a brief demographic questionnaire and subsequently participating in a 60-90 minute interview that will be scheduled at a convenient time for you between today and the end of April, 2014. You will also be presented with the option to participate in a follow up meeting that will allow you to review the transcript from our interview as well as some of my preliminary analyses. These follow up meetings will likely be scheduled during the late summer or early fall of 2014.

There is minimal risk associated with participating in this study and you have the option to withdraw from this study at any point. You are not required to answer any question(s) that cause you to feel uncomfortable and your identity will be kept strictly confidential in any data that is reported from this research.

If you would like to participate or require further information about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at:

Emil L. Cunningham, ABD

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Emil L. Cunningham, M.Ed.
Dissertation Co-Chairs, Leticia Oseguera, Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University and Kimberly Griffin, Ph.D. University of Maryland, College Park
APPENDIX B - Demographic Questionnaire

CONTACT INFORMATION
1. Preferred Pseudonym: ____________________________
2. Email address: ____________________________
3. Phone number: ____________________________

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
4. What is your gender identity?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other: ______________
5. What is your age: __________

NEIGHBORHOOD BACKGROUND:
6. How would you describe the racial background of the neighborhood where you grew up?
   a. Racially Homogenous (similar)
   b. Predominantly Heterogeneous (different)
   c. Racially Mixed
7. How would you describe the economic background of your neighborhood?
   a. Low-income
   b. Lower-middle class
   c. Middle class
   d. Upper-middle class
   e. Upper class
FAMILY BACKGROUND:

8. What is the highest level of education completed by your parent(s) or guardian(s)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother or Guardian 1</th>
<th>Father or Guardian 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School diploma or G.E.D.</td>
<td>High School diploma or G.E.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associates degree</td>
<td>Associates degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate school</td>
<td>Some graduate school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., MBA, JD, etc.)</td>
<td>Terminal degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., MBA, JD, etc.)</td>
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</table>

9. What is the best estimate of your household’s total income
   a. Under $20,000
   b. $20,001 - $40,000
   c. $40,001 - $60,000
   d. $60,001 - $80,000
   e. $80,001 - $100,000
   f. Over $100,001

10. What is the occupation of your Mother/Guardian (e.g. professor, teacher, sales associate)? (Please leave blank, if not applicable): _____________________________

11. What is the occupation of your Father/Guardian (e.g. professor, teacher, sales associate)? (Please leave blank, if not applicable): _____________________________

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

12. What is your current academic year standing?
   a. First-Year student
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior

13. What is your major? _____________________________

14. What is your current GPA? _____________________________
FRIENDS AND RELATIONSHIPS

15. Please list the names and race/ethnicity of 5 of your closest friends:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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16. Please indicate any campus specific spaces or locations on campus you most often associate (hang out) with your friends: ________________________________

17. Please indicate any other campus specific places or locations on campus that you and your friends most often associate (hang out) together? __________________________
APPENDIX C - Interview Protocol

Introductory Questions:
1. Tell me some things about yourself
   a. Primers
      i. Where are you from?
      ii. Why did you decide to come to [Middle State]?

Campus Racial Climate Questions:

Historical Legacy of Inclusion/Exclusion
1. How would you describe [Middle State's] commitment to and level of acceptance related to diversity?
2. How supportive do you think [Middle State] is of Black students on campus?
   a. Follow up - How would you describe the level of trust between Black students and campus administrators?

Psychological & Behavioral Climate
1. Can you talk to me about your experience in making friends here on campus? How has that experience been?
2. How would you describe race relations since you have been on campus?
3. Tell me a bit about the last time you experienced a negative campus racial incident. What happened? What was that experience like?
   a. How did you manage your feelings and get support after this experience?
   b. How common are experiences like this within the Black community? Where do your peers go for support?
4. Tell me a bit about how you interact with your peers on campus. How do you feel members of other races respect you on campus? How about members of your own race?

Structural Diversity
1. What would a diverse campus look like to you?
   a. Follow up – How does [Middle State] fit into that view?
2. Can you describe your level of satisfaction with the diversity of the student body here on campus?
   a. Follow up – how about with the level of diversity of faculty and staff?

Sense of Belonging Questions:
1. Talk to me a bit about how you feel you fit in on this campus?
   a. Follow up – Have there ever been instances in which you have felt alone? If so, can you talk to me a bit about those?
2. How do you think Black students experience this campus?
   a. Follow up – How do you think other Black students generally feel like they belong on this campus?
3. Tell me a bit about your level of comfort engaging with members of the campus community - how comfortable do you feel interacting with faculty and staff?
   a. Follow up – How about with your peers?
4. To what extent have you participated in social events on campus?

**Social Network Questions:**
1. Tell me a bit about your friends and most important relationships on campus?
   a. Follow up – how did you find those people and connect to them?
2. How much of a factor does race/ethnicity play into your social network?

**Black Cultural Center Questions:**
1. Tell me about your engagement in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC) – when did you start going there? How often do you go and what do you do there?
2. Tell me a bit about the level of support you receive from the PRCC – how comfortable do you feel interacting with the staff in the center?
   a. Follow up – how about with other students?
3. How would you describe the PRCC to somebody who is unfamiliar with its presence?
   a. Follow up – what words might you use to describe the space?
4. Tell me about your relationships with staff members in the PRCC. What are they like?
   a. Follow up – how did those relationships come about?
5. Tell me about relationships you have with fellow students in the PRCC. What are they like?
   a. Follow up – how about with other students?
6. How do you feel about your sense of comfort and fit within the PRCC?
7. To what extent do you feel connected and/or integrated with the PRCC community?
8. When you discussed your sense of fit with [Middle State], what makes you feel that way?
   a. Follow up - if PRCC is not discussed – does the PRCC have any effect on making you feel this way?

**Persistence questions:**
1. What made you decide to attend [Middle State]?
   a. Follow up – How do you feel about this decision now?
2. How important is it for you to graduate from college?
   a. Follow up – How important is it to you to graduate from [Middle State], specifically?
   b. Follow up - Have you ever thought of dropping out of college altogether?
3. Are there other college or universities you would rather attend? Have you ever given thought to leaving the institution?
   a. Follow up – Why or why not?
   b. How likely is it that you will register for classes here next fall?

**Wrap Up Questions**
1. What recommendations do you have for the institution to enhance the Black experience?
2. Are there any questions I did not ask you that expected me to ask?
3. Are there any additional comments you would like to make before we wrap up?
Emil L. Cunningham – C.V.

EDUCATION

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Graduate Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs
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Report directly to the Vice President for Student Affairs. Serve as a member on the leadership team for student affairs and work collaboratively with student affairs directors on initiatives aimed at improving the college student experience. Represent the interests of the Vice President at select meetings, including; town and gown affairs, student led initiatives, university initiatives, student affairs wide initiatives, and myriad trainings. Serve as a point of contact for the office of the Vice President for interested parties, students and non-Penn State affiliates, who are either in need of service or wish to establish formal relations with student affairs or the institution. Collaborate and work with multiple offices and departments across the university to develop new partnerships. Supervise, advise, and provide guidance for select staff on special projects, such as a proposal for a Legal Issues in Student Affairs Conference to be created and potentially held on an bi-annual basis at Penn State.

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