FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION: CONSIDERING INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS THROUGH CULTURAL CAPITAL THEORY

A Thesis in
Higher Education
by
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ABSTRACT

Many scholars continue to call attention to the growing socioeconomic divide within the African American population (Wilson, 1987; Gates & West, 1996; hooks, 2000; Dyson, 2005). While desegregation has contributed to the growth of the largest African American middle class in history, the last forty years has witnessed the development of the largest African American underclass in history. The shifting socioeconomic background characteristics of first-year African American college students at four-year institutions reflect the growing class distinction within the African American population. Despite this increasing heterogeneity, current research on African American college students typically addresses socioeconomic status separately from ethnic identity. This study contributes to postsecondary research by investigating the compounding effects of ethnicity and socioeconomic identity for African American student experiences during the first-year of university study.

The influence of socioeconomic background differences on educational experiences for African Americans has been considered extensively at the secondary level through the use of Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory. Cultural capital refers to background - knowledge base, skills, and attitudes - families of the dominant socioeconomic class transmit to their children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In an effort for the dominant class to maintain their status position, some forms of culture are devalued, while other forms are legitimized and honored within social institutions.

Qualitative research methods, specifically a multiple case study method, were employed for this study. Through purposive criterion sampling, fifteen African American
students from various socio-economic backgrounds were identified in the fall of 2006. All participants were entering their first-year at a selective, doctoral research extensive institution located in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted three times during the academic year. In between interviews, participants highlighted significant academic and social experiences in journal entries. During the data analysis phases, four themes emerged reflecting the experiences of African American students during their first-year at a predominately White institution: 1) Constructing an African American identity; 2) Converting various forms of cultural capital; 3) Experiencing stereotypes and racism; and 4) Developing bicultural perspectives.
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Chapter I

Introduction of Inquiry

Students from non-privileged backgrounds…could not bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront. They were crushed. More often than not they dropped out with no trace of their inner anguish recorded, no institutional record of the myriad ways their take on the world was assaulted by an elite vision of class and privilege. Their records merely indicated that even after receiving financial aid and other support, these students simply could not make it, simply were not good enough. (hooks, 2000, p. 37).

Institutions of higher education have long been viewed as places that embody the notion of meritocracy - an environment where, above all else, individual ability and effort create opportunity and success. A growing body of evidence suggests that this premise is becoming increasingly inaccurate, as personal characteristics such as economic background and ethnicity appear to influence educational experiences and outcomes (Lindsay & Justiz, 2001; United States Department of Education, 2005; Harvey & Anderson, 2005; Lumina Foundation, 2006). Specifically, persistence rates for African American students remain significantly lower when compared to those of White students, with the gap widening between 1994 and 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2003). Students from low-income family background are far less likely to earn

---

1 The term African American is used for this dissertation to refer to persons of African descent who have been primarily socialized in the United States, unless cited reference uses an alternative term such as Black or Negro. Additionally, the term ‘race’ refers to a social category based on similar or perceived physical appearance (e.g., Black), while ‘ethnicity’ refers to a social category based on shared culture (e.g., African American, Nigerian, Ghanaian). See Chapter Four for further clarification.
a baccalaureate degree when compared to students from high-income family backgrounds, a disparity that has narrowed only slightly over the last thirty years.

African-American students from low-income backgrounds seem to be in double jeopardy, particularly at four-year Predominately White Institutions (PWI). Various studies suggest that PWIs provide a less supporting environment for students of color than historically African American colleges and universities (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004).

Since the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court decision (1954), educational policies in the United States have focused on equalizing access to formal learning. The contemporary development of the American postsecondary system reflects a focus on expanding opportunity (Kerr, 1963; Trow, 2000). Despite a philosophy of providing mass higher education systems, the challenge of extending postsecondary participation across diverse racial groups and socioeconomic background continues to exist, with signs of deteriorating rather than improving. As indicated in Table 1-1, African American students who first enrolled at a four-year institution in 1995 had a lower bachelor’s degree completion rate after five years than African American students who first enrolled in 1989 (United States Department of Education, 1996). By comparison, the degree completion rate of White students and Asian/Pacific Islander American students increased between the 1989 and 1995 cohort. Further evidence suggests that lower persistence levels for African American students begin during the first year of enrollment. As shown in Table 1-2, African Americans transfer from their original institution and leave postsecondary education after their first year at higher rates that Whites or Asian/Pacific Islander Americans. As shown in Table 1-3, the gap in
persistence rates between students from the lowest quartile of family income and highest quartile continues to remain above 20% between 1994 and 2000. Additionally, as shown in Table 1-4, a higher percentage of students from the lowest quartiles of family income leave postsecondary education after their first-year than students from the higher quartiles of family income.

Table 1-1: Percentage of students beginning at a four-year institution who completed a bachelor’s degree at any four year institution, by race/ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black, Non Hispanic</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-2: Percentage of students beginning at a four-year institution who left original institution after their first year, by race/ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total attrition</th>
<th>Transferred</th>
<th>Left PSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black, Non Hispanic</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Non Hispanic</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Beginning Postsecondary (BPS) data from United States Department of Education (1996)
For the African Americans, declining educational opportunities based on ethnicity and family background have particular significance. Many scholars continue to call attention to the growing socioeconomic divide within the African American population (Wilson, 1987; Gates & West, 1996; hooks, 2000; Dyson, 2005). While desegregation has contributed to the growth of the largest African American middle class in history, the same period has witnessed the development of the largest African American underclass in history (Wilson, 1987; Gates, 1998). Between 1980 and 1998, the population of the African American underclass – welfare dependent, marginally educated, and chronically unemployed – tripled (from 900,000 to 2.7 million).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest Quartile</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Middle Quartile</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>52.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Quartile</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Quartile</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-3: Percentage of dependent students beginning at a four-year institution who completed a bachelor’s degree at any four-year institution, by family quartile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total attrition</th>
<th>Transferred</th>
<th>Left PSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest Quartile</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Middle Quartile</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Quartile</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Quartile</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-4: Percentage of students beginning at a four year institution who left original institution after their first year, by family income quartile
The shifting socioeconomic characteristics of first-year African American college students at four-year institutions reflect the growing class distinction among the African Americans population. African American students from the lowest income groups make up a smaller proportion of the total African American first-year population in postsecondary education when compared to thirty years ago (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005). Conversely, there are more African American students in the highest income groups than ever before, and the number of African American students with parents who are college educated has grown. As Allen et al. (2005) notes, “This pattern is indicative of college admission and recruitment procedures that privilege more affluent students regardless of color” (p. 3).

The influence of socioeconomic status and African American ethnicity on experiences within mainstream social structures is a common topic in sociological research. In investigations on postsecondary students, higher education scholars typically address socioeconomic status separately from specific racial identities. Limited by sample size, quantitative research on low-income or first-generation students typically employs race as a dichotomous White/Non-White variable (e.g., Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Elkins, Braxton, & James 2000; Braxton, 2000; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Investigations of within-college experiences and outcomes for African American students often do not consider differences based on socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Cabrera, et al., 1999; Reason & Rankin, 2005).

Researchers of secondary school systems have used Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory to consider the influence of social class differences on educational
experiences for African Americans (Kalmijn & Kraaykaamp, 1996; Roscingo & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Lareau and Weininger define cultural capital as background – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – that families transmit to their children. In an effort for the dominant class to maintain their socioeconomic status position, some forms of culture are devalued, while other forms of culture are legitimized and honored within social institutions.

### 1.1 Research Questions

In light of the growing socioeconomic heterogeneity within the African American community, examination of socioeconomic differences among African American college students remains an underdeveloped area in postsecondary research. This study seeks to add to the understanding of postsecondary experiences of African American students by examining the influence of ethnicity and socioeconomic status on African American student experiences during the first-year of university study. Specifically, this study investigates the following questions:

1) In what ways is the intersection of socioeconomic status and ethnic identity influential in shaping first-year persistence of African American students at a Predominately White, four-year post-secondary institution?

2) Is Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory relevant to African Americans within the context of a predominately White, four-year postsecondary institution?

3) How is cultural capital used differently among African Americans to develop social and academic connections within the institution?
Many higher education scholars have dismissed the use of a social conflict perspective, such as cultural capital theory, for examining student persistence and achievement at the higher education (Tinto, 1993; Berger & Braxton, 1998). A social conflict perspective emphasizes the impact of wider social forces on the behavior of students within institutions of higher education. Critics of the social conflict perspective on student departure suggest that a focus on external forces devalues the impact of institutional or organizational influences. In contrast, functionalist perspectives of student persistence, including interactionalist theory, stress the assimilation and acculturation of students into the dominant culture of the institution. “The first stage of the college career, separation, requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence” (Tinto, 1993, p. 95).

However, social conflict proponents criticize research on students in postsecondary education for underestimating the increasingly porous boundaries between postsecondary institutions and society, specifically the contribution higher education institutions make to the social reproduction process that favors those familiar with the dominant (middle-class and White) culture external to the university (Tierney, 1992; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tanaka, 2002). As students enter higher education, they confront an environment that is not value-neutral, but a place that maintains certain preferences and tendencies frequently emphasized to marginalize those with dissimilar cultural references. For nontraditional students, the biased environment leads to the unique challenge of developing a “bicultural” perspective:
Nontraditional students often have to negotiate a new landscape, learn how to step in and out of multiple contexts, engage in double readings of social reality and move back and forth between their native world and the new world of college—all at an accelerated pace. Nontraditional students live in multiple realities and lead cyclical lives that demand a high degree of biculturalism” (Rendon, 1996, p. 19).

This study proposes that the development of a bicultural perspective for nontraditional students relies heavily on the possession of cultural capital. Students deficient in the cultural capital recognized on the college campus may struggle as they transition between their home community and the postsecondary institution. The type of cultural capital acknowledged within the institution and the degree to which it varies among African American students from various socioeconomic backgrounds is the central subject that guides this investigation.

**1.2 Significance of Study**

Careful investigation of inequality in postsecondary access and attainment across socio-economic and racial boundaries has significance for society, its institutions, and individuals. Since the founding of Harvard University in 1636, the historical charter between the university and society is grounded in a belief in higher education’s place as a significant contributor to the collective good—developing public leaders, cultivating the intellectual pursuits of students, advancing knowledge through research, and educating citizens for democratic engagement (Gumport, 2004; Kezar, 2004). Unequal participation within postsecondary education based on station at birth or ethnic identity, or more notably socioeconomic status and ethnicity, has a dangerous price for a representative democracy. Over sixty years ago, Gunnar Myrdal’s seminal work, *The American*
Dilemma (1944) highlights the gap between America’s professed belief in equality and treatment experienced by the African American population, stressing the obstacles that fostered social and economic isolation. During the same period, The Truman Commission on Higher Education (1948) noted the consequences of unequal educational opportunity:

These various barriers to educational opportunity involve grave consequences for both the individual and the society. From the viewpoint of the individual they are denying to millions of young people what the democratic creed assumes to be their birth-right (sic): an equal chance with all others to make the most of their native abilities. From the viewpoint of society the barriers mean that far too few of our young people are getting enough preparation for assuming the personal, social, and civic responsibilities of adults living in a democratic society (Higher Education for Democracy, 1947).

Among the barriers identified in the Truman Report are race, specifically the lack of equal opportunity for the “Negro” student, and low-income status. Forward sixty years, and these same barriers continue to exist within higher education. Higher education scholars have examined various factors which significantly influence nontraditional student participation in postsecondary study, including differences in college access (Hurtado, Inkelas Kurotsuchi, Briggs, & Rhee., 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000), disproportionate influence of rising tuition costs (Heller, 2001; Hu & St. John, 2001), and assimilation demands to institutional culture (Tinto, 1993; Berger & Braxton, 1998). However, these studies often control for social class differences and/or racial identity rather than focusing on how the interaction of class and race in the same demographic groups may shape students' experiences and outcomes.

For higher education institutions, as the United States becomes more diverse, raising the educational attainment rate of traditionally underrepresented populations becomes increasingly important for maintaining healthy undergraduate enrollment.
figures. The majority of the population growth will occur among the groups that are historically the least educated. Projections indicate that half of the high school graduating class of 2014 will be White, non-Hispanics, while half will represent a racial/ethnic minority (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2005). The movement toward a “minority majority” country will increase the need for postsecondary institutions to develop a more complete understanding of the background, characteristics, and culture of major racial/ethnic groups.

Unless there are major departures from the status quo, the projected demographic shifts suggest that college participation rates might decline, particularly in states where there are projected increases in the numbers of low income and Black and Hispanic students (The College Board, 2005, p. 3).

While studies have identified the factors contributing to nontraditional student attrition, details about the mechanisms and processes students utilize to maneuver past these barriers remains unclear. Equally ambiguous is how the complexity of socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicity interact to shape student experiences in academic and social settings on campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As ethnic populations become more diverse, continuing to rely on monolithic perspectives of students from these populations may misguide future higher education policy and programs.

Strong evidence suggests that an undergraduate education positively affects occupational status, career attainment, and lifetime earnings for graduates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Taking into consideration the shifting demographics, an economic inventive exists to re-examine institutional culture to improve the persistence of historically marginalized students. Additionally, studies have indicated that diverse
enrollments provide benefits for all students enrolled at the institution, including majority students (Gurtin, 1999; Milem, 2003). Individual benefits include improved racial and cultural awareness, more occupational and residential desegregation later in life, and a greater satisfaction with the college experience.

Finally, this research also has an opportunity to contribute to larger sociological perspectives concerning the role of social institutions in constructing and maintaining forms of equality. By identifying how social institutions help create systems of inequality, a greater understanding of how to transform such systems can be gained. Detecting categories of difference based on socio-economic status within a specific racial group further challenge the notion that racial identity is clear-cut and homogenous. Analysis examining blurred the racial and class boundaries may be helpful in unmasking deepening cultural divides within traditionally viewed homogenous groups – leading to greater understanding of the issues that affect our society.

If precollege characteristics such as family background and ethnicity continue to influence educational achievement, socioeconomic disparity in the United States will continue to grow, contributing to unhealthy cycles of social isolation and despair. The apparent double jeopardy of being African American and poor magnifies the existing inequities that society struggles to recognize beyond isolated moments such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In 1993, Cornell West suggested that Race Matters within the context of American social institutions. Seven years later hooks (2000), proposed that Class Matters in shaping individual experiences. The natural next step is to investigate ways in which race and class matter in influencing personal experiences within particular context.
1.3 Review of Subsequent Chapters

The subsequent chapters outline the theoretical concepts guiding this investigation (Chapter II) and the research methodology that will be used (Chapter III). The theoretical concepts are rooted in the work of historical intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, Talcott Parsons, and Pirtum Sorokin, as well as contemporary scholars such as William Cross, Claude Steele, and John Bean. An extensive literature review offers a critical analysis of previous research. The literature suggests a conceptual framework, blended from various perspectives, to guide the investigation.

The research methodology considers the best approach to gaining insight on the phenomena of interest through identification of participants, collection of data, and interpretation of results. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore transitional issues for African American student from various socioeconomic backgrounds attending at Predominately White Institution. The justification for using qualitative approach, how the conceptual framework is operationalized, and clear strategies ensuring credibility of results are the foci of Chapter III.

Chapter IV will present an overview of the sample, including participant profiles and observations from backgrounds. An analysis and discussion of findings are presented in Chapter V, including the major themes which emerged from the data. Finally, Chapter VI will cover a discussion of the findings, implications for policy and practice, and offer recommendations for further research.
Chapter II

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In order to build a conceptual framework to examine the interactive effects of ethnicity and class on educational experiences of first-year African American students at Predominately White Institutions, the review of literature is parceled into three main areas: 1) historical and contemporary observations of how African Americans identity develop; 2) theoretical perspectives on college student persistence; 3) and patterns of cultural capital theory in educational settings. Each thread of literature contributes theoretical tools from which an overall conceptual framework for this study may be developed.

2.1 African American Identity and Higher Education

Sociologist W.E.B. DuBois presciently concluded at the end of the nineteenth century that the most pressing issue of the twentieth century in the United States would be the issue of race (DuBois, 1897). For African Americans coming out of the shadow of slavery, the new century would present the struggle between self-conception as a person of African descent and American birth, “One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois, 1897, p. 194). DuBois’ notion of a double-consciousness for African Americans remains
relevant into the 21st century. In particular, African Americans at Predominately White Institutions (PWI) experience tensions related identity. For traditionally aged undergraduate students, this struggle can have an impact on educational experiences, including an inability to connect and thrive academically and socially at the institution.

Coincidently, DuBois provides one of the first accounts of struggles for African Americans attending PWIs through his social study, *The College-Bred Negro* (Dubois, 1900). DuBois sent a comprehensive survey to African American students, African American college graduates, and administrators at various types of institutions. Along with a follow-up study, *The College-Bred Negro American* (1910), DuBois establishes a scientific approach to studying the African American experience within mainstream social institutions.

DuBois (1910) posed several questions to gain insight on the impact of campus climate on educational experiences of African American college students, both at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). A particular survey question queried students about chief hindrances in their educational path. One student responded, “Prejudice and prescription have operated to my disadvantage to the extent of cooling ardor and chilling aspiration” (p. 87). Another student responded:

> Prejudice and lack of opportunity have been at once my handicap and my constant stimulant. Daily experience with them has kept me keyed up to constant exertion and the doing of my best. Expecting no quarter, it has been with me a fight to the finish and a point of manhood and honor to succeed (p. 89).

DuBois’ early study also collected statements from White administrators about institutional attitude toward African American college students, providing historical
insights on campus climates while illuminating comments of students about barriers in their education path. Responses from administrators included the following:

I cannot tell what the attitude of the student body should be towards Negroes, but we shall not risk a trail of it. Applications are very rare – one during the last four years. We do not think it wise here under the prevailing conditions to accept any distincively colored student into the college - Saint Vincent College (PA), (DuBois, 1910, p. 25).

I have never been aware of any hostile attitude on the part of the student body toward Negro students. Of course, we have never had but an occasional Negro student in the University – Leland Stanford University, (DuBois, 1910, p. 24).

DuBois’ pioneering study on African American college students was a significant contribution to sociology and higher education research. DuBois’ proposition that psychosocial barriers exist for nontraditional students sounds less profound now, but was a noteworthy conclusion at the turn of the century. Additionally, gauging attitudes at PWI towards African American students, DuBois demonstrates constraints for African American students within certain institution, barriers that continue to exist. Any contemporary examination of African American college students owes a debt to the investigations of DuBois at the turn of the century. Du Bois' study provides a rich, deep portrait of the African American experience in higher education - the struggle with duality (presented in Figure 2-1), the unique challenges of transition, and the characteristics attributed with success. Current researchers may use this study to measure growth and compare current experiences.
2.1.1 Racial Identity Formation

In a more contemporary study, Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) propose seven noncognitive student traits that are critical in helping minority students overcome barriers present at Predominately White Institutions: 1) a positive self-concept; 2) a realistic self-appraisal; 3) the ability to deal with racism; 4) demonstrated community service; 5) ability to develop long-range goals 6) a strong support network; and 7) successful leadership experience. The authors conclude that success or failure of minority students at a PWI depends on how students adjust to the seven outlined characteristics and how faculty and staff encourage this adjustment (Sedlacek, 1987). Sedlacek and Brooks
outline many traits that are indicators of academic and social success for all students, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, Sedlacek and Brooks conclude that three characteristics listed are especially relevant for first-year African American students at PWIs: positive self-concept, the ability to deal with racism, and a strong support network.

Cross’s model of Nigrescence (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991; Cross 1995) reflects the formation of positive self-concept and the ability to deal with racism through the process of racial identity development. Cross proposes that African Americans go through five stages – Pre-Encounter, Encounter Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment – to develop a healthy racial identity (See Figure 2-2).

During the Pre-encounter stage, African Americans absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant culture. The individual seeks assimilation and acceptances by Whites – de-emphasizing one’s racial group membership as a way to seek unconditional acceptance in the dominant culture. An event that forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism on one’s life – social rejection by White peers based on race, for example – stimulates a movement into the Encounter phase. A desire to surround oneself only with visible symbols of one’s racial identity and actively seeking other African-American peers while developing a newly defined and affirmed sense of self characterizes the Immersion/Emersion stage. As an individuals move into the Internalization stage, they exhibit a security of one’s own racial identity while acknowledging and respecting the culture of other racial groups. Those at the fifth stage, Internalization-Commitment, have found ways to use racial identity as the “point of departure for discovering the universe of ideas, cultures and experiences beyond
blackness in place of mistaking blackness as the universe itself” (Cross et al., 1991, p. 330).

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**Figure 2-2: Conceptualization of Cross’ Model of Nigrescence**

Using the Black Racial Identity Attitudes Scale, Neville, Heppner, and Wang (1997) examine the relationship between racial identity attitudes and general stressors for students (e.g. financial aid), as well as culturally specific stressors (e.g racial discrimination) for African American students at a Predominately White Institution. The findings of Neville et al. suggest particular racial identity attitudes are statistically significant predictors of both general and cultural stressors. Specifically, their investigation reveals the immersion/emersion stage, where students have high level of focus on race-related issues, is a unique predictor of general stressors. The Encounter stage, a period where students grapple with identity issues, relates to culturally specific stressors. Overall, the greater comfort students have with their racial identity, the lower identification of culture-specific stressor. The authors find no statistical difference
between men and women. Examination of differences based on socioeconomic status is not part of the study.

Examining racial identity attitudes as predictors of psychological health for African American college students attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI), Pillay (2005) concludes that early stages of racial identity make a unique contribution to the psychological health of African American students. Specifically, the Pre-Encounter and Encounter stages were significant predictors of negative psychological health accounting for over twenty percent of the variance. However, the later stages, Immersion-Emersion and Internalization subscales are not significant predictors in any direction. The study finds that gender makes modest contributions to the variance of the outcome. While the study collected socioeconomic status information using Hollingshead Index of Social Position – a commonly used instrument to measure socioeconomic status – the discussion does not include a summary of socioeconomic differences.

Using the Hollingshead’s Index of Social Position, researchers have also considered differences in socioeconomic status, Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) suggest that socio-cultural stresses play a significant role in shaping experiences of first-year students of color at a PWI. They note, “Status-related pressures are associated with increased feeling of distress and pose additional demands on students’ coping resources” (p. 447). The authors also suggest that minority-related stress varies significantly across race (African Americans indicated higher levels of stress than other students of color sampled) and socioeconomic backgrounds (students from lower SES indicating higher levels of stress). The study does not include a test of gender differences and there are no within-race socioeconomic differences reported.
For many students, entering college represents the first major transition in their lives, triggering high levels of stress (Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Brooks & DuBois, 1995; Pritchard, 2003). For African American students, unique anxiety related to racial identity development supplements general transition stress. Previous studies have demonstrated the link between racial identity development and levels of stress, as well as levels of stress and college adjustment. Less understood is the mechanisms by which students cope with increased levels of stress and how this process interacts with racial identity development. This study intends to contribute to higher education research by identifying and detailing moments that trigger identity development, spaces where students confront stressors, and resources student rely on to survive and move forward (or use to leave).

2.1.2 Stereotype Threat

Development of racial identity appears to contribute to formation of a positive self-concept and the ability to deal with racism. However, a concern for ethnicity-based negative stereotypes may inhibit African Americans from establishing healthy, cross-cultural relationship in racially diverse settings (Steele, 1995, 1997). Stereotype threat refers to personal anxiety over others’ viewing oneself through a perspective rooted in a negative assumption about a particular group. Steele (1997) identifies five general features of stereotype threat: 1) it affects members of any group about whom there exists some generally known negative assumption; 2) in a setting which integrates stereotyped and non-stereotyped people, stereotyping becomes a dimension of difference, more
salient and thus more strongly felt; 3) the type and degree of stereotype threat vary from group to group, depending on the content of the stereotype and the situation; 4) One need not believe in the stereotype for it to be threatening to them; and 5) Trying to disprove a stereotype can have detrimental effects (p. 617-618).

Various studies highlight the relevance of stereotype threat for African American college students (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, David, & Pietrzak, 2002). In a study at Stanford University, Steele and Aronson introduced a test to a group of students as a measurement of intellectual ability, African American students scored significantly lower than White students. However, when presented with the same test as a laboratory task only designed to study how students answer certain problems, African American students' performance matched the performance of White students.

Using a longitudinal study, Mendoza-Denton et al. (1995) suggest that those with high sensitivity to rejection due to one’s membership in a stigmatized group “not only expect rejection but also are highly concerned that this negative outcome with occur” (p. 897). They conclude that students who begin with high expectations of ethnicity-based rejection had a stronger sense of alienation, less trust in the university, and a decline in grades into their second and third years when compared to students entering with low expectations of ethnicity-based rejection. African Americans in the study have significantly higher levels of rejection sensitivity than Asian Americans or Whites, even after adjusting for income and parental educational levels. African American students who begin college with high sensitivity to rejection based on ethnicity perceived the university administration as less legitimate, reported fewer White friends at the end of
their first year and greater anxiety about discussing an academic problem with professors or teaching assistants after their second and third year.

Nora and Cabrera (1996) findings indicate that minorities are more likely to perceive a discriminatory campus climate, sense more prejudice on the part of faculty and staff, and are more prone to report negative in-class experiences than Whites. Their results also suggest that other factors, including encouragement from parents and positive experiences in academic and social systems, are more influential in predicting level of adjustment than perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Neither Mendoza-Denton et al. (1995) nor Nora et al. investigate differences based on socioeconomic backgrounds of African American or minority students.

The development of interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty, and other staff at an institution is important for fostering student success. The concern about stereotype threat leads many African American students to doubt their academic abilities and to fear social marginalization. Studies have consistently linked stereotype threat and perceived prejudice with shaping academic and social experiences at PWI for African American students. This study seeks to build upon previous research by exploring specific triggers of stereotype threat and identifying the resources that reduce anxiety. Additionally, to address a critical gap in the literature, this study seeks to observe how family background influences attitudes towards stereotype threat.

Psychosocial influences on individual attitude highlight how development of racial identity shapes educational experiences of African American students at Predominately White Institutions. DuBois proposition of double consciousness for African Americans, conceptualized in Figure 2-1 (p. 16), establishes the historical
struggle for African Americans attempting to maintain a cultural legacy rooted in Africa, while simultaneously striving for rightful recognition in American society. DuBois himself documents this struggle within the context of postsecondary education through two studies of African Americans college students and graduates, including those who attended Predominately White Institutions. Cross’s Model of Nigrescence, conceptualized in Figure 2-2 (p. 19), provides a detailed contemporary update to DuBois observation. Outlining specific stages, which represent the struggle to conceptualize dual selves, the model captures the catalyst for development and the provisional frame of mind of individuals. Steele’s stereotype threat offers insight on internalized barriers against self-recognition and awareness. Conceptualized in Figure 2-3, stereotype threat can be inferred by the individual, promoted by others, or both – simultaneously or independently of each other. As sensitivity to stereotype decreased, students’ perceptions of self may be less influenced by their awareness of other’s perception.

![Figure 2-3: Conceptualization of Stereotype Threat](image)

Taken together, the concepts described above provide a first step in constructing an overall conceptual framework to guide an examination of African American student first-year experiences at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Figure 2.4 (p. 25) blends the concepts of double consciousness, African American identity development,
and stereotype threat. Around the boundaries of double consciousness, represented by the interlocking circles, stages of African American identity are placed marking development of both non-dominant (African) and dominant (American) traits. The bolded lines within the conceptual framework represent the impact of stereotype threat along the developmental process.

The conceptual framework attempts to capture the socio-psychological process of ethnic identity development – a combination of experiences, perceptions, and social interactions. As Gay (1987) states, “Ethnic identity development is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic process. It has both public and private, individual and communal, conscious and unconscious, positive and negative, past and present, cognitive and emotional, expressive and symbolic dimensions” (p. 35). At this stage, the conceptual framework provides guidance for developing a set of methodological strategies. However to explore fully the phenomena as expressed by Gay, further theoretical viewpoints are needed. The next set of literature explores sociological perspectives of student persistence
2.2 Functionalist Perspectives on Student Persistence

Talcott Parsons, one of the leading American sociologists in the twentieth century, attempted to bridge the theoretical divide between individual agency and structural determinism (Holton, 1998; Scott, 2003) to explain social action. Primarily interested in how a social scientist can analyze a social system, Parsons’ work rejects the proposition that rational choice alone produces a harmonization of individual action and a stable pattern of norms. Parsons concluded that once individual actions are explained principally in terms of the surrounding environment, the idea of individual autonomy is undermined. For Parsons, the way to connect these theories is to bring social values into the theoretical framework. Social order arises from the rules that regulate self-interest and
from a development of shared value systems that provide individuals with meaningful ways of selecting between courses of action. This conclusion leads Parsons to speak of a social system in terms both the types of social action individuals engage in and the types of natural constraints that arise as collectivities formalize.

2.2.1 Theoretical Framework of Bean and Tinto

In viewing higher education institutions as distinct social systems, a functionalist perspective focuses on the individual student’s interaction with various institutional environments. Outcomes, such as success and persistence, become a function of students’ ability to fit with established social norms of the campus – through relationships with peers, interaction with faculty, and participation in co-curricular activities. Among the most researched outcomes for undergraduate students, particularly from the first year to second year, student persistence has been the subject of empirical inquiry for decades (Braxton, 2000; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In particular, two theoretical frameworks with functionalist elements have informed research about the student withdrawal process over the last three decades: Bean’s model of student attrition (1980; 1985) and Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1993). Both Bean and Tinto build upon the work of William Spady (1970), often credited with developing the earliest theoretical model of student attrition (Bean, 1989). Based on research on suicide by Durkheim, Spady postulates that student withdrawal from college due to a lack of shared values (acceptance of the importance of academic work) and
normative support (students have family, close friends, or significant others to emotionally and financially support their staying in school).

Adopting theories of employee turnover in work organizations to student attrition in higher education, Bean (1980) proposed a model that focused on how student background variables (including socioeconomic status and distance from home) and organizational determinants (including staff/faculty relationship, housing, and campus organizations), influence the level of individual satisfaction and commitment to the institution. Bean suggests that the degree to which students are satisfied and committed to the institution determine the likelihood that students will drop out. In an empirical test of the model, Bean (1980) confirms institutional commitment as the most important variable related to dropout.

In a follow-up studies, Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) focus on developing a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition. The authors conclude that the defining characteristic of the nontraditional students is the lack of social integration into the institution, however previous understanding of student attrition focused on socialization to explain the attrition process. Thus, the authors identify four groups of dependent variables - background variables, academic background, non-college environmental variables, and social integration - that influence academic and psychological outcomes. Testing this conceptual model, Metzner and Bean (1987) find a degree of empirical credibility to the proposed model. Social integration failed to create significant effects on psychological or academic outcome variables, while three of the environmental variables – finances, outside encouragement, and opportunity to transfer-had significant effects on intent to leave.
Bean (1990) concludes that approval and support from parents and their
community are important for continued enrollment of African American students. “When
parents approved of students attending school, the students had a greater sense of
academic and social integration, perceived their education to be of greater utility, and felt
less alienated on campus” (Bean, 1990, p. 167). Research investigating the importance of
African American families in supporting college adjustment of students attending a
Predominately White University supports Bean’s findings (Hinderline & Kenny, 2002).
Parental attachments, the support and security students feel they receive from family
during times of stress, are associated with all aspects of college adjustment. Parental
attachment adds significantly to the outcome of academic adjustment, personal-emotional
adjustment, and institutional attachment. Hinderline and Kenny found no significant
correlation between socioeconomic status and parental attachment or college adjustment.
Additionally, their study does not explore the process that enables some families to
provide secure attachments associated with academic and personal adjustment.

However, families may be both an asset and liability to African American college
student persistence (Guiffrida, 2005). African Americans students who do not persist
perceive their obligation from their families as negative, describing little emotional and
financial support from their families to stay in college. In contrast, persisting students
perceive their families, regardless of their incomes of levels of education, as among their
most important supportive structure and described various ways in which family
members provided emotional and financial support – most notably by encouraging
students to grow socially and intellectually.
The conceptual model offered by Bean and Metzner and supported by subsequent empirical research is informative for these studies because while they are rooted in functionalist traditions of Parsons, they point out the importance of external variables on dropout decisions for nontraditional students. In particular, the work of Bean and Metzner highlight the importance of encouragement and support from family and community. Absent in the literature are indications of the method by which some families provide support to students, buffering stressors related to college adjustment. This study seeks to examine the saliency of family support during the first-year of study at a four-year institution and uncover the mechanisms that provide positive support for students. Additionally, this investigation will focus on differences in mechanisms and support based on family socioeconomic background.

2.2.2 Tinto Model of Student Departure

Despite substantial evidence supporting environmental factors in student persistence, the most notable advancement in the theories of student persistence after Bean’s Model of Student Attrition, focused on the importance of separating from family and childhood support and adapting to a new set of values and behaviors. Tinto’s model of student departure (1975, 1987, 1993), similar to Bean’s model, began with the notion that new students enter with precollege attributes that are shaped by their familial upbringing including academic and social skills and abilities. These pre-college attributes help students shape goals and commitments regarding the institution. As students formally and informally experience the academic and social systems of the institution,
there is increasing influence in the level of integration within each system. The degree to which students are integrated reshapes their initial goals and commitments, rewarding encounters foster student integration and persistence, negative encounters leads to marginality and withdrawal. Tinto eventually expanded his model to include a three-stage process for students: separation, transition, and incorporation. The separation stage refers to the student’s parting from past habit and patterns of association. During the transition stage, students cope with stresses of departing from the familiar while not completely integrating into the new college environment. The incorporation stage reflects students’ competency as an institutional member.

Assessing Tinto’s model of student departure, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) discover only modest support for the propositions underlining the model across various single institution sites. They find consistent evidence that entry characteristics and pre-college schooling affect the level of initial commitment to the institution. In turn, the initial commitment to the institution influences subsequent level of commitment to the institution, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college. However, the empirically backed propositions leaves social integration – relationships with peers and faculty – unexplained. In a follow-up study at a Predominately White Institution, Berger and Braxton (1998) find support for using organizational attributes – institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement, and encouraging student participation in decision-making – as a possible source of influence in fostering social integration and persistence. The authors indicate differences based on race, as White students are much more likely than Non-White students to report feeling that they
participate in decision-making and relate to their peers. However, Non-Whites are less likely to relate to faculty. Because of the limited number of students of color in the sample (7%), the Non-White variable includes African American, Asian American, American Indian, and foreign-born students. The authors conclude “it is difficult to interpret these findings, but they clearly indicate that race plays an important role in this (PWI) environment” (p. 115).

Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) investigate the influence of separation on fall-to-spring semester departure decisions for first-year students. Employing a longitudinal panel design at a mid-size public university, the researchers conclude that White students are more likely to receive support for college attendance than students who are members of ethnic minority groups. Further, Elkins, et al. find that initial institutional commitment statistically related to a student’s rejection of past attitudes and values. However, the researchers admit validity concerns in measurements of support from past communities and the perceived need to reject past attitudes and values in order to remain in college. “Although the variables (survey items) used to measure these constructs possess face validity, qualitative research methods should be used to study the separation stage with first semester, first-time freshman students” (p. 262).

Tinto’s model of student departure has been criticized for overlooking issues of voice, power, and authenticity in the exchange between students and the subsystems of the institution (Tierney, 1992; Braxton, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora 2000; Swail, Reed, & Perna, 2003). Critics suggest that, in stating departure as a value-neutral action, Tinto’s theory does not address specific examples related to non-traditional elements within higher education. Experiences that lead to departure may be contextually
dissimilar for different groups. The conclusion that different students have distinctive experiences within sub-systems of the institution suggests that Tinto’s theory of student departure is limited when applied to nontraditional students, not White, middle-class, or male. Elaborating this point, Rendon et al (2000) conclude that “absent from the traditional social integrationist view are the distinctions among cultures, differences among students with regard to class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, and the role of group members and the institutions in assisting students to succeed” (p. 139).

Variations of Bean’s Model of Student Attrition began to consider external environmental influences on student dropout decisions, particularly for African American students. The perceived need to reject past attitudes and values as a step to successful integration into the college environment, as suggested by Tinto, overemphasizes the individual responsibility for adaptation. Concentrating on the individual responsibility aspect of Tinto’s theory requires the assumption that all students are ready, willing, and able to get involved through the shedding of “cultural baggage” not validated in the institutional setting. While the importance of getting involved is critical, equal recognition must be given to the inherent trauma experienced by nontraditional students during the transition process. This viewpoint is central to the objective of the current examination. Social and academic connection within institution is important for African American student persistence. However, if this connection comes at the expense of breaking off relationships in the home community, the emotional distress is equally disruptive. The process by which students seek and maintain balance between external and internal pressure is a key inquiry for this study.
2.2.3 Bicultural Perspective

In outlining theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education, Rendon et al. (2000) suggest researchers be familiar with the concept of biculturalism rather than assume that separation from the home community is necessary for transition. Bicultural perspectives in education grow from Valentine’s (1971) observation of how professional personnel such as psychiatrists and doctors have of a stereotypical view of African American youth. Valentine concludes that an individuals need not abandon their culture of origin in order to succeed in the mainstream culture. Instead, a person may develop the ability to operate in two cultures through a bicultural model. Building upon Valentine, de Anda (1984) concluded that bicultural experience is possible because the mainstream culture and the ethnic or socioeconomic culture sometimes overlap. The blending of the two worlds allows individuals to function effectively and less stressfully in both worlds. de Anda’s model of bicultural socialization proposed how, through cultural mediators, models, and translation, individuals could effectively navigate between cultures.

Rendon et al. (2000) suggest that biculturalism requires “changing, indeed transforming the academic and social culture of institutions of higher education to accommodate culturally diverse students” (p. 135). In a study of African American students attending a Predominately White Institution, Gloria, Robinson-Kurpius, Hamilton, and Wilson (1999) found that higher levels of cultural congruency – perception of similarity between personal values and university values - are associated with positive academic persistence. The authors suggest that successful African
American students “developed the bicultural skills necessary to successfully negotiate the predominately White setting” (p. 263). Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, and Caldwell (2002) found that African American females had higher levels of cultural congruency than their African American male peers at a Predominately White Institution. The authors contributed the difference to a low presence of African American males and their perceptions of others’ attitudes and behaviors toward them.

Building upon the conclusion of Elkins et al. (2000) which sound less support for African American students at PWI than for White students, this study seeks to examine the separation stage with first semester, first-time students, specifically as it applies to African American students. However, rather than incorporating a functionalist perspective of student persistence which emphasizes separation and assimilation as driving transition to college this study is guided by the concept of bicultural development. Through qualitative analysis, this investigation draws conclusions about institutional procedures and personal experiences that promote or hinder the development of a bicultural perspective.

Retuning to the conceptual framework established earlier in this proposal (Figure 2-4, page 24), links between biculturalism, double consciousness, and African American racial identity development are established. Recognizing the increasing diversity on campus and in society, Figure 2-5 increases the overlap between the ‘two worlds’ of African Americans. Of equal importance is the increasing depth of diversity among African Americans since desegregation. Conceptually, the degree of bicultural development may vary among African American students based on socioeconomic background. It is possible that a bicultural perspective relates to an individual’s ability to
interpret social norms and campus sub-systems. In order to determine what drives the ability to interpret meaning, this proposal turns to cultural capital theory.

2.3 Cultural Capital in Educational Settings

While functionalist theories focus on ways in which educational institutions mirror meritocratic beliefs – individuals are treated similarly and have an equal opportunity to succeed within the institution, conflict theories focus on ways in which educational institutions reinforce external social inequalities. Social mobility has been the subject of philosophers and empirical scientists for centuries. Sorokin (1959) described social mobility as existing in two forms: ascending (social climbing) and descending (social sinking). The ascending currents exist as an infiltration of the individuals of a
lower stratum into an existing higher one or as a creation of a new group by such individuals into a higher stratum (either side-by-side with or in place of the existing groups of a stratum). Descending social mobility currents flow in two ways. The first consists in the dropping of individuals from a higher social position into an existing lower one. The second way manifests itself in a degradation of a social group as a whole, “in an abasement of its rank among other groups, or in its disintegration as a social unit” (emphasis added, Sorokin, 1959). For Sorokin, education was a major vehicle for ascension, functioning as a social mechanism to “through an elimination of the failures…close the doors for (individuals) social promotion…” (Sorokin, 1959, p. 188).

2.3.1 Defining Cultural Capital

Because belief in individual merit and equal opportunity are ingrained ideologies of American culture, the recognition of ascribed status in social structures is often overlooked (Wolff, 1969; McNamee & Miller, 2004). Several non-merit-based factors influence socio-economic positions, including the effects of inheritance as unequal starting points in the race to get ahead; the effects of informal networks (social capital) and “fitting in” (cultural capital); unequal access to educational opportunities, and discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics including ethnicity and gender. In particular, for higher education, the recognition of non-merit influences threatens the myth of institutional value neutrality.

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory is a widely recognized theoretical framework for investigations of power in social structures (Bourdieu, 1998). Cultural capital refers to
background – knowledge base, skills, and attitudes – that families transmit to their children (Carter, 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Certain forms of this inherited culture is legitimized and honored within social institutions (such as colleges and universities) ignoring other forms of culture in an effort for the dominant class to maintain status and control. Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital in the context of his educational research. It is in sociology of education that the concept has had its most sustained impact (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Cultural capital can exist in three states: embodied (disposition of mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1998; Dika & Singh, 2002). Certain forms of cultural capital are valued more than other forms, and each individual brings a set of dispositions (habitus) to the field of interaction. The struggle between agents with different means and ends is contained within this spatial field. “Rules of the game” characterize the field, which are neither explicit nor codified. Because the field is dynamic, valued forms of cultural capital are also dynamic and arbitrary.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggest that the dominant interpretation of cultural capital that currently articulated in educational research is inadequate in terms of Bourdieu’s own use of the concept and its inherent potential. They conclude that two assumptions – that cultural capital is a reflection of knowledge or “highbrow” aesthetic culture and that examination of cultural capital effects must be made separately from proper educational achievement – result in studies in which the salience of cultural capital is tested by assessing whether measures of “high brow” participation predict educational outcomes independent of various ability measures. “We therefore suggest the
need for a broader conception that stresses the micro-interactional processes through which individuals comply (or fail to comply) with the evaluative standards of dominant institutions such as schools” (p. 568). Lareau and Weininger emphasis on micro-interactional processes focuses on the interaction of individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence with institutionalized standards of evaluation. Transmissible across generations, these specialized skills are subject to monopoly and yield advantages.

2.3.2 Social Class and Education

In her study of how social class and schools structure opportunity, McDonough (1997) uses a cultural capital perspective to study the college choice process. McDonough defines cultural capital as the symbolic knowledge that elite postsecondary institutions value yet secondary schools do not explicitly teach. This qualitative study compares the resources that various schools offer to students in the course of selecting a college or university. At the foundation of the study is the often-overlooked fact that all educational settings are not created equal (Tanaka 2002). In considering how social class and high school resources shape college choice decisions, the socio-economic reasons underlying the various factors become clearer.

In reviewing longitudinal data on postsecondary institutions, Walpole (2003) found that students’ socioeconomic background affect their college experience. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who attend four-year colleges and universities work more, study less, are less involved, and report lower GPAs than their high SES
peers. Walpole concludes that because high-status cultural capital is valued, rewards go to students from higher SES backgrounds possessing this capital, leaving students with low-status cultural capital at risk for lower success rates. Walpole findings suggest a link between acquisition of cultural capital and development of a new habitus for low-SES students, leading to better experiences. However, she proposes that it is not clear how the acquisition of cultural capital occurs in the interaction between students and faculty or between students and their participation.

Carter (2003) provides evidence of the coexistence of two forms of capital within the social and academic lives of students at the secondary level. Using qualitative methods, the author illustrates how students negotiate their perceptions of the differential values placed by educators on “dominant” and “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital. Carter suggests that the term “dominant cultural capital” corresponds to Bourdieu’s conceptualization of powerful high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals, while non-dominant cultural capital embodies a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles.

Non-dominant cultural capital describes those resources used by lower status individuals to gain “authentic” cultural status positions within their respective communities. Different, though interconnected, these two forms of capital represent variable cultural currencies, the benefits of which vary, depending upon the field in which the capital is used. For example, in one setting, youth might employ dominant cultural capital instrumentally to gain academic and socioeconomic mobility. In another setting, they might utilize their non-dominant cultural capital to express in-group affiliation (p. 138).

The use of Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory to explain why academic and social outcomes for African Americans are significantly different from Whites has been
criticized (Yosso, 2005). Critics argue that cultural capital theory presents a deficit view of African American communities by shaping them as places full of cultural disadvantages instead of focusing on the unacknowledged array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups. However, in part, this argument relies on a homogenous view of African American culture and backgrounds. As Celious and Oyserman (2001) argue, African American ethnicity is not a monolithic experience. Just as cultural distinctions exist between African Americans and Whites (and among Whites as well), African Americans distinguish among themselves based on educational attainment, residential location, and family socioeconomic status and these differences produce cultural variations among the African Americans (King, 2006). Therefore, in social space with both ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity, one may hypothesize that the unique variation of culture developed by the socioeconomic advantaged African Americans provides capital in particular social settings. Conversely, one may propose that any unique cultural capital possessed must closely relate to dominant culture characteristics due to traditionally negative perspectives of African American culture. In either scenario, the most disadvantaged and isolated group is low-income African Americans, marginalized by the increasing socio-economic distance among their ethnicity and stigmatized by negative stereotypes developed and maintained by dominant perspectives. The historical and contemporary position of African Americans within Predominately White Institutions of higher education presents a unique opportunity to examine within-group and between-group issues inclusion and connection by using of cultural capital theory.
2.4 Summary

Considerable diversity exists among black students on White campuses. Black students currently enrolled in college are more diverse now than ever before. Despite this fact, researchers have been slow to investigate that diversity and to assess its consequences...We have extensively studied Black-White differences, but the record on Black-Black and Black-other minority differences is more limited. It is time to redress the imbalance. Until we do so, black progress toward the goal of educational equity, and eventual social equality, will be impeded (Allen, 1982).

Over the last twenty-five years, studies on the heterogeneity among African American college students have focused on linking various racial identity attitudes with educational experience and the discrepancy of experiences based on gender. Less is known about the influences of socioeconomic status on educational experiences of African American students. Research on outcomes based on socioeconomic backgrounds generally do not examine within-race differences. The focus of socioeconomic background as a more salient influence on life opportunities than African American identity is not new. E. Franklin Frazier (1957) examined the class power of the “Black Bourgeoisie” in the 1950s. However, as widening class distinctions have weakened a sense of collectivity of the African American experience, the focus on socioeconomic background becomes more salient, particularly in social structures promoting a meritocracy. Therefore, considering dimensions of duality, racial identity, and stereotype threat, this examination considers:

1) In what ways is the intersection of socioeconomic status and ethnic identity influential in shaping first-year experiences of African American students at a predominately White, four-year postsecondary institution?
Most research on persistence in higher education includes examination of how background variables, such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity, influence academic and social outcomes. Emphasis has been placed on how integration or assimilation by individuals to the cultural norms of the institution, while connection with (and support from) past social structures has been deemphasized. However, a bicultural perspective of student development focuses on importance on developing a dual orientation towards maintaining relationships with both cultures. Cultural capital theory provides a perspective to inform researchers on how development of bicultural perspective may aid the ability for individuals to find and sustain comfort in the culture of the institution. Assumptions that aspects of African American culture are not valued at a mainstream social structure, such as a Predominantly White Institution, renders cultural capital theory irrelevant for enrolled African American students. Considering this perspective and literature, which suggest both the importance for support from their home community and institution for persistence, this study, presents the following queries:

2) Is Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory relevant to African Americans within the context of a Predominately White Institution?

3) How is cultural capital used differently among African Americans to develop social and academic connections within the institution?

In the 1920s, W.E.B. DuBois, challenged by a group of young scholars seeking to emphasize the growing socioeconomic distinctions within the African American community, questioned whether the dogma of class struggle applied to African Americans (Holloway, forthcoming). He concluded that, due to legalized oppression based on skin-color, the African American community had yet to experience concrete
socioeconomic distinctions. However, DuBois predicted, “In one hundred years if we develop along conventional lines we would have such fully separated classes…” (as cited by Lewis, p. 555). Within the context of higher education, this study seeks to examine that statement
Chapter III

Research Methodology

This study seeks to explore ways in which socioeconomic background and ethnic identity influence the first-year transition of African American students enrolling at a Predominately White Institution. This chapter reviews the research design and methods used to investigate the questions of interest.

Studies of student experiences in higher education often employ quantitative analysis to link educational outcomes to personal, academic, and social characteristics of the individual students (Perl & Nodlon, 2002). The quantitative approach for student outcomes often focus on uncovering a systematic relationship between inputs and outputs through statistical analysis (Stage & Manning, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). The repeated observation of a relationship between two or more variables and the ability to generalize to a population reflective of the sample selected are central characteristics of quantitative research. The strength of a quantitative approach lies in its ability to support statistically conclusions about general behavior within the context of theory, based on a sizeable number of observations.

In higher education, conclusions from quantitative studies valuable information about general phenomena occurring at postsecondary institutions. However, when findings are generalized to a larger student population the range of what can be said about any one individual student or small group experience is limited (Stage & Manning, 2003). Because quantitative research tends to collapse theoretical concepts and human
characteristics into predetermined categories, an accurate reflection of the complex nature of individuals becomes susceptible to reductionism (Perl & Nodlon, 2002). Consequently, segments of the population that do not reflect the prevailing norms of the larger population may be disparately influenced.

Individuals in the sample who differ significantly from average (for example, older students, or ethnic minority students on a predominately White research campus) are unlikely to find their experiences represented unless the data are collected in a manner that deliberately seeks to represent large numbers of these students (Stage and Manning, 2003, p. 25).

Since the primary focus of this study is a detailed understanding of specific processes and relationships between specific variables, a qualitative analysis is the most appropriate research methodology. The naturalistic approach of qualitative research emphasizes examination of process within a context-specific setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Golafshani, 2003; Stage & Manning, 2003). Because qualitative research is idiographic and descriptive, the researcher becomes the instrument through which participant perspectives are interpreted and analyzed. The strength of qualitative research is the ability to provide an account of the means by which individual outcomes are achieved, considering both institutional context and participant meaning rather than focusing on the relationship between predefined criteria and outcome variables.

### 3.1 Case Study Research Design

For this investigation, I employ a multiple case study method to inquire about transitional experiences of first-year African American college students from various socio-economic backgrounds. A case study design is particularly useful when the
boundaries between the phenomenon and context are unclear (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). Multiple case studies explore a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context through the collection of data from several cases. The use of multiple cases allows for both within case analysis and cross-case comparisons. Researchers often regard the data collected and analyzed through multiple cases as more robust than a single case method.

3.1.1 Units of Analysis

A critical component to developing a case study design is defining the ‘case’ and the unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). Defining the unit of analysis relates to the initial research questions guiding the study. This study uses multiple case studies with multiple units of analysis. The ‘cases’ are African American students entering their first-year of postsecondary education directly from high school graduation. Following the example of Sellars, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (2004), ‘African American’ is the terminological preference used in this study to describe persons of African decent who have received a significant portion of their socialization in the United States. Using the term ‘African American’ rather than ‘Black’ reflects a shift away from physical description in favor of culture as the basis of group identity (Patterson, 1997; Sieglman, Tuch & Martin, 2005). However, the term African American is open to critique because it does not delineate between individuals from families who recently moved from an African or Caribbean country and those from families who have maintained residence in the United States for multiple generations. Since this study has a domestic rather than international focus, the
cases concentrate on students of African descent whose primary residence has been in the United States.

The primary unit of analysis embedded within each case is family socioeconomic background, which vary across cases. Socioeconomic background refers to position of individuals or families with respect to access of economic and social resources (Hauser & Warren, 1997; Bollen, Glanville, & Stecklov, 2001; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Characteristics that indicate socioeconomic background include occupational status, education, and income. There are many conceptual approaches to sorting out different levels of socioeconomic backgrounds, but social science literature identifies two discernable methods. The first method identifies socioeconomic background as a unitary concept. From this perspective, a summary index represents a fundamental dimension that underlies socioeconomic background. A common example is of a unitary approach is Hollingshead’s Two Factor Index of Social Position (Miller & Salkind, 2002), which combines education and occupation to produce a categorical scale of socioeconomic status. The second approach to defining socioeconomic backgrounds treats the components of socioeconomic background as distinct dimensions with different effects on particular outcomes. For example, although parents’ educational attainment and occupations are highly correlated, each may affect students’ outcomes in different ways. This method requires a complicated sorting out of the separate effects of social and economic disadvantages, which if done incorrectly may understate the importance of the accumulation of household resources.

Theoretical and empirical studies suggest the utility of measuring along occupational and educational dimensions, rather than economic dimensions, when
assessing socio-economic status of traditional college students because college students may not have an accurate sense of their parent’s financial situation (McMillan & Western, 2000). For this study, socioeconomic background was determined through open-ended questions focusing on occupation status and educational experiences of student’s parents. Participants, identified through campus mail and email contact, were assigned to different categories of socioeconomic status based on the Hollingshead Index of Social Position. The Hollingshead Index of Social Position is a long-standing index often used to define socioeconomic categories in sociological studies (Hauser & Warren, 1997; Bollen, Glanville, & Stecklov, 2001, Miller & Salkind, 2002). Outlined in Table 3-1, the index combines a ranking of seven occupational categories (1 = high level executives/professionals; 7= unskilled workers) with ranking of seven educational categories (1 = graduate degree; 7 = less than 7th grade education). The socioeconomic status score of a family unit is calculated by multiplying the average scale value for occupation by a weight of seven and the average scale value for education by a weight of four (the overall factor weights were calculated with multiple regression equations). Individuals with scores totaling more than sixty-four are assigned to lower socioeconomic family background category, while those scoring seventeen or less are assigned to the upper socioeconomic family background category. Those falling between these scores are categorized into upper-middle, middle, or lower middle on the socioeconomic family background spectrum.
Table 3-1: Hollingshead’s Index of Social Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Scale Score</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Higher Executives, Proprietors, and Major Professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Company Presidents, Lawyers, Physicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business Managers, Proprietors of Medium-Sized Businesses, and Lesser Professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Advertising Directors, Real Estate Brokers, Accountants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Administrative Personnel, Owners of Small Businesses, and Minor Professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Department Store Managers, Interior Decorators, Military Sergeants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clerical and Sales Workers, Technicians, and Owners of Small Businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Bank clerks and tellers, Military Petty Officers, Supervisors of Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Skilled Manual Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Auto body repairers, Electricians, Small Farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Machine operators and semiskilled employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Examples: Hairdressers, Delivery person, Housekeepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Unskilled employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: Cafeteria workers, Janitors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Scale Score</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Graduate/Professional (MA, MS, MEd, MD, PhD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Four-year college graduate (BA, BS, BM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>One to three years college (also business schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>High school graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10 to 11 years of school (part high school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Seven to nine years of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Less than seven years of school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISP score = (average parent occupation score × 7) + (average parent Education score × 4)

Classification system

Range of scores

11-17
18-31
32-47
48-63
64-77
The use of the Hollingshead Index for research in the United States is validated by longitudinal measurement models showing it to be as strong an indicator of occupational status than other well-known indices such as the Hodge-Siegel Index or the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (Slomczynki, Miller, & Kohn, 1981; Miller & Salkind, 2002). The Hollingshead Index, outlined in Figure 3-1, does not provide a measure of socioeconomic status of students in any absolute sense (Barratt, 2005). However, as a scale, it is sufficient for creating SES groups based on qualitative data collected.

A second variable of interest for this study is gender of the student. Although not central to inquiry explicated in the research questions, studies indicate gender has influence on shaping educational experiences of African American first year students (Fleming, 1984; Davis, 1995; Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004). For example, because African American males are less prevalent on PWI campuses, their high visibility contributes to increased vulnerability of being viewed through negative stereotypes centered around aggression and lack of academic aptitude. Furthermore, gender differences in seeking academic and social support expose African American men to attrition issues. The propositions of this study focus on socioeconomic backgrounds, however, ignoring gender would dismiss a possible rival explanation for factors influencing first-year experiences.

3.1.2 Institutional Contexts

The institution selected for this study is a public, four-year, doctoral research extensive institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. With a
campus located just outside a major metropolitan city, Bayside University (pseudonym) as an overall enrollment of 12,000 students, drawing students from the inner-city as well as the suburbs. The university enrolls approximately 1,400 first-year students in the fall, with over 70% residing in campus housing. Between 1996 and 2002, the ethnic profile of first-year students was 61% White, 19% Asian American, 13% African American, 5% International students, 2% Hispanic American, and .4% Native American.

A member of the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE), Bayside University falls into the selective institution category based on the average combined SAT score for the freshman class. From 1996-2002, the average SAT scores for incoming freshman at Bayside University was 1193. During the same period, African American students averaged a combined SAT scores of 1152, 91 points higher than the average SAT scores for African American students at other highly selective institutions in CSRDE. For the 2002 cohort, Bayside University’s overall first-year retention rate was lower than comparative institutions (82% vs. 86%). However, African American students had a higher first-year retention rate at Bayside than at comparative institutions (89% vs. 86%). Bayside has demonstrated the ability to attract highly qualified African American students and retain them at higher rates than peer institutions in the CRSDE.

Originally founded as a commuter school to alleviate enrollment pressures at the flagship campus of the state system, Bayside University currently offers 37

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4 Information about Bayside was provided by various institutional resources
5 The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange includes a diverse group of 4-year degree-granting institutions, representing every level of Carnegie classification from Doctoral through Baccalaureate, public and private, large and small institutions. Other highly selective institutions include Arizona State University, Pennsylvania State University, and University of Texas-Austin.
undergraduate majors, 28 master’s programs, and 21 doctoral degrees. The institution has ranked programs in both science and engineering. Over twenty research centers are located on campus and Bayside’s Research Park encourages innovative technology development through cooperative research and training. Led by a person of color as President, Bayside University has developed into nationally and internationally recognized university, receiving considerable attention for creating a campus climate that fosters African American student persistence in science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) fields.

The Walker-Drew (pseudonym) scholarship program is designed to provide students of color with support mechanisms that fosters academic excellence in STEM related majors. The program includes a Summer Bridge component, as students take courses together, leave in the same residence hall, and attend social and cultural events on the campus and in the community. The prestige of the Walker-Drew program draws students from across the country.

The unique institutional context provides many advantages for this study. Using Bayside diminishes the possibility that institutional characteristics uniquely influence African American experiences as the institution has demonstrated the ability to retain African American students at above average rates. The average African American student has strong academic preparation, providing a deep population from which this study can sample. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from this study are increasingly valuable to institutions with similar profiles. Finally, the diverse socioeconomic community surrounding the campus attracts African American students from various backgrounds, as Bayside University actively recruits from the inner city (site of many severely depressed
socioeconomic communities) and the surrounding suburbs (containing wealthy, racially
diverse communities).

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

This study uses multiple case studies where the ‘cases’ are full-time African
American students entering their first-year of postsecondary education directly from high
school. The most important consideration in qualitative sampling decisions is to select
individuals who can provide investigators with insight into the stated research question
(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Specifically, maximum variation sampling
allows investigators to select purposefully a wide range of cases that have similar
characteristics, but vary on the dimension of interest. Patton (2002) suggests that sample
size for qualitative study depends on what the investigator is researching and what
resources investigators have to conduct their study. “The validity, meaningfulness, and
insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness
of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than
with sample size” (p. 245).

Two constructs – sufficiency and salience – help to determine the number of
interviews needed in a qualitative study (Stage & Manning, 2003). “Sufficiency” is
reached when the numbers of interviews reflect the range of experiences in the site.
“Saturation” is accomplished when the same information is heard repeatedly throughout
the interviews. While Patton (2002) stresses that there are no rules for sample size in
qualitative inquiry, he recommends specifying a minimum number of samples based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon.

As a former professional employee of the Office of Residential Life at Bayside University from 2000 until 2002, I was able to gain administrative approval and support for this investigation. In fall 2006, approximately 170 residential students who entered their first year at Bayside University self-identified as African American. One hundred and forty eight African-American students (students who had not turned 18 years old by September 1st were excluded) was offered the opportunity to participate via a letter of invitation and a copy of the informed consent statement explaining the nature of the research and rights of the participants including confidentiality and anonymity. Fifteen students expressed an interest and return a signed consent form prior to the first interview. Participant profiles are outlined in Chapter IV.

3.2.1 Triangulation of Data

A strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of data, known as triangulation of data (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Triangulation of data provides an opportunity for convergence on evidence from different sources. Through this data collection method, the validity of one source of evidence can be evaluated against other sources of evidence. Studies that use only one source of data are more vulnerable to errors linked to that particular method. Triangulation of data helps strengthen internal validity of a study because various sources provides multiple observations on “what is really going on” in the case (Merriam, 2002, p. 25).
For this study, three sources of data are used – ethnographic interviews, journal entries, and review of institutional documents. The primary source of data for this study is ethnographic interviews. An ethnographic interview “seeks to gain the perspective of the participant that is informed by the social context and the participant’s position within that context” (Stage & Manning, 2003, p. 37). To gain a greater understanding of the context, a researcher should observe the setting before identifying research participants or developing the interview protocol. Prior to the study, I had various opportunities to observe the institutional – as a professional working with students, as a doctoral student conducting qualitative research for publication, and as a visitor evaluating Bayside University as a potential research site for my dissertation.

In order to assess the meaning participants make of their experience, ethnographic interviews protocol often employs a set of semi-structured questions (Stage & Manning, 2003; Yin 2003). Open-ended questions should address the phenomena of interest, encouraging participants to respond with in-depth responses. Stage and Manning (2003) suggest that questions are arranged to flow from low-risk to high-risk questions.

This investigation included ethnographic interviews at three points during the academic year. The first interview took place in October, at the conclusion of the sampling process. Several studies (Woosley, 2003; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005) emphasize the critical role the first eight weeks of the semester have on future success. Students quickly move from being excited about the fresh start to being overwhelmed by their new surroundings. The purpose of the first interview was to gather information about family background, review pre-college academic and social experiences, and discuss initial impressions about the first weeks at Bayside University.
I conducted the second interview in December. Typically, during this period, students organize for the final academic push of the semester, as well as preparing for a return to their home community and family. Students have established social and academic connections or have isolated themselves from the community (Zeller & Mosier, 1993). During this time, students typically begin to think about how their renegotiated identity may connect or clash with family and home community traditions. The goal of the second interview was to discuss academic and social adjustments; identify challenges in establishing connection with the community; review relationships with peers, faculty, and staff; and discuss expectations for returning home for the winter break.

I conducted the final interview in March, about six weeks prior to the end of the academic year. While students were weeks away from completing their first year at Bayside University, by this time they had adjusted successfully (or not) and were (maybe) looking forward to a second year. The goal of the last interview was to review successes and challenges during the year, discuss the balance (or lack of balance) between school community and home community, and discuss future academic plans. With permission of the participant, all interviews were audio recorded via a digital recorder. Interviews took place in secured study rooms located within the student’s residence hall or in an alternate neutral location chosen by the student.

In addition to interviews, personal student documents, specifically journal entries were collected. Journals are a rich source of information, contextually relevant, and grounded in the context (Merriam, 1998; Love, 2003). Journals provide an indication of the inner thought process of the individual in their personal language, uncovering events with lasting impact, stimulating further questions from the researcher. Students were
asked to complete at least one journal entry between October (first-interview) and November (second interview) and two entries between November (second interview) and March (final interview). Journals were allowed to be unstructured, although I gave students general instruction to record and reflect on experiences they feel have been important in shaping their first-year. Personal electronic journals have become very popular with traditionally aged college students through websites such as myspace.com, facebook.com, and livejournal.com. A form of personal documents, these websites are already been used by administrators and researchers for investigation and inquiry of college students. For this study, students were encouraged to keep a personal journal separate from previously established electronic journals (such as myspace.com or facebook.com), although I perused electronic journals as a source of data with permission of the student.

Institutional records, including academic transcripts, administrative records, and general documents were the third source of data for this study. I informed students identified for the study that their participation will include my access to academic and administrative information, which will be kept confidential. Academic records provide a quantitative account of how students have adjusted in the classroom setting (Love, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Transcripts offer an observation of each case beyond the student and the researcher. It may provide an opportunity for the researcher to cross check information provided by the student through interviews and journal entries. Similarly, administrative records, such as residential incident reports and mid-year academic reports, provide information about issues of personal adjustment. While this study used fall semester grades, spring first year grades were not part of the study due to time limitations (spring
semester ended May 24th). Several studies (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Berger & Braxton, 1998) suggest a strong correlation between intent to persist and actual persistence the next semester. I inquired about student’s intention to persist into Fall 2007 and checked information provided by students with registration records for Fall 2007 registration.

As part of the data collection from institutional records, I also examined general documents periodically, including the campus newspaper and the Bayside University website. General records provide information about events occurring at institution that may influence student experiences. As a source of data, administrative and general documents are non-interactive, therefore their accuracy cannot immediately be checked with an interview participant (Love, 2003). Even if participants are asked about a particular document, such as a residential incident report, they are producing another perspective constructed at a different time and from a different perspective. The result is reporting a bias, where particular viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations persevere while others are lost. As Yin (2003) recommends, if the documentary evidence contradicts evidence from other data sources, pursued the issue by inquiring further into the topic during interviews.

As Patton (2002) states, no data collection method is beyond bias. Interviews are subject to respondent’s bias – participants may be providing information they feel the researcher wants to hear or are purposefully avoid discussing negative experiences (Maxwell, 2005). While a threat to the validity of this study, data collected from documents prepared by university staff reduces respondent bias.
In discussing research within a college context, Stage and Manning (2003) conclude that the manner in which researchers gain access to participants is a precursor to the trust critical to the quality of the data gathered. As a former student affairs professional at Bayside University, from 2000 until 2002, I maintained contact with key administrators since my departure. After reviewing a brief version of my proposal topic, my former direct supervisor – currently Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs - agreed to support the investigation. Although I utilized resources at Bayside University to identify my sample and collect data, I made it clear to students that this investigation is for research purposes only.

Participants received a total of $45 for their participation in the study. I provided $15 to students upon completion of the one-hour interviews in October, December, and March. Additionally, I thanked students for their participation via a personal letter after the last interview session. Participants were invited to review transcripts, interpretation of data, and the final draft of the study. Thirteen of the fifteen students completed all three interviews, while ten out of the fifteen participants completed journal entries. Fourteen out the fifteen students had set up an on-line personal profile on facebook.com and/or myspace.com.
Currently, there is a theoretical debate about to consider issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research (Patton, 2003; Merriam, 2003; Yin, 2003). In particular, qualitative researchers using postmodern and critical perspectives continue to challenge constructivist notions of validity and reliability. Additionally, the strategy of purposefully sampling for in-depth cases appears to make generalizability irrelevant.

Merriam (2003) suggests it is important for qualitative researchers to address credibility concerns by discussing issues of validity, reliability and generalizability as they relate to a qualitative investigation. Internal validity refers to the question of whether we are observing what we think we are observing. Because researchers constantly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Face-to-Face Interviews</th>
<th>Journal entry</th>
<th>Web Profiles</th>
<th>Administrative Records</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Malik</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Fana</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Imani</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalya</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interpret reality, whether through numbers or words, internal validity is the strength of qualitative research because the investigator is the primary instrument for data collection. Because qualitative researchers are primary instruments for data collection and analysis, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observations…We are ‘closer’ to reality than if an instrument with predefined items had been interjected between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2003).

Triangulation of data collection helps reduce concerns of internal validity by allowing the researcher to check data collected through one source (interview of students) with data collected through another source (administrative records).

A second tactic for addressing internal validity is through member checks. Member checks involve asking participants to comment on the interpretations of the data inferred by the researcher by taking tentative findings back to participants to determine whether their experience have been accurately reflected (Merriam, 2003).

Peshkin (1988) suggest that because researchers cannot remove individual subjectivity, it needs acknowledgment and monitoring throughout the research process. My own personal observation of students of color at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and in the development of my own African American identity partly shapes by subjectivity. Reflecting on my personal experiences as a student of color attending a PWI, I was fortunate enough have parents who were well educated and worked in university settings. Therefore, I had an advantage of adjusting academically and socially because the environment was familiar to me. However, many of my close friends did not have a similar family background and struggled. I contend that some of my most intellectually gifted friends never matriculated to graduation, in part, because of their
inability to find a comfort in the university community. As a professional in student affairs for several years, I observed similar patterns among the students of color.

Reliability is concerned with the extent to which other researchers may replicate the study with a goal of minimizing bias (Merriam, 2003; Yin, 2003). In qualitative research the focus is not on replicating the results (the same data can produce numerous interpretations), but to ensure that the researcher’s conclusions are plausible given the data collected. Peer review, which occurs naturally in the dissertation process, is a tactic used to confront reliability concerns. Committee members, as well as fellow graduate students familiar with the research, were asked to scan raw data and assess whether the initial findings are reasonable based on the data. Another strategy is to use an audit trail to describe in detail how the researcher collected data, the mechanisms through which coding categories were established, and the decision-making processes throughout the investigation (Merriam, 2003, p. 27). I utilized peer review through communication with dissertation committee members and I created an audit trail through updated research journals and memos.

The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, as defined in an empirical sense (Yin, 2003). A qualitative study relies on analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. Analytical generalization focuses on using conclusions from the study to inform theory. This study seeks to inform various theories including cultural capital theory, student persistence theories, and racial identity theory. For this study, I test generalizability through a careful selection of criteria for categorizing information and identifying themes that emerge from the various data sources.
3.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis refers to the process of systematically searching and arranging the sources of data that the research accumulates for data interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Data interpretation refers to the development of ideas about the findings, including relating them to the literature and to broader concepts. While a difference exists between data analysis and data interpretation, researchers often process them simultaneously.

Yin (2003) concludes that the analysis of case study evidence is one of the most difficult aspects of doing case studies. There are a few qualitative data analysis software programs to help novice a researcher code and categorize large amounts of narrative text, such as those collected from open-ended interviews and journal entries. This study used the seventh version of the Nonnumerical Unstructured Data-Indexing, Searching & Theorizing (NVIVO) software as a tool to analyze data gathered.

Yin (2003) suggests developing general strategies for analyzing the data to ensure that the researcher is treating the evidence fairly, ruling out alternative interpretations, and producing compelling analytic conclusions. Relying on the theoretical propositions discussed in the literature review helps the research focus on examining the units of analysis within each case and compare across cases. For this study, focused on data that provided insight as to how and why various socioeconomic backgrounds of African American first-year students influence their educational experiences.

Another useful strategy for analyzing the data is to consider rival explanations. Being aware of the alternative explanations allows researchers to attempt to collect evidence about other influences. The hypothesis in the theoretical proposition for this
study considers cultural capital, whose accumulation is influenced by socioeconomic background, as the primary vehicle shaping educational experiences at Bayside University. One of the primary direct rivals for this hypothesis is that the gender primarily shapes educational experiences of first-year African American students (Chavous et al, 2004).

Pattern-matching logic, through development of a coding system, is the specific technique used for within case and across case analysis. Pattern-matching logic compares a theoretical-based pattern with an empirically based pattern (Yin, 2003). Coding is often based on description of setting, definition of particular situation, and ways of thinking toward specific aspects of a situation. Developing a list of coding categories outlines emergent themes, reducing the data to patterns for comparison.

In Chapter II, the literature review outlined a particular pattern through the development of a conceptual framework. First-year African-American students at Predominately White Institutions experience an elevated level of duality – searching to create a neo-self who can connect with the norms of their current environment without giving up the values nurtured within their home. The development of bicultural perspectives, stimulated by the accumulation of cultural capital, fosters a reconceptualization of a self which student positively internalize. Whether African American students from various socioeconomic backgrounds process this development differently and how that may shape educational experiences and outcomes is the inquiry of interest.
3.3.1 Role of Researcher

The relationship between the researcher and the subject under investigation is a critical threat to internal validity (Lincoln, 1995; Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2003), one that deserves independent consideration. As the instrument through with data analysis flows through, qualitative investigators are encouraged to confront their subjectivity though reflexivity – articulation and clarification of assumptions, experiences, and theoretical orientation that may influence study. “Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the origins of one’s own perspective…” (Patton, 2002, p. 65).

I should be aware and acknowledge the subjectivity rooted in my identity as an African American. Many would argue that an African American studying African Americans could not be anything but very subjective, tending to discredit the intellectual contribution. However, male researchers study other male students and White American researchers study White American students, without fear of being discredited. Acknowledging my identity as an African American and the role it plays in the study demonstrates to interested readers that I am monitoring perceptions created by that identity.

Researchers who embrace subjectivity as a part of our whole selves may claim that findings are more than wishful thoughts blanketed by subjectivity. The management of our subjectivity, as Peshkin (1991) suggests, allows us to know what we are disposed to see and what we are disposed not to see, allowing researchers to escape biases that
may shade our findings. Further, an honest reflection creates a level of trust and validity among participants, audiences, and the researcher.

3.4 Limitations

In addition to the limitations highlighted throughout this section, several others cautions sound accompany the results of this investigation. Studies of college student experiences cannot account for every factor that may influence educational experiences. Other environmental developments not identified as a primary or secondary unit of analysis for this study may influence educational experiences of African American students at Bayside University. Such factors include course schedule, certainty of major choice, residence hall location, and distance from home. While I attempted to make the cases as similar as possible, with the exception socioeconomic background, the goal of the purposeful sampling was to identify cases that best inform the research questions. As data was collected, I highlighted information regarding alternative explanations for variation in educational experiences as they were uncovered.

Examining student experiences in a unique context raises concerns about whether conclusions drawn are relevant solely to the distinctive characteristics of Bayside University. The campus is unusual for a PWI because it offers an environment where African American students persist at above national average rates. Using a unique postsecondary context provides the opportunity to consider how structural characteristics that appear to be favorable for African American student success interact differently (or consistently) with African American students from various backgrounds. Readers should
take into account the unique nature of the institution when considering the conclusions offered in this study. By providing a collection of rich data, this study provides valuable contribution to the theory of African American student persistence, cultural capital, and racial identity. Furthermore, this study offers future research, conducted in different context, data points for comparison.

In considering how home community connections shape educational experiences, due to limited time and resources, this study collected perceptions from students, excluding perspectives from parents and other important home figures. The single perspective limits the results because there was no opportunity to cross-check statements from students about pre-college experiences, increasing the threats to internal validity. The lack of multiple perspectives also limits the richness of the data, as parents and other important individuals may have information that is critical to understanding transition and the process of developing a bicultural perspective.

Despite these limitations, distinct patterns which emerged from the students in this study regarding the interaction of ethnicity and socioeconomic background have implications for future research and policy development. Using a cultural capital perspective to examine transition and connection processes during the first year adds to previous literature examining secondary school experiences and the college choice process. Examining the potential for socioeconomic stratification among African Americans adds to the current debate about the fragmenting African American collectivity. Finally, the collection of data throughout the first-year contributes to future research on identifying factors related to persistence, particularly for African American students.
Chapter IV
Bayside Participants

This chapter provides an overview of the sample collected for this study, followed by a description of each participant, focusing on family background, pre-college academic environment, and college choice process. In the third part of this chapter, information about participant backgrounds provides the framework for considering transformative classifications of socioeconomic status and ethnic identities in the United States.

4.1 Overview of Participants

The multiple case studies involve fifteen traditional-aged (18 to 20 years old), residential students who enrolled at the same postsecondary institution in the fall of 2006. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student, as well as the institution, in order to ensure participant anonymity. All students described themselves as African Americans and every participant was born and socialized primarily in the United States. Eight students indicated that their parents were born outside the United States – either in Africa (6) or the Caribbean (2).

The sample includes nine females and six males. Eleven students are in-state, the rest are from out-of-state locations primarily from the Atlantic region. Six students
participated in a scholarship program (given the pseudonym Walker-Drew Scholarship Program for this study) aimed at increasing participation of students of color in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields. Using Hollinshead’s Index of Social Position, three students classified as having upper socio-economic status (SES), six students upper-middle SES, four students middle SES, and two students lower-middle SES. No student classified as being low SES based on the two-factor index (Table 4-1).

4.2 Participant Descriptions

4.2.1 Case One: Anthony

Anthony is a Walker-Drew Scholar majoring in mechanical engineering. He was born in Baltimore, MD, but moved to Montgomery County, MD at an early age because “that’s where the good schools and churches are.” Anthony’s parents were born in Nigeria and attended graduate school internationally before settling in the United States. His mother is a high school English teacher and his father is a research director at a federally-funded agency. The youngest of three children, Anthony has a sister who graduated from Duke University and currently attends graduate school at Harvard University. His brother attended Bayside University for a while, but is currently out of school and working. Hollingshead’s Index classifies Anthony as a student from an upper class family background.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Father’s Occupation/Education</th>
<th>Mother’s Occupation/Education</th>
<th>ISP Average</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Walker-Drew</th>
<th>First Semester GPA</th>
</tr>
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<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Research Director/Graduate</td>
<td>HS Teacher/Graduate</td>
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<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
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<td>Registered Nurse/Graduate</td>
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<td>Business Administrator/Graduate</td>
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<td>18.0</td>
<td>Cultural Anthropology</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
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<td>Will</td>
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<td>Lawyer/Graduate</td>
<td>Correctional Officer/Bachelors</td>
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<td>Pre-Physical Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
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<td>Software Engineer/Graduate</td>
<td>Registered Nurse/Bachelors</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
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<td>3.80</td>
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<td>Administrative Assistant/Bachelors</td>
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<td>Economics</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Nurse/Associates</td>
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<td>Biology</td>
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<td>Not provided</td>
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<td>Administrative Assistant/Some College</td>
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<td>Unemployed/High School</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Parent is alive, but not a consistent presence in participant’s life
An honor roll student throughout high school, Anthony described his school environment as “really competitive” academically. According the Maryland Department of Education, 87% of the 2006 graduating class at Anthony’s high school enrolled directly at a postsecondary institution, with 82% attending a four-year college. “I think that the environment pushed people to want to do well academically, for the most part.” Anthony took several Advanced Placement (AP) courses and graduated with high honors.

Anthony recalled being “the one Black kid” in most of his advanced courses, although he had “friends that were all races” while in high school. In 2006, Anthony’s high school enrolled approximately 2,400 students, 90% of whom were categorized racially as White (55%) or Asian/Pacific Islander (35%). African Americans (6%) and Hispanic students (4%) represented the remaining 10% of the student population.

Attracted by the Walker-Drew Scholars program and the mid-size enrollment, Anthony chose to attend Bayside over other higher profile institutions. He was also familiar with the campus through his older brother, who attended Bayside for a while. “Whenever I came up here he would take me to the (student recreation building) and those people were real friendly...It’s a diverse culture and I like that.” Anthony expressed satisfaction for the 3.8 grade point average (GPA) he earned during the first semester, and slight disappointment over the one B he received.

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4 Information about Maryland public high schools was gathered via the Maryland Department of Education website (http://www.mdreportcard.org/), including documented post-graduation decisions of the 2006 class.

5 Advanced Placement courses are offered at high schools by the College Board to prepare students with college level work
4.2.2 Case Two: Malik

Born and raised in Prince George’s County, Malik is a Walker-Drew Scholar majoring in Biochemistry. Like Anthony, Malik’s parents were born in Nigeria and lived internationally before settling in the United States. Malik’s mother is a registered nurse and his father is a civil engineer. Both of his parents received advanced degrees from a Historically Black University (HBCU). The second of four boys, Malik and his brothers were all sent back to Nigeria for several years because their parents felt they were becoming “too Americanized.” He states, “My parents wanted us to be in another culture and actually know where we were from so we can actually have a sense of being African.” Hollingshead’s Index classifies Malik’s family as upper-class.

Malik spent his seventh and eighth grade years in Nigeria before returning to the United States for high school. He describes himself as “smart in high school, but I was cool too. It wasn’t like I was ever a nerdy type. I just knew when to get my work done and I did it.” Malik attended a high school with over 2,300 students, with just over 60% of the 2006 class enrolling in postsecondary education after high school (40% at a four-year institution). “A lot of people were going to college or trying to get into college. If not, they settled for the community college.”

Malik’s high school was attended predominately by students of color, the majority being from African-American (46%) and Hispanic (40%) backgrounds. “I couldn’t even imagine what it would be like if I went to a predominantly White high school. Some of my friends who went to a predominantly White high school tell me (about) all the racism there. It’s crazy.”
Malik chose Bayside over other institutions after he was not accepted or waitlisted at his top choices, including several Ivy League schools. Malik also considered attending his parents’ alma mater (where his brother is currently a sophomore), but received a better scholarship offer from Bayside. Like Anthony, Malik indicated that the scholarship was the deciding factor in his decision. Malik earned a 4.0 grade point average his first semester. “I was really happy with that, especially in my Chemistry class…that was a struggle.”

4.2.3 Case Three: Fana

Like Anthony and Malik, Fana is also a child of Nigerian-born parents. She was born and raised in Montgomery County, MD. Her father is a lawyer, and her mother is a registered nurse with an advanced degree. Fana’s parents divorced when she was 13 and her father moved to California, where she spends her summers. The oldest of three children, Fana is a pre-med major and hopes to become a surgeon. The family of Fana is classified as upper class according to Hollingshead’s Index.

Fana was in the “popular circle” and maintained “high B, low A average” through high school.” She describes her high school as “a breeze,” even though she always took honors and AP courses. Seventy-five percent of the students at Fana’s high school attended a postsecondary institution directly after high school, 61% at a four-year college or university.

Fana attended a high school with a racially diverse population. “Most of the time that color thing was blurred except maybe once in awhile when something came up.”
Among the approximately 1,800 students enrolled at Fana’s high school in 2006, 45% were African American, 26% were White, 20% were Asian/Pacific Islander; and 9% were Hispanic.

Fana’s initial desire was to go far away to college, and she applied to several out-of-state institutions. “I always wanted to get away from, like, everything.” However, Fana’s mother encouraged her to attend an institution closer to home, and she settled for Bayside because it was “the furthest school away from home that I applied to.” Fana still feels bitter about the process, expressing that she did not get to choose a college, but that “Bayside was chosen for me by my mom.” Fana did not participate in the follow-up interview in the spring.

4.2.4 Case Four: Bridgette

Bridgette is a cultural anthropology major from Prince George’s County, MD. The youngest of two children, she was born in Oklahoma and raised primarily in northern Virginia. Her parents divorced when she was 12 and she chose to live with her father, a business administrator. Bridgette is a third-generation college student. Her grandfather, a doctor, graduated from Howard University, and her father from Princeton University. “My grandparents and parents were always big on education or do something so you’re not out in the streets.” Hollingshead’s Index classified Bridgette as a student from a upper-middle class family.

After the 10th grade, Bridgett convinced her father to allow her to switch schools because at her old high school she felt that “if you were focused on your education, you
were) considered White.” Her first high school in Virginia was a large, public institution with over 2,000 students, 44% African American, 25% Hispanic, 24% White, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and a postsecondary attendance rate of 57% (42% to four-year colleges and universities). Upon moving to Prince George’s County, Bridgette enrolled in a small, private, Catholic-affiliated high school with an overall enrollment of 800 students. Seventy-eight percent of the students are persons of color (no specific ethnic breakdown is provided in the profile) and the school boasts a 100% college placement rate for the class of 2006. While both of the high schools she attended had a predominately non-White enrollment, she felt more comfortable in the second school for several reasons. “I only had one African American teacher at (her first high school), but I had about five or six at (the second high school)…and in the AP classes at (the second high school), there were a lot more Black people.”

Bridgette chose to attend Bayside University over higher profile institutions, describing Bayside as “probably my last or second to last” college choice. She was influenced by receiving a full scholarship and her father’s desire for her to remain close to home. Her older brother, who lived with their mother growing up, is also a college student, although he has taken several semesters off and has transferred three times. Bridgette admits that his lack of focus has encouraged her to be more specific in her academic plans. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology. Bridgette earned a 4.0 grade point average her first semester at Bayside, “I didn’t really expect it, but I was happy!”

Information about private high schools was gathered via individual school websites.
4.2.5 Case Five: Will

The oldest of three children, Will is from Howard County, MD. His mother is a correctional officer with a degree in sociology, and his father is a lawyer specializing in real estate transactions. A pre-physical therapy major, Will tends to spend his weekends at home at the request of his parents. At first, he did not mind the arrangement, given that Bayside is not “very sociable on the weekends,” but in our final interview he wondered “what’s the point” of living on campus during the week and at home on the weekends. Hollingshead’s Index classifies Will’s family as upper-middle class.

In high school, Will began taking college credit courses at his local community college and entered Bayside with “nine or twelve” credit hours earned. “It was my mom’s idea, but I thought she was bothering me…you know I was young, I mean give me a break…let me get into college first!” Will’s high school is relatively new to Howard County, being established in 1997. Sixty-nine percent of the 2006 graduating class at Will’s high school entered postsecondary education this year (54% at a four-year institution).

Just under half (48%) of the 1,800 students at Will’s high school were White, 29% were African American, 15% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 8% were of Hispanic descent. In his advanced classes, Will noticed that he was often one of the few students of color. Will felt “not really saddened but, you know…come on, why aren’t there more Blacks in the class? It doesn’t reflect society. Obviously, it doesn’t look good.”

Will limited his college applications to institutions within driving distance from his home. After not getting admitted to his top choice, he chose Bayside University over
other local institutions because of the science program. Will earned at 3.0 grade-point average his first semester at Bayside, which he felt was “good.” However, he admitted that his parents were disappointed and expected him to “beef it up” in the spring semester.

4.2.6 Case Six: Tara

A Walker-Drew Scholar, Tara is another student whose parents are Nigerian. She is a biochemistry major born and was raised in Raleigh, NC. Her mother is a registered nurse, and her father is a software engineer. Tara’s father came to the United States to attend college and earned an advanced degree from the University of Kentucky before moving to Raleigh for a job. Until arriving at Bayside University, Tara had not lived outside of Raleigh, and, as the oldest of three, she is the first sibling to leave home. According to Hollingshead’s Index, Tara’s family is upper-middle class.

Tara attended a large, public high school in North Carolina. A profile provided by the school indicates at least a 90% college attendance rates for graduating classes in recent years, including 95% reported in 2005 (83% to a four-year institution). Tara indicated that most of her friends in high school were “high-achieving,” a “not so friendly” competitiveness among them at times. “Everyone’s always asking, ‘What’s your rank? What’s your GPA?’ It’s just such a big thing.”

Tara had friends in high school from all racial backgrounds, but she did not see her African American friends very often because “we didn’t have the same classes.” She revealed that because she was in “the magnet program, not the base school,” most of her
classmates were White and Asian. A profile provided by the school indicates that among
the 2,200 students enrolled in 2005, 51% were White students, 34% African American,
12% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Hispanic.

Tara initially heard about Bayside because of the Walker-Drew Scholars program.
She decided to attend Bayside after being accepted into the program, although she was
admitted to several high profile institutions and wait-listed at an Ivy League university.
Her mother encouraged her to consider Duke University, while her father pushed her
towards Bayside because of the scholarship. Tara earned a 3.8 grade-point average her
first semester at Bayside. “I had my doubts toward the end of the semester because it was
getting tough with all the papers I had to work on, but it turned out pretty well.”

4.2.7 Case Seven: Christopher

Christopher was born in Washington, DC and was raised in several areas of
Montgomery County, MD. Christopher has a mixed heritage (Swedish mother, African
American father), although he self-identifies as African-American, “not biracial or
mixed.” His mother is an administrative assistant and his father is a real estate agent.
They both graduated from West Virginia University, where they met. Christopher
attended two high schools and admitted he has “never really been into school,” often
skipping classes in middle school and the early part of high school. He decided to get
more serious during his junior year after switching high schools, a different path than
some of his former peers. “The people I used to hang out with…a lot of my friends, they
went into the Army and a lot more of them just work and do things to get by.”

Christopher’s family is upper-middle class according to Hollingshead’s Index.

In the first high school Christopher attended, just 41% of the students attend a four-year college after high school (27% at a four-year institution) while 25% entered the workforce after graduation. At second school, 77% of students attended postsecondary institution after high school (62% at a four-year institution), while 13% entered the workforce immediately. “The first high school I went to nobody went to college that much. But the second high school I went to…was a lot nicer than (the first high school), so a lot more people went to college.”

In terms of racial diversity, the first school was almost all students of color – 94% (59% African American, 33% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander). The second school Christopher attended was also attended predominately by students of color – 84% overall (44% African American, 22% Hispanic, 18% Asian/Pacific Islander).

Currently an Economics major, Christopher expressed surprise that he was accepted to Bayside. He is one of the few students who resides on the Walker-Drew Scholars residential floor, but is not a part of the program. During our first interview, Christopher revealed that he recently became “involved” with a young lady who was part of the Walker-Drew program and felt the relationship had helped him become more academically focused. Christopher earned a 1.7 GPA his first semester at Bayside. “I was surprised because I thought I was going to fail. I didn’t think I was going to even get that.”
4.2.8 Case Eight: Ron

Ron, a mechanical engineering major, is from Prince George’s County. His family is originally from Trinidad. His mother moved to the United States to live with relatives shortly after she got pregnant with Ron. He has visited his father a few times in Trinidad, the last time when Ron was eight years old. Ron is an only child. His mother is an information technology specialist who earned a bachelor’s degree as an adult student. Ron recalls relocating several times as a youth, often sharing homes with extended family members. “My elementary years, we bounced around…I moved about three or four times in, like, a three year span.” According to Hollingshead’s Index, Ron’s family is upper-middle class.

Ron attended the same high school as Malik (Case Two). Neither acknowledged the other during their interviews and, to the best of my knowledge, each was unaware that the other was participating in the study. Ron was not a consistent honor student like Malik, usually earning “between a 2.0 and 2.5” during ninth and tenth grade. He credits his mother and joining the high school Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) as the catalysts that got him “straight.” Ron reported that he earned at least a 3.0 grade point average after 10th grade.

Ron indicated that he was planning to join the army after high school. However, to the surprise of his family, he was accepted to Bayside University. Ron had been rejected by the other school which he had applied to during his senior year before receiving the acceptance letter from Bayside. “When I got in, I didn’t even say anything to any of my family members…I just threw the big envelope with the ‘YES’ stamped on
front at dinner and walked away smiling.” However, Ron had a rough first-semester at Bayside academically, earning below a 2.0 grade point average. “I only had four classes and I failed my economics class, so that killed everything. So know I’m taking 18 credits to try and make up for it.”

**4.2.9 Case Nine: Gina**

Gina is a biology major from Montgomery County, MD, although she was raised primarily in various communities within Prince George’s County, MD. Her mother is a nurse, and her father runs a small business. She recalls her parents attending college part-time while she was young. Her mother has an associate’s degree, while her father has a bachelor’s degree. Gina recalls her family moved often early in her life, living with various family members before getting a place of their own. Gina recalls going to “about five different schools until the fourth grade, when we moved to (a suburban city).” Gina is from an upper-middle class family according to Hollingshead’s Index.

Gina describes her high school as academically competitive, and she felt “because my friends were doing well, I had to do well, because I didn’t want to be the only one not doing so well.” Seventy-three percent of the students in Gina’s graduating class attended a postsecondary institution after high school, with 55% enrolled at a four-year college or university. Gina describes her high school as “very diverse.” Of the 1,960 students enrolled in 2006 at Gina’s high school, a relatively new high school established in 1999, 40% were White, 28% African American, 17% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 14% Hispanic.
Although she received a full scholarship from a local Historically Black Institution (HBCU), Gina chose to attend Bayside University. She was familiar with the campus through her cousin, who is currently a junior at the campus. When visiting her cousin, she recalled “just (loving) the atmosphere and everything, how it wasn’t a party school and everything here was geared toward education.” Gina did not participate in follow-up interviews in the spring semester.

4.2.10 Case Ten: Eric

A political science major, Eric was raised in Prince George’s County, although his family recently moved to Charles County because “we just came into some money.” His father is a real estate agent, and his mother is an administrative assistant. Although his parents attended college, neither completed a degree. The oldest of two children, Eric had just turned 18 the month before our first interview in October. Eric is from a middle-class family according to Hollingshead’s Index.

Eric attended the same private Catholic high school in Maryland as Bridgette (Case Four). He describes himself as unmotivated in high school. “It was a challenge, but I just didn’t push myself to, like, go further. So I had trouble in high school at times. But it wasn’t anything that was impossible.” Eric and Bridgette also reside in the same residence hall and consider each other friends. Through conversations independent from the researcher, they became aware of each other’s participation in the study.

Eric chose Bayside University over another comparable institution. As the oldest child, he wanted to stay close to his family. He first heard about Bayside from a member
in his church who had graduated from the school. Despite living close to the campus, Eric’s first visit to Bayside was during orientation. At the end of the first semester, he had expressed a desire to transfer because of the “disappointing social scene.” However, in our final interview Eric was confident that he would return to Bayside next year. Eric did struggle academically his first semester, failing a class and accumulating just a 1.6 grade-point average. “I learned you can’t study like you did in high school and get by…here you got to put in a lot of work.”

4.2.11 Case Eleven: Jada

Jada is a biochemistry major from Raleigh, NC. She is also a partial recipient of the Walker-Drew scholarship. Jada’s parents divorced when she was young, and she has lived with her mother and sister since the divorce. Jada recently reconnected with her father, who resides in a city near Bayside University. Her mother is a nurse’s aid who attended a community college, while her father is a retired Marine. Jada talked openly about her family being homeless for a brief time when she was young, living in a women’s shelter for a few months. “It was weird because my aunt and my grandmother were like, ‘You know, we can help you guys.’ And my mom was like, ‘No, I want to do this on my own.’” According to Hollingshead’s Index, Jada is a student from a middle class family.

Jada attended the same high school in North Carolina as Tara (Case Six). Although the two were not close in high school, they have grown closer as a result of both participating in the Walker-Drew Scholars program and residing in the same
residence hall. Like Bridgette and Eric, they became aware of each other’s participation in the study and mentioned each other several times during their interviews.

Like Tara, Jada took Advanced Placement and honors courses during high school and noticed the lack of other students of color in those classes. “I always felt uncomfortable in those courses. I could just feel tension. I felt that I was being judged, or whatever, and that I had to represent. I was the only one in that class, so I had to represent for African American students and do well.”

Jada chose Bayside over some similar institutions closer to her home. She heard about the Walker-Drew program from her guidance counselor in high school. She received a partial scholarship from the program, not a full scholarship like others participating in this study. Jada also chose Bayside because of her father’s presence in the area, although the two have not connected as much as she anticipated. She earned a 4.0 grade-point average her first semester at Bayside. “I was happy about that… I’m working on doing that again this semester!”

4.2.12 Case Twelve: Imani

Imani is a political science major from Washington County, MD. The youngest of four children, Imani’s parents are from Senegal. Her parents divorced recently, and she has been living with her mother, a nurse’s assistant who attended community college. She indicated that she moved several times during her childhood as her parents split and reconciled multiple times. “It wasn’t that chaotic. It was just a lot of moving around and
not really staying in the same place a lot.” Imani’s family is middle-class according to Hollingshead’s Index.

Compared to most of the other participants in the study, Imani attended a relatively small, public high school with 887 total students. Just over half of her graduating class (55%) attended a postsecondary institution after high school, with 37% attending a four-year college or university. While Imani took some AP courses during the latter part of her high school years, she admitted that she was not a good student earlier in high school. She admitted that one of her teachers once commented to her: “I don’t understand why you don’t work harder, because you’re so smart.” It was her teacher’s confidence that made her think “Yeah, I can go to college! I don’t have to stay here with these (hometown) people!”

Imani’s high school was also very racially homogenous, with 90% of the students being categorized as White, 4% Asian, 2% African American, and 2% Hispanic. “In my graduating class, there were three Black people.” She continues, “I was aware that I was the only Black person….In all my pictures I’m that one Black person so I’m aware of it, but (my friends) didn’t really think about it that much.”

While she applied to several institutions, she was pleasantly surprised to be accepted to Bayside University. She was concerned that her early disengagement in high school would limit her options to the local community college. During her first semester, Imani earned a 2.8 grade point average. “My mom was not as mad as I thought she would be, but she was like, I have to do better. I know I can do better.”
4.2.13 Case Thirteen: Stephanie

Stephanie is an Africana Studies major from Prince George’s County, although her family recently moved to South Carolina “for economic reasons.” Her mother is a stay-at-home mother, and her father is a computer programmer who earned a two-year degree. Stephanie was home-schooled by her mother through the eighth grade and then attended a private, Christian high school with a graduating class of ten students. Stephanie was raised in a deeply religious home and talked openly about how her Christian beliefs influenced her academic and social life at Bayside. “Whenever I feel like I don’t want to do this or I don’t want to study, I always think about God and how He wants me to do this to accomplish this plan for my life. He’s my major role model. Everybody else comes second.” Hollingshead’s Index places Stephanie’s family in the lower-middle socioeconomic class.

Stephanie’s school was a K-12 institution affiliated with the Church of the Brethren. A total of 289 students enrolled at all grade levels, 75% African American, 19% White, 3% Hispanic, and 2% of Asian/Pacific Islander descent. Stephanie noted that, according to her parents, the school used to be predominately White until the last decade or so, when the local neighborhood became more predominately African American. While the student demographics changed, Stephanie mentioned that most of the teachers were White and “have been around for about 30 years.”

Information provided by the institution indicates that “an average of 70% of graduates pursue postsecondary education, with half of those attending four-year schools.” Stephanie was proud that she was the student to whom others looked for
assistance, although some of her teachers felt she was too serious. “They would say ‘you’re very different from the rest of the class. You’re so into your work. But you need to relax, too, and you need to have some fun. Don’t be so into your work.’”

The valedictorian of her high school class, Stephanie considered both religious-affiliated institutions and all-female schools, but decided to attend Bayside University because it was one of the few institutions on her list that had a degree program in Africana Studies. The oldest of four children, Stephanie noted that her parents asked that she consider transferring to a school in South Carolina. During her first semester, Stephanie earned a 4.0 grade-point average. “I definitely exceeded my expectations. It was very hard at first, but I pulled through and did really well.”

4.2.14 Case Fourteen: Kristina

Kristina is a Walker-Drew Scholar from a suburb of Philadelphia, PA, majoring in biochemistry. She is the middle of three children. Kristina’s mother is a customer service representative, and her father is a telephone line repairman. Although both of her parents attended a four-year college for a while, neither obtained a degree. However, Kristina’s older brother was a Walker-Drew Scholar at Bayside University. Her family lived in West Philadelphia before moving to the suburbs when she was young. Kristina stressed that education was a priority in her family. “My mom and my dad were always sitting with us when we were doing our homework and making sure we understood. When we needed tutors, we got tutors.” Hollingshead’s Index places Kristina’s family in the lower-middle socioeconomic classification.
Kristina attended a high school that was predominately White – in 2005, 83% of the 1,900 students were classified as White, 10% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. Kristina recalled that she had mostly White friends growing up, although she tried to be close with the other African Americans in her class. “(The) kindness was almost never returned from the Black kids. From the White kids, they would include me and stuff but it wasn’t the same because I wasn’t a part of them either. So that was always troublesome.”

According to information provided by the high school, 87% of students graduating from Kristina’s high school in 2005 enrolled in a post-secondary institution (76% to a four-year college or university). Commenting on her Advanced Placement courses, Kristina emphatically states, “There was no African Americans in any of my advanced classes. I didn’t really care. I used to care. I remember my first, in ninth grade, when I walked into my first AP class, and I was like…(eyes get big).”

Always a good student in high school, Kristina chose Bayside over similar institutions because of its medium size and her familiarity with the Walker-Drew program through her brother. It was her brother who paid for her college applications – eleven in all. “He wanted to make sure I had options and choices.” Kristina earned a 4.0 grade-point average during her first semester at Bayside. “I was very happy with my performance last semester. I came into this semester and was, like, ‘I’m going to do it again’ and then I remember how hard I had to work and wish I was still on break.”
4.2.15 Case Fifteen: Natalya

Natalya is a Walker-Drew Scholar, majoring in chemical engineering, whose parents are originally from Jamaica. Natalya was born and raised in a suburb of Philadelphia (different from Kristina’s hometown). Her mom is a telephone operator, and her father is unemployed, recently losing his long-time position as a security guard. Natalya has three older brothers, two of whom attended college for awhile, but did not graduate. Her third brother is currently attending a mid-size institution on a football scholarship. Natalya is a student from a lower-middle class according to Hollingshead’s Index.

Natalya recalls that her parents always pushed her to participate in academic programs during the summer, particularly science programs. She attended a six-week summer program at Temple University for two years and participated in a summer internship at the National Institute of Health in Washington, DC between her junior and senior year. “(When) I went to the summer program for the first time, I was amazed at how many (students of color there were)… I was happy that they all looked like me. It was really cool seeing that.” At Natalya’s high school, 86% of the 1,300 students enrolled in 2006 were classified as White, 7% African American, 5% Asian, and 1% Hispanic.

Natalya recalls that her parents relocated to the suburbs specifically for the school district, which she described as “supposedly one of the most affluent” in the United States. She indicated that most of her friends were African American and did well in school, although “We have a lot of Black people who aren’t excelling as what the statistics show that we are, so that was an issue.” According to the school, approximately
88% of students enrolled a four-year college or university after high school and an additional 6% enrolled in a two-year college.

Natalya was accepted by each institution to which she applied and chose Bayside because of the diversity in the student population. During our interviews, Natalya often expressed concern about her family situation, particularly the strain between her parents. She specifically decided to spend the majority of her winter break with her grandmother in Philadelphia. Despite the additional stress, Natalya earned a 3.5 grade-point average her first semester. “I thought a couple of the classes I took last year a weed-out class for engineering, so I just tried my best, and I was pretty happy with the result.”

4.3 Observations about Backgrounds

The participants in this study arrived at Bayside University with various feelings about their new surroundings, shaped by family background and prior educational experiences. In the process of comparing family history across each case, compelling observations emerged related to socioeconomic status and African-American ethnicity. First, as participants described their upbringing, it became clear that the socioeconomic classification, reflected by Hollingshead’s Index of Social Position, did not fully represent participants’ economic circumstances growing up. Second, although all students self-identified as African American, a requirement for participation in the study, some participants had more direct links with their African heritage than others.
4.3.1 Socioeconomic Status as a Dynamic Variable

Socioeconomic status is a complex concept that is difficult to define and operate in scholarly research. For this study, a two-factor index was used – education and occupation. More complex measures may include income and residential location. However, current definitions of socioeconomic class, even those including multiple measures, fail to address constraints on African Americans prevalent through centuries of structured inequalities in the United States based on race (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997; Shapiro, 2004). White families in higher socioeconomic categories have advantages over African American families from similar socioeconomic backgrounds through inherited assets. African American families typically do not inherit the wealth associated with higher levels of socioeconomic status. Rather, economic assets are accumulated through income via intergenerational mobility (increasingly better jobs, advanced education). Without the wealth, African American families tend to rely on income to increase assets, including relocating multiple times to residential areas that reflect their new status. The continual movement exposes children in the family to multiple socioeconomic environments. As a result, the social and cultural experiences of traditional-aged African American college students categorized in a particular socioeconomic classification may be vastly different than the widely-held assumptions attached to these classifications.

For the participants in this study, socioeconomic position appeared to be in consistently changing status during their childhoods. In discussing their family background, many participants discussed moving several times during their youth. For most participants, relocation was fueled by opportunities to access better-quality schools,
churches, and residential neighborhoods. For example, Anthony states that he was born in a major city, but moved to the suburbs “because of the church that was there and also because of the good school that was there.” Gina indicated that she went to “about five different schools until the fourth grade…because we stayed with other family members until we got our own place.” Tara remembers moving “from apartment to apartment” until her family settled into a house when she was in middle school. Christopher recalled moving six times, the last between 10th and 11th grade. Christopher describes the difference between his high schools:

The first high school I went to nobody went to college that much. But the second high school I went to…the first high school was in (urban area near major city) and the second high school was in (suburban area near city). (The suburban area) is a lot nicer than (the urban area) so a lot more people from my second high school went to college.

However, not all students experienced consistent upward mobility during their childhood. A few participants recalled how major life changes influenced their living conditions. Weeks after arriving to campus, Stephanie’s family informed her that they were moving to South Carolina for better employment for her dad and “because the cost of living is cheaper down there.” Heather, who recalled how her parents moved from West Philadelphia to the suburbs because of the school system, experienced a sudden life change months prior to her arrival at Bayside University:

My dad actually lost his job like, two, three months ago… I don’t exactly know why he got fired or whatever. We ended up losing our house because of money… Right now we are living with someone in their attic because they had two extra rooms. I don’t know how it got to that point. But it was crazy. I don’t know how I’m still sane. God only knows.

Residential mobility for the families of participants in this study often appeared to be based on providing their children with access to quality education, not surprising given
that formal education has historically been viewed as a primary catalyst for socioeconomic mobility or stability, particularly among African Americans (Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Cole and Omari, 2003). The number of times participants relocated and their conscious recognition of the reasons behind their mobility is striking. In contrasting experiences in multiple communities, many participants were able to mark their mobility across time. Therefore, the cultural aspect to socioeconomic position may be more visible for these participants than for those who inherited their socioeconomic position.

It is important to recognize that socioeconomic status is not a fixed state for the participants in this study. The transparency of socioeconomic mobility adds an element to the consideration of interaction effects of socioeconomic background and African American ethnicity on first-year experiences of participants. As participants struggle to contextualize their ever-changing class identity, they engage in a new environment where upper and middle class identities may be valued over lower class identities.

Despite this added complexity, many of the participants in this study are privileged. Their families have achieved some success and positioned the participants to benefit from social institutions such as schools and churches. However, the data provided by participants in this study suggest that one cannot view families who, through intergenerational mobility, have attained a certain class status in the same way that one views those who have maintained status through inherited wealth and position.
4.3.2 Heterogeneity of African American Ethnicity

Just as the information provided by participants added insight to the complications of socioeconomic classification, the data also provided key insight to the complexity of the label African American. As a group, those of African heritage in the United States have experienced multiple socially-constructed labels – Colored, American Negro, Black, Afro-American. “African American” seemed to be an advancement from Black as it moved away from physical features. However, even the label African American does not fully represent the heterogeneity of heritage among persons of African descent, just as the label Asian American does not capture the cultural and social distinctions among Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, and East Indian Americans.

While the research design for this study called for “African American” students, immediate ancestry of participants in this survey was diverse—eight of the fifteen participants were first-generation African American – their parents had immigrated from Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal) or the Caribbean (Trinidad and Jamaica). The direct contact with their families in Africa or the Caribbean varied, with some students taking numerous trips to visit family and other students never visiting the birth country of their parents. Malik’s parents sent him to Nigeria for two years:

Initially, they didn’t tell me I was supposed to go. It was only my older brother that was supposed to go but when we finally got to Nigeria, my whole family went. My older brother was supposed to stay, so when we got there, they said I should stay with him. ... I knew it was because of discipline and of course to learn how to stay focused and to study and basically grasp our culture…to know where we were from so we can actually have a sense of being African.
Despite his time in Nigeria, Malik self-identified as African American. “I know I’m African American. I was born and raised here.” Fatima, whose family is from Senegal, notes “I can’t speak the language and I was born here, so I’m pretty much American.” In referencing his extended family, Anthony talked about Nigerians separate from himself, “I would really say all of my dad’s family and friends because Nigerians as a whole I would say, or at least the Nigerians that I know are very hard workers and they are very focused on education and doing well with education so you can get things later on in life.”

The top three scores on the SES index belong to first-generation African American participants (all from Nigeria), reflecting some of the general socioeconomic trend within African immigrant populations. African immigrants, particularly Nigerians and Ghanaians, often arrive to the United States to attend postsecondary school. Compared to native-born African Americans, African immigrants are typically better educated, earn higher income, and live in more racially integrated neighborhoods (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007; Rimer & Areson, 2004;). As a result, there are “sound theoretical reasons for expecting an overrepresentation of immigrants among African American college students in postsecondary education” (Massey et al., 2007, p. 246). The sample identified in this study provides an opportunity to expand the scope of the original inquiry to examine whether students from immigrant families are handicapped by the stigma of race and discrimination or, because of a more direct link with their lineage, they are comparably dissimilar to children from multigenerational African American families.
4.4 Summary

This inquiry, which emerged from the information provided by students, is linked to the initial questions outlined for this study. In examining the relevance of cultural capital for African Americans, we must acknowledge the various cultures within the African American population that derive from multiple socioeconomic backgrounds and family heritage. The diversity underlying the African American label further complicates the exploration of ethnicity and socioeconomic status within the context of postsecondary education, but like the complexity of SES, to ignore such would not do justice to the data provided by participants. Taking into consideration the participant backgrounds and information about socioeconomic and ethnic identities in the United States, the next section presents findings and analysis.
Chapter V

Presentation and Analysis of Research Findings

This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected for this study. In an effort to gather information about participants’ first-year experiences, data were collected from four sources: face-to-face interviews, journal entries, web profiles (Facebook and/or Myspace), and administrative records (with the approval of the participant). Despite my best efforts, some participants did not provide a full set of data. Of the fifteen participants, thirteen completed three face-to-face interview sessions. Journal entries ranged from zero entries to three entries (maximum request). All but one participant had an active profile on Myspace and/or Facebook. Ten participants allowed me to have access to administrative records held by the institution, including academic grades.

Information provided by participants was analyzed for recurring words and themes through content analysis (Patton, 2005). Consistencies across cases were coded and compared to the conceptual framework (Figure 2-5). The patterns that emerged are presented through four major themes: constructing an ethnic identity; converting various forms of cultural capital; experiencing stereotype threat and racism; progress towards blended perspective. The underlying patterns provide detail to the participants’ experiences, addressing how individual backgrounds shape attitudes and activities within each theme. Each common theme attempts to capture the narrative responses of participants as they relate to the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter II. The themes and patterns are followed by a summary at the end of the chapter.
5.1 Theme One: ‘It is Who I Am Now’ Constructing an Ethnic Identity

*I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.* - Zora Neal Hurston (1928, p. 153)

The above passage represents the ethnic awareness and the accompanying consciousness of difference within the dominant White culture. A construction of ethnic identity begins with a sense of self and develops continuously through experience that provides fresh opportunities for revelation (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991; Cross, 1995). Phinney (1996) defined ethnic identity as “an enduring fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership” (p. 922). Ethnic identity is not static, but changes with individual’s accumulation of experiences and shifts in various social contexts (Phinney, 1992).

Cultural norms espoused in the primary social system of an individual influences agency towards developing a healthy identity (Parsons & Clark, 1966; Holton, 1998). To varying degrees, observations of the cultural (and subcultural) norms lead individuals to internalize observed outcomes as created objectively rather than influenced subjectively. Individuals accumulate both positive and negative experiences in various contexts as they develop an ethnic identity. The patterns that support the “constructing ethnic identity theme” emerged from discussions with participants about their pre-college experiences.
5.1.1 Pattern One: Accusations of “Acting White”

For the participants in this study, accumulation of experiences includes the painful charges of “acting White” from peers. Many of the students recalled taunts, from both African American and White peers, aimed at mocking their perceived disassociation because of particular traits – in particular speech patterns or style – not aligned with stereotypical perceptions of African Americans. Looking reflectively at the floor, Anthony recalls being branded as an ‘Oreo’ several times during his youth. As I inquired about his response to the name-calling, he responded:

I usually would shut down when somebody would confront me about that. I wouldn’t really know how to respond to them. And depending on who it was, I would like…because sometimes even White people would even say it to you, so umm…so if it was a Black person I would usually shut down, but if it were a White person maybe I would get angry at them and just sort of tell them to leave me alone or whatever.

Like Anthony, Kristina attended a majority-White high school and experienced similar taunts, although she responded in a more matter-of-fact manner. “They would call me the White girl because of the way I talk and the things I say, but that’s not my fault. That’s just who I am.” Kristina later stated that she tended to associate herself with White and Asian peers because she “never really fit in with the Black people” at her school. Imani also tended to socialize with a majority of White peers, to the dismay of her African American peers. “People were like, ‘Oh, why are all your friends White? You don’t hang out with any Black people!’ Stuff like that. Um, my friends would be like, ‘You’re just a White girl with a really, really good tan.’” Bridgette recalls the rules of
the game at her initial high school, a majority African American and Hispanic student population:

See, you’re supposed to impress your teacher and get good grades and speak correctly, but, then when you’re in the hallways, if you use correct grammar…it’s like, oh you’re White…which never really bothered me…it didn’t affect me, but it affected my friends and they were kind of sad all the time and it just…I just didn’t understand.

Stephanie, who was home-schooled until enrolling in a small, private high school that is predominately African American, recalled how her teachers responded to her academic seriousness, “They came to me, they were like, ‘Wow!’ They told me this, too. My English teacher…she was White…She said, ‘You’re very different from the rest of the class. You’re so serious about your work.’ I kind of felt like…Isn’t that what you are supposed to be like in school?”

De-emphasizing ethnic identity within the context of their high schools did not mean that students actively sought a Eurocentric identity. Participants in this study who experienced challenges to their ethnic identity seemed to use de-emphasis as a coping strategy rather than seeking unconditional acceptance from the dominant culture. As Imani states, “I do think that I am Black, I feel that I am Black, I’m not like, ‘Oh, God, I wish I was White.’ I’m not like one of those people. It’s just that I wasn’t going to be a certain type of Black person just to fit in with (peers in high school).”

The *Encounter* stage of Cross’ African American identity development model involves an accumulation of experiences that challenges an individual’s understanding of one’s African American identity, leading to a reinterpretation of ethnic identity (Cross, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many participants identified peers as the source of these challenges, derived from a narrowly defined view of African American culture in
their school community. “Acting-White” or “Oreo” taunts are extensions of historical insults such “Uncle Tom,” or “Sell-Out,” meant to de-authenticate one’s ethnic membership. As Anthony suggested, members of the dominant culture, as well as other African Americans, offer these taunts. Instead of challenging these notions, particularly when they originated from other African Americans, participants chose to de-emphasize their ethnic identity.

This pattern among students suggests that agency toward ethnic identity is manipulated by peer subculture, which views educational aspirations as a value of the dominant culture. Often, the widely held ‘Acting-White’ hypothesis is cited as an explanation of educational achievement gaps among African American and White students (Horvat & O’Conner, 2006). By holding the African American youth subculture as responsible for low achievement, structured inequalities are deemphasized. However, subsequent information provided by participants in the study highlights the organizational contributions to cultural norms.

5.1.2 Pattern Two: Influence of Institutional Structures on Identity Development

For many of the participants in this study, the struggles with ethnic identity appear to develop from the marginalization they felt by displaying individual traits deemed to deviate from African American culture. Researchers tend to rely on oppositional culture theory and the related ‘Acting White’ description to explain characteristics of an environment which outcasts academically motivated students such as the participants in this study (Carter, 2003; Horvat & O’Conner, 2006). Oppositional culture theory
(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) suggests that historical discrimination has compelled disadvantaged ethnic minorities to become skeptical of the educational structure because of its foundation in the dominant White culture. Therefore, becoming academically successful means that African American students, through assimilation, reject their ethnic culture and identity. As “acting White” typically generates a negative response among peers, academic achievement is devalued.

However, for students participating in this study, academic motivation did not appear to be the catalyst for social marginalization. As Eric emphatically states, “I’ve never met anyone who wants to hang around dumb people.” Rather, peer perceptions of participant disassociation with their ethnic identity were formed, in part, because of structural observations within the school – namely the under-representation of students of color in Advanced Placement and honors classes. With few exceptions, students discussed social isolation from other African American peers as they were often one of few, if not the only, person of color in their advanced or honors courses – even in racially diverse high schools. Will recalls that every year he would have the same reaction upon entering his advanced classes, “I was just sad…just make me think, you know…c’mon why aren’t there more Blacks in this class?” Of her few African American friends, Jada recalls not seeing them often during the school day. Tara further explains the conundrum she and other participants in this study faced:

Since ninth grade I’d take honors classes…we’d have fewer and fewer Black students and other races. The majority of them were White. And I was like, not the only…but there were either one or two Black students and the rest were White. So I did not have many Black friends outside my (advanced) classes…then when we made friends with the people in class…all of a sudden we were trying to be White.
Variation of pre-college experiences among participants appeared to be based on awareness of demographic differences between the overall student population and peers in their Advanced Placement courses. Participants who could not recall any differences between their honors classes and the overall student population also did not experience “acting White” taunts, but rather were more concerned with the ethnically neutral label of “nerd.” Malik took several Advanced Placement courses at his high school with many other African American students, “I was smart in high school but I was cool too. It wasn’t like I was ever a nerdy type. I just knew when to get my work done and I did it.”

Gina states “Because my friends were doing well, I had to do well because I didn’t want to be the only one not doing well…at the same time we were in the popular clique, not the nerdy clique.”

Because she attended two different high schools, Bridgette offers a unique perspective. As stated earlier, at her initial high school, Bridgette and her friends were labeled as White-acting, but she presents a different picture at her second high school, “In the AP classes at (my second high school) there were a lot more Black people and they seemed to be there because they were smart and not to make the class seem like it’s not racist.” While ‘acting White’ was still part of the vernacular at Bridgette’s second school, it was not explicitly linked to academic achievement, “They always thought that I was acting White until they knew me, then it was it was kind of just like…‘Oh, that’s just the way she is.’ It was kind of funny.” Perhaps one of the reasons that these taunts did not affect Bridgette as much as her friends is because she had role models in her family to counteract them – her grandfather, a doctor, and father, a graduate of an Ivy League institution.
As the son of two parents with advanced degrees, it would appear that Anthony had similar resources as Bridgette. He recalls seeking counsel from his parents, but as African immigrants, it seems that they could not relate. “I guessed they never experienced it since they have always been in their own Nigerian culture. So, they never really had problems with that so they would tell me to ignore it.” Anthony went on to say that while his sister had a similar experience in high school, his brother was more popular among peers because “out of the three of us, he fit in the most with the stereotype of the normal African American group.”

Sociologist Talcott Parsons attempts to shed light on the role of social systems on personal actions by focusing on the role of symbolism for individuals in specific institutions (Parsons, 1959; Holton, 1998). Individuals communicate with others and themselves through symbolic meanings that regulate behavior, thoughts, and actions. The process of learning these symbolic meanings is not automatic, which leaves space for individual autonomy. However, this process is not free of tensions and conflicts, particularly for individuals belonging to historically excluded groups.

Institutional environments with structured inequalities – very few students of color in advanced courses and low teacher expectations in high school settings, for example – encourage monolithic perspectives of African American culture that do not include academic achievement. Hence, as illustrated by participant examples, educational aspirations becomes equivalent to “Acting White.” When educational inequalities are not present, then mocking, while still insensitive, is less likely to have any ethnic associations. Socioeconomic status did not appear to be a determining factor in shaping institutional contexts, as students in the study who scored low on Hollingshead’s
index of social position tended to attend different types of high schools, including majority White schools. More critical to shaping student experiences is access to heterogeneous views of African American culture, influenced by the presence of a critical mass of African Americans within the institutional context.

5.1.3 Pattern Three: Value of Critical Mass

For participants in this study, the ability to move towards a reinterpretation of ethnic identity appears to be influenced by exposure to a critical mass of African American students. When there is only a small presence of a traditionally underrepresented group within the larger population, the minority population is easily marginalized. As the presence reaches a critical point, a sub-community emerges, offering valuable support to members (Etzkowitz, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Because it provides exposure to the diversity within that African American population, the community becomes a valuable asset to the construction of a healthy ethnic identity.

For some participants, alternative resources offered opportunities for exposure to a mass of academically motivated students of color. Natalya attended summer camps during her childhood and recalls her first experiences, “The first time, I was amazed at how many…because it’s for minorities, mostly minorities… I was happy that they all looked like me. I got to experience that because a lot of the people in the program were smart and they weren’t ashamed of it.” For Anthony, Gina, and Kristina, who come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, Bayside University provided exposure to the heterogeneity of African American culture. Anthony and Kristina are part of the Walker-
Drew Scholarship Program, which groups students of color into cohorts who enroll in the same classes and live in the same residence halls. As Anthony states:

I actually have a lot more Black friends than I ever had in the past. I like that a lot. Some of them shared (my experience) and some of them just, some of them were actually like ‘What?! Why would they do that to you?’ because I guess they got to know me and they didn’t agree actually agree with what the other people did back in high school.

Kristina, who once felt that she didn’t fit in with African Americans growing up, recalls the reactions from her peers, “Like, a lot of my friends from (high) school, when they look on my Facebook, they’re like, ‘Oh my gosh! All of your friends are Black and that’s not who you are!’ And I’m like, ‘It’s who I am now.’”

While not part of the Walker-Drew program, Gina has found a vibrant African American subculture at Bayside University. Similar to Anthony and Kristina, she had predominately White friends in high school. “Well, it’s like all my friends are African American and it’s like the first time ever in my whole life because all my friends in high school, I was like the only African American girl so it’s like an adjustment to have all your friends be African American.” When asked about the adjustments she has made as a result of having predominately African American friends for the first time, she replied “It’s just more of a comfortability because they have similar views, you can talk about the things they relate to and you don’t have to try and...nobody has to hold themselves back from speaking to you because they feel like they’re going to offend you or anything.”

It is not just in the formal organizations where students find a heterogeneous mix of African American peers. The informal network, particularly in the residence hall communities, offers an opportunity to find, as Natalya describes “like-minded African
Americans.” In her journal entries, Natalya wrote about connecting with a group of women in her residence hall, not necessarily members of the Walker-Drew program. “We all just kind of click and support each other. It’s like a community within a community. I think we get along because we are the same in certain ways and different in others. When questioned about how the dynamics of the group differ from her high school experience, she replied

   In high school, I never really had it like this, it was kind of either be in this group and act a certain way or be in that group. Like here, I don’t have to make that choice. If I want to be a certain me, I hang with one group and then I have the other group too.

A critical mass of African American students appears to influence self-development among participants in this study, particularly for students with lower socioeconomic positions and those with immigrant parents. Acceptance of an African American identity as a heterogeneous concept appears to allow students to develop a healthy self-concept associated with their ethnicity. As illustrated in following themes, the valuable resources offered by critical mass surface throughout the first-year.

For first-year students at Bayside, the construction of an African American identity began long before their arrival on campus. Students discussed challenges they faced in their previous environment and their coping strategies. A theme among many participants was their marginalization from African American peers, a result of structural characteristics of schools that presented academic success as ‘White-acting” through under-representation of students of color in advanced and honors courses shaped peer perspectives. When structural characteristics of schools were different – population in advanced courses were reflective of the general population – ‘White-acting’ taunts
represented accusations grounded in certain taste and style not traditionally associated with African American identity rather than solely associated with academic achievement. For participants whose previous academic context moderated socio-cultural development of ethnic identity, contradictions to a monolithic perspective of African American identity came from various sources – family, other community programs, and/or activities at Bayside University. From these resources, students acquired a unique skill set, which allowed them to interact within multiple contexts with little compromise to their personal identity. As they continue to transition to a new community, a related, yet distinct challenge emerged – interpreting the hierarchy of values at Bayside and deciding which forms of cultural capital are honored and which are devalued within the multiple systems of the institution.

5.2 Theme Two: Finding Equilibrium: Converting Various Forms of Cultural Capital

*Whites won't believe I remain culturally different; Blacks won't believe I remain culturally the same. I have a foot in each world, but I cannot fool myself about either . . . I know how tenuous my grip on one way of life is, and how strangling the grip of the other way of life can be.* - LeAnita McClain, (as cited in Page, 1986, p. 14).

The life and death of LeAnita McClain, a prominent African American journalist who committed suicide in 1984 at the age of 32, illustrates the daunting challenge of functioning in multiple, culturally-distinct environments without “being torn asunder.” To avoid the dangers of a fractured existence, one must develop the ability to evaluate and understand the value of multiple selves in multiple realities. However, the unification
of complexity requires confusing, sometime painful experiences of recognizing limits to overlapping cultural boundaries.

Cultural capital theory calls attention to the subtle ways in which language, knowledge, and cultural style shape interactions (Carter, 2003; Swartz, 1997). Cultural capital is defined as background, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors that the dominant socioeconomic class transmits to their children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In an effort for members of the dominant class to maintain their status position, some forms of culture are devalued, while other forms of culture are legitimized and honored within social institutions. In educational institutions reflecting the dominant class, possession of certain cultural resources is assumed and those who do not have such resources face an unfriendly, even hostile, environment. The patterns that support the “converting various forms of cultural capital” theme emerged from discussions with participants about their first-semester experiences.

5.2.1 Pattern One: Access to Dominant Forms of Cultural Capital

Many participants in this study presented information that suggested varying levels of access to cultural capital. However, Bridgette appeared to be the only student whose family background produced a certain reproduction of privilege. A third generation college students, her knowledge of the dominant culture appeared to be transmitted directly from family role models – grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts.

My grandparents inspired me, especially my dad’s father - the doctor. I do remember this poem he gave me…it’s called ‘Equipment’ by Edgar A. Guest. It’s on my wall in my room. I hang it everywhere. Also, my mom went to Vassar and my dad went to Princeton, so…they were kind of smart.
Bridgette consciously recognizes her privileged position, demonstrated in her response to a follow-up question to comments about her views of African American culture, “It seems like some parents, not mine …but some parents aren’t really teaching their kids (pause) what should be taught. I mean, they’re letting the television teach them…and I don’t think (Black Entertainment Television) is the greatest thing in the world. I watch it…but I know when to set that aside and not really use it as a standard in my life.” For Bridgette, the development of “life standards” or what Bourdieu may call “cultural habitus,” resulted from her family and their focus on academic and professional achievement in the dominant community. On the surface, it does not appear that the reproduction process as effective in the dominant social institutions as Bridgette did not attend a highly selective PWI institution like her parents. This raises the concern that for African Americans, there may be limited ability to transmit social status. Bridgette was not accepted to Duke University, although she was accepted and considered attending Washington University in Saint Louis.

For Ron, who grew up in a single-family household, access to dominant cultural capital was gained through participation in summer camps related to his academic interest.

My mom would always send me to these science camps in the summer…basically there’s probably like only five or ten other Black kids in this like 200-kid camp…and a lot of the other ones are going to White schools, so you can like say they are like White-Black kids…like you know they were not from my background. So, its like after a while she realized that…she thought that was like a plus and kept sending me. And I wanted to go back…you know I had fun so…

When queried about why he thought his mother saw these camps as a plus, Ron responded, “(She) decided that when I was born she wanted me to be exposed to
everything. So going to a lot of public schools in (urban area) I was exposed to a lot of urban, Black, (Hispanic), not as many White kids and that crowd.” For Ron, the camps provided cultural resources not found in his primary community. He further explains ways which he would mediate his experiences within the two contexts. “I mean, in a way different parts of my personality would show in the camp than at home. But, if I learned something new at camp I would bring it back home and be like ‘Yo, look at this,’ you know what I’m saying, like ‘This is cool.’”

From very different family backgrounds, both Bridgette and Ron represent the acute awareness of the value of dominant forms of culture capital among participants in this study. Given that participants attend a Predominately White Institution (PWI), it should not be surprising that they exhibited a level of cultural awareness. However, as demonstrated in the Constructing Ethnic Identity theme, accumulating distinct resources related to African American culture is important to participants and sometimes conflicts with their acquired dominant perspectives. Carter (2003) offers evidence of two forms of cultural capital for students – dominant cultural capital and non-dominant cultural capital. Dominant cultural capital corresponds with Bourdieu’s conceptualization of powerful high status attributes, while non-dominant cultural capital describes resources used by individuals to gain “authentic” cultural status within their respective communities. Different, though interconnected, these two forms of capital represent varied cultural currencies, the benefits of which vary depending upon the social space in which they are used.

As symbolic resources, the cultural capital accumulated by students provides opportunities for them to interact effectively in the dominant habitus – the prevailing
values of the social setting (McDonough, 1997; Berger 2000). Based on the information provided by participants in this study, African American students interact in multiple social settings – family, school, and community – that require multiple forms of cultural capital. An emerging pattern among participants suggests that as these various sources of capital are forged and maintained, a conflict between the forms develops.

5.2.2 Pattern Two: Conflict Between Dominant and Non-Dominant Forms of Cultural Capital

The conflict between forms of cultural capital was particularly evident among the first-generation African American students in the sample. It appeared that their parents, who have some resources which allowed them to immigrate to the United States to pursue advanced study, are resistant to the developing African American ‘authenticity’ among their children. Anthony, in recalling the reaction of his mother when he told her he was considering attending a Historically Black College, reported: “I remember she said that if it’s run by Black people it probably won’t be as good as other institutions.” In the spring semester, having developed a network of African American friends for the first time, Anthony recounts the increasing tension between himself and his mother over the winter break. “My mom has actually said some funny things…because I started buying a lot of my own stuff… that I look more like a hoodlum or whatever when I come home. I just told her that that was my style has always been this way. I just never really had access to get it myself or whatever.”

Malik, who was sent to Nigeria for two years because his parents thought he was becoming too ‘Americanized,’ reported a similar experience with his parents. “They
never want us to try to do what all the Americans do. For example, they don’t want us to
go get cornrows. They probably would get really mad if we did something like that if we
behaved in a certain way, my mom will say ‘stop being like an American.’” When Malik
returned home, he was questioned about his changing dialect “When I went home for
Thanksgiving break, I said something to him like, ‘yo,’ and like, ‘man’ and (my brother)
was like, ‘Why are you saying that? Those people are rubbing off on you! ’” For Imani
and her mother, increasing tensions resulted in a confrontation about her ethnic identity:

Oh, my mom has said, ‘You people think that you’re American but you’re not!
You’re African!’ I’m like, ‘No! We’re African American. We were born here.
Then she says, ‘No you’re not because I’m African and that makes you African.’
My mom is very, she wishes that we could speak the language. She is always
like, ‘So-and-so’s kids speak the language and so-and-so’s kids went back to
Africa last year. Why don’t you want to go to Africa?’ I’m like, ‘Cause I don’t
want to go to Africa!’ I have no urge to ever be in Africa ever. Sorry.

Participants from multigenerational African American backgrounds provided
similar information about tension they felt at home as they expressed a stronger ethnic
identity. For example, Stephanie joined the campus chapter of the National Association
for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the fall semester. She
recounted a particular reaction from her father when she wore one of her NAACP t-shirts
at home, “I always liked the shirts that they had, like Black power. Then I came home
and my dad saw the shirt that I was wearing. He is much more conservative than I am and
I think he thinks I might be becoming a radical or something.” When queried about her
dad’s perception of the NAACP, Stephanie responded “He told me all about the NAACP
and how they’re not the same as they used to be in the Civil Rights Era and they didn’t
really want me to be in that.” In the spring semester, Stephanie stated that she decided not
to join the organization, “Yeah, and I decided not to (join) because of the things that they believe now are different. I like the NAACP back when Martin Luther King was involved. What they were about now, I’m not too sure about.

The tension between Will and his family arose from his reluctance to attend church over the break. During the first interview, Will identified his church community as a source of strength for his family, one of the reasons they relocated to the community. However, during a follow-up discussion at the end of the first semester, he admitted additional stress related to returning home every weekend. In the final interview, he admitted that during the winter break, he realized a disconnection with his church community. As he states:

I want more diversity now, because my family goes to a mostly White church, and it’s not very diverse. I can’t relate with them sometimes. I began to realize that I don’t even like these people that much, so I want to kind of find a new church where it’s like people more like me and stuff.

The students in this study appeared to be shifting multiple forms of cultural capital during their first year at Bayside. Often the contrast becomes apparent upon their return to their home community and family, particularly if the home community is connected with dominant cultural capital resources. The dynamic often complicates the transition for students – the same resources that foster successful transition at Bayside, through connections with the critical mass of African American students, are the same resources in conflict with the capital of family and/or home community institutions. In the process of appraising competing values within certain community contexts (Bayside University, African American community, and family), participants appear to struggle with maintaining a healthy blend of the perspectives. As the academic year advanced,
conversations with participants began to reveal the importance of converting accumulated resources, particularly in academic settings. This was particularly evident for male students in the study.

5.2.3 Pattern Three: Converting Accumulated Resources in Academic Settings

For this study, conversations with male participants suggest a more difficult struggle to find a balance between perspectives. For Anthony and Malik, participation in the Walker-Drew Scholarship Program offered a formal structure that balanced perspectives through collaboration and cooperation with other African American students experiencing similar issues—leading to successful navigation within the academic communities at Bayside University. Malik recalls learning a valuable lesson in one of the required seminars for Walker-Drew scholars.

"I really had not gotten to know my professors too well and (a Walker-Drew peer mentor) was like, ‘You all need to make at least one appointment with each of your professors.’ So I did that and now (pause)...like my calculus teacher, I got to know her outside of the class...Just yesterday, I asked her to write a recommendation for me for a summer internship. I guess that was good advice (laughing)...

For other males in the study, it appeared that awareness of dominant cultural capital resources did not automatically result in the ability to convert accumulated resources, particularly within the academic context. Ron, along with Eric and Christopher, earned less than a 2.0 grade point average during their first semester at Bayside. They are headed for academic probation after the spring semester (students at Bayside must have at least a 2.0 cumulative grade point average after attempting 24
Ron blamed his difficult academic adjustment to unfamiliarity with the academic system.

A lot of stuff didn’t make sense to me…It’s just because I was new, I had to get adjusted to the system here….It’s like you’re taken out of your comfort zone and put into a new place. So you have to find equilibrium. I’ve found it socially, but maybe not academically, obviously.

Eric, who attended the same high school as Bridgette, had similar difficulty with adjustment during his first semester. With obvious frustration, he commented “I came to college as a B student. I knew all the stuff in psych class because I had already taken it in high school. It’s just that (pause) I don’t know man, I just can’t really explain it.” In the initial interview, Christopher indicated that living on the floor with Walker-Drew scholars (although he was not part of the program) had solidified an academic focus that began when he switched high schools after the tenth grade. However, as the semester continued, he appeared frustrated by experiences in the academic setting. He cited a particular illustration from the fall semester. “I just got (angry) in Spanish class because I came like three minutes late one time and they were taking the test and (the professor) would not let me take it.” When asked if he took advantage of office hours to communicate with the teacher about a possible make up opportunity, Christopher commented,

(No) I didn’t think about that. Beside, she wouldn’t let me take it (in class) so she probably wouldn’t change her mind. Anyway, after that I didn’t think I could pass the class so I was like, alright, I’m not coming (to class) anymore at all…that kind of (messed) me over.

Besides their male gender and low GPA for the first semester, two distinct characteristics separated Ron, Eric, and Christopher. First, among the participants in the
study, their family background placed them in the middle to low-middle position on the SES scale. Second, they were the only participants who had not taken Advanced Placement or honors courses in high school. These characteristics suggest that, out of all the participants, they were most vulnerable to struggling in the academic environment. However, at no point during the first semester did they mention participation in formal programs or informal peer groups that may have aided their navigation through the academic system during their first year at Bayside.

When asked about the biggest lessons from the first semester, Eric mentioned the value in studying with peers. “It’s better because it forces you to study. If you’re sitting with a whole bunch of people and they’re reading and studying you feel bad just sitting there on Facebook or something.” During his final journal entry in the spring semester, Eric noted that he had joined BROTHERS (Brothers Reaching Out To Help Each Rise) at the suggestion of his high school friend Bridgette. For Christopher, access to academic mentoring was more personal. During the second semester, he began to date a female student on his hall who was in the Walker-Drew scholarship program. “My girl influenced me a lot...She’s in the (Walker-Drew) program, she’s like...I guess her mom influenced her and then she influenced me...cause she takes me...like I go with her to the library everyday and we stay there for like three hours.”

Ron provided one account which suggested that, perhaps, he was beginning to understand what it might take to succeed academically. This lesson happened by chance and came from a complete stranger:

I was in the study lounge with my boy and we were kind of going over this math problem and not understanding it...then this girl who was working on her own paper in the room came over and started helping us...She was working with us for
like an hour…I’m not going to lie, I had given up on it, but she wouldn’t leave it alone!…And the thing is, she still had her paper to write! I was like ‘Damn.’ It kind of motivated me so…I don’t know, it’s like if she was willing to do that for me…a dude she (doesn’t) even know? I figure I better step my game up, so…

Several studies support the observations of this study of gender differences among African American students attending a PWI (Allen, 1992; Coakley, 2001; Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004; Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005). African Americans tend to view PWIs as more hostile environments with little supporting mechanisms. As a result, they are more likely to try and ‘go it alone’ becoming less active in seeking assistance through tutoring services or peer study groups. In the face of poor academic performance, struggling students may go through the process of academic disassociation (Steele, 1992). Individuals increasingly disassociate ethnic identity with academic success as a way of preserving African American students’ self-esteem.

The lack of ability to convert accumulated resources in academic settings has significant consequences for the African American male students. Based on their admission to the institution, students should be able to succeed academically as they have accumulated a level of educational credentials judged worthy of enrollment. However, contrasting the experiences of Anthony and Malik with those of Ron, Christopher, and Eric highlight the importance assisting African American males with continuing support to cultivate skills and knowledge necessary for successful negotiation in academic settings. Unlike the males, the differences of experience between Walker-Drew Scholars Tara, Jada, Natalya, and Kristina did not vary vastly from the rest of the female participants – suggesting African American males have unique challenges in converting accumulated resources. Without the support to overcome these obstacles, males may
develop a reinterpretation of ethnic identity that reverts back to stereotypical notions of African American educational aspirations. The reasons why African American males have a more difficult time rising above these challenges is an under explored area in higher education research.

Overall, first-year students at Bayside, converting various forms of cultural capital can be a traumatizing experience. By their presence at the institution, one may assume past access to dominant forms of cultural capital. As the use of dominant culture capital is juxtaposed against a developing use of non-dominant culture capital, supported by the critical mass of African American students on campus, a conflict may develop. The conflict plays out most notably among the first generation African-American participants in the study. The potential equilibrium between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital for African American students is mediated by formal and informal structures at the institution. However, for male students from particular backgrounds, this equilibrium is more difficult to access, particularly in academic contexts. Ultimately, the process of discovering that cultural currency is prone to variety of value, depending on the particular circumstances individuals find themselves in, is an important development toward a bicultural perspective. However, the movement from allowing the context to shape identity to recognizing multiple contexts and a comfortable place within each space is buffered by a third theme that emerged from this study – the hanging presence of stereotype threat.
5.3 Theme Three: ‘Do I Really Look Like I Play Basketball for the School? Experiencing Stereotype Threat and Racism’

*I am an invisible man. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination indeed, everything except me.* - Ralph Ellison (1952, prologue)

Through the narrator in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison presents the most ominous threat to identity development, the unauthenticated assumptions of others. Vulnerability to assumptions grows as one extends them to environments where the possibility of alienation is high. For African American students striving towards a healthy duality at a PWI, the presence of stereotype threat can be consistently stressful.

Steele (1997) defines stereotype threat as the vulnerability of being judged by a widely-held negative assumption about a group to which one belongs, or the fear of performing in a way that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype. One does not have to believe that the stereotype is accurate, only that it is a general assumption transmitted in the culture. For example, the commonly held assumption that African American students enter postsecondary education with limited cognitive capabilities to succeed may inhibit the participation of students from those backgrounds for fear that struggling with course content will confirm the stereotype. In certain contexts, the stereotype assumption may become a dimension of difference, causing the student to feel even greater pressure.
5.3.1 Pattern One: Experiencing Stereotypes in Academic Settings

Across socioeconomic background, stereotype threat became a source of stress for participants in this study. Even in the face of a strong sense of ethnic identity, the perception of negative assumptions among peers is a constant threat. As Natalya summarizes, “I do think about whether they see just a Black person or do they see me?” The anxiety over stereotypes influenced experiences in both social and academic settings at various points in the academic year, often eroding the accumulation of dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital even among academically successful students.

Jada, who attended a predominately White high school, sees the stress as an extension of what she felt in advanced courses as one of the few African Americans. “I always felt uncomfortable in those courses. I could just feel (the) tension. I felt that I was being judged or whatever and that I had to represent. I was the only one in that class, so I had to represent for African American students and do well.” In a conversation during the spring semester, I asked Jada if she still felt uncomfortable in the academic settings at Bayside, particularly after earning good grades doing her first semester. She paused reflectively and then commented:

I guess I see it still. I mean, they don’t know what I got last semester, so I feel like I have to prove myself again….Maybe before I would think that I may not be as intelligent or can’t contribute as much as other members. Now I start saying things early and then they see, ‘oh, she is kind of smart’ and they open up to my ideas more.

Among the students who did not do well in the first semester, Eric expressed frustration over a discussion which occurred during his psychology class in the fall, a course he ultimately failed despite taking AP Psychology in high school.
We were in a psychology class and we were talking about intelligence and whether race has anything to do with intelligence and one guy said that maybe it is possible that the White people might be smarter than the Black people because of certain physiological traits. And I was just listening to him and thinking, ‘That’s ignorant.’ And I’ve been thinking about it for the past few days. It’s really been running through my mind.

When I asked Eric if he felt the need to respond in class, he shook his head stating “I’d just rather say something to his face. I’ve been looking for that guy.” Later, when the subject was brought up again in a subsequent conversation, Eric reported that he had yet to confront his classmate or offer a rebuttal in class. “I thought about it, but…I would try to be stoic, but if he tried to retort, then…if he kept his position, eventually I would get frustrated and I might get more emotional. I just wanted to move on.” It appears that, for Eric, the idea of conforming to an “angry Black man” stereotype stifles outward expression of his reaction to the comments from his peer.

The examples provided by Jada and Eric represent the agonizing internalization of stereotypes and how they exert consistent influence over the experiences of students. Despite a 4.0 grade point average, Tara’s academic self-worth remains subject to the need to prove herself to her peers. While Eric’s academic difficulty was not isolated to the psychology class, one is left to wonder how much that conversation clouded his academic adjustment, particularly in the absence of any affirmative support during the first semester. Additionally, as first-generation college students, it is possible that Jada and Eric suffered a double threat (perhaps triple threat in Eric’s case because of the combination of gender and ethnicity) based on negative perceptions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
Steele (1997) argues that a desire to prove a stereotype threat wrong is also detrimental. However, among many participants, particularly those in the Walker-Drew program, stereotype threat seemed to emerged as a motivator. Malik offers an illustration from the spring semester:

Our professor said that the TA came and asked her, ‘Are there a lot of Walker-Drew students in the Calculus II class?’ She told him there were, and she asked him why he asked that, and he said he saw a lot of minorities in class and that there’s not usually as many minorities in Calculus 2… And he was basically saying that there were a lot of, she told us that he couldn’t even finish the sentence. He was like, ‘There are a lot of…’ She kind of finished it for him, ‘There’s a lot of people of color in there?’ He said, ‘Yeah, that’s all I’m going to say.’ We kind of laughed about it.

After laughing and pausing for a bit, Malik continued seriously, “Yeah, it definitely put something in me. When I came back, I told some of the other Walker-Drew students and they were like, ‘Damn.’ So I was like, O.K. let’s do this.” Anthony concluded with a similar refrain in recalling an experience in the classroom, “I was called up to the board and (in an instant) one of the things running through my mind was ‘Are the White people in this class thinking that I won’t be able to get this problem?’ I want to show…to prove to people that I can do as much as they can.”

In the face of stereotype threat, many participants in the study demonstrated resiliency to move past concerns and succeed. Resiliency theory suggests that those with stable healthy personas develop coping skills that enable them to succeed in the face of perceived or actual threats (Gandara, 1995; James, Jurich, and Estes, 2001). Resiliency is influenced by individual attributes such as positive self-efficacy and structural support, and involvement in programs that provide a sense of support. Certainly, the Walker-Drew program offered a sense of support for specific students, elevating their level of resiliency
to perceived stereotype threat within the academic setting at Bayside University.

However, as students began to explain experiences in social settings at Bayside, it became clear that more profound incidents had affected students in deeper ways.

5.3.2 Pattern Two: Experiencing Racism in Social Settings

During a conversation in December, Will discussed how he had recently experienced a profound incident in his residence hall – overhearing a racial slur from a person he considered to be a good friend.

He was playing (a boxing video game) and he knocked the dude out and he said, ‘That nigger’s dead.’ I was surprised at that. Because he’s really cool, like, he’s one of my friends. It made me think, ‘What if this is the way certain other people act right after I leave, when I’m not in the room?’ and it just made me think about all the people that I’ve known.’

In a subsequent interview, when asked about how his relationship had developed with his friend, Will replied “He didn’t even remember it. I guess he had been drinking so…I told him what he said and he was like ‘Oh, you can go ahead and call me something derogatory.’ I just kind of dropped it.” For Imani, the residence hall provided the setting for a particularly unsettling experience where she and an African American peer were questioned about their ethnic ‘authenticity’ based on their musical taste. “We were talking and my friend Jai was listening to my iPod and she said, ‘John Mayer! I love John Mayer!’ and this White guy at the table said, ‘You guys aren’t Black!’ No, his exact words were, ‘You guys need a Black intervention!’ And he’s White.” Knowing that Imani experienced ‘Acting White’ taunts from her African American peers in high school, I inquired how she handled the situation.
When he said it, we were the only two Black people there and it was this whole group of White people. And all of the White people were really, really uncomfortable and me and Jai were really pissed off, but I wasn’t going to cause a scene...But, when Alex was yelling at him, she was saying everything I thought. She was like, ‘How dare you tell me about being Black? You don’t even know! You don’t know anything about me! Because I like John Mayer, I’m not Black?’ And he was like, ‘I was just joking!’ But that’s not funny. It’s not appropriate. It’s just rude.

No longer accepting the identity of a “White girl with a really good tan,” during her first year, Imani had gained a sense of ethnic membership that would not allow others to define her based on what type of music they think she should be listening to. As I started to move to another question, Imani quickly added a closing thought about the incident “What does he think being Black is? Does he think that we’re supposed to...does he think that we should just listen to Tupac?’ Well, I have Tupac on my iPod too! So there. (laughing)”

Similar to the stereotype incidents in the academic settings, some students felt an obligation to be resilient when faced with discriminatory incidents. For example, Jada talked about how an unwelcoming environment fostered her motivation to win a board game tournament held on campus.

I was getting into this game called ‘Go’ and I had been going to the club meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So, anyway I ended up entering the tournament and it’s supposed to be a $5 fee for Bayside students and the guy who was doing the tickets was like, ‘Yeah, I’m going to charge you full-price.’ And I was like, ‘What do you mean? I’m a student!’ And I had my ID. That was a small thing when I first got there.

When asked how the initial interaction affected her play, Tara responded, “That’s why I lost. I was the only Black person there. It was mostly guys, White guys. And I just felt like I had to do well and show them that I could do well. I would call my sister in
between rounds for support. But I wasn’t doing too well. It was bad.” In following up on her comments, I asked Tara why she stuck around, “I felt obligated to stay. I could have left, but that would have been rude, I think, so I stayed. And I wanted to win the game too. (laughs).” As the semester continued, Tara mentioned in one journal entry that she had stopped attending the meetings after the tournament. In a follow-up interview in the spring, Tara casually mentioned that she had rejoined as a member. “The President saw me coming from class one day and asked why I wasn’t coming to the meetings anymore. He always encourages me to come every time I ran into him, so I started to go again a couple of weeks ago.”

In reviewing discussions with participants over the course of the year, students cited more examples of stereotype threat in academic settings than racist experiences in social settings, although the social incidents had much deeper meaning for students as they tended to dominate journal entries. While the campus climate provided supportive environments, the pockets of racism were felt by participants. One may assume that these experiences would eventually lead participants toward ethnic-centered student organizations as a measure of support was, surprisingly, not a common theme across participants. Instead these organizations – in particular the largest Black student organization – were viewed as catering to a particular group of African American students.
5.3.3 Pattern Three: Negative Views of Social, Ethnic-Centered Student Organizations

In conversations with participants about ethnic-centered student organizations on campus, students in the study appeared to grow callous over the academic year, with no observable trends based on socioeconomic status, gender, or affiliation with the Walker-Drew scholarship program. Kristina, who initially identified herself a member of the main African American student organization, Black Students Organization (BSO), stated that she often is left wondering what the purpose of the organization is after attending a meeting. “I don’t even know what it’s supposed to do on campus. We get together and you just have a lot of Black people in the room, is that what we’re supposed to do? I have no idea what the purpose of that organization is.” Will was equally direct, “I guess it’s to bring Black people together, I guess. Or to raise awareness or something. I don’t know.” Jada also touched upon the unclear mission statement of BSO and other African American student organizations she considered joining:

I went to one meeting of (BSO). They weren’t doing much. I went to SISTERS, which is supposed to be a predominantly African American organization. They weren’t doing much either. I was like, what am I doing here, just socializing? Aren’t we supposed to be doing community service or something? Something. Anything. But they don’t really do anything. If I’m going to join a club, I’m joining to have fun or to do community service or work or something. Not just sit around and chat about…what do they chat about? But they send me messages on Facebook because I’m still attached to that group on Facebook. I see the topics they discuss, but I’m just not that interested in going to discuss it.

The theme of BSO is “Embracing Others to Create a Cultural Identity,” however Eric disagreed with the suggested inclusiveness. “(BSO) seems to cater to the urban, hip-hop, trendy crowd. (BSO) kind of shuts out the Black kids who are not into Anime
(Japanese animated art) or rock music, or anything else. What would they talk about when they go there? They would more than likely not be accepted.” Bridgette agreed, defining BSO as “the clique of the century.” She continues:

I think it’s become more of a social thing… I’ve heard about some of their topics and they’re really superficial and they don’t even delve that much into the Black community so it seems like a group that doesn’t even care about it’s message, they just labeled it the (BSO) because that would get them maybe sponsoring or…I don’t know…there not really doing that much for themselves or the campus so.

During the spring semester, a number of participants described a growing negativity towards BSO, stimulated by a Talent Show they sponsored. As Bridgette described “All the Black people were there, I mean every Black person on this campus.” Bridgette reported that a mix of talent was presented, but those only performances that “delivered it in this, this certain, ‘I’m confident and you’re gonna listen to what I say’ way” were supported by the crowd and BSO judges. She describes the reaction of an act she was impressed with:

He was playing piano with his spoken word, and he was kind of more, he was cool with it. He was cool with his words and they said it sucked… I don’t think they were open, they wanted like traditional in your face Black things and they weren’t open to anything else so, that kind of frustrated me a little bit.

In a separate interview, Imani discussed the same event in response to a question about student organizations on campus. She offered a similar observation about the piano act:

The guy who was um playing piano…it wasn’t fair what they said about him, and others were just like oh yeah, he sucked. I don’t know. I didn’t think it was right what they said. And they, they go in with this image of like…I don’t know, Black people playing drums and doing stomp and stepping and all that. You don’t necessarily (pause)... that’s fun to have, but you don’t need that for it to be good.
Guiffrida (2003) states that African American students often turn to formal African American student organizations to battle perceived prejudices at PWIs. He concludes that these organizations serve to facilitate cultural connections and social integration by exposing and connecting students to African American culture. For participants in this study, African American student organizations were viewed as neutral at best, and often elicited unenthusiastic comments. Perhaps the presence of a critical mass of African Americans at Bayside University – including the Walker-Drew scholarship program - negates the necessity for students to join formal African American student organizations. As the incident in the talent show demonstrates, a narrowly defined view of African American culture may appear in social settings purporting non-dominant values. This adds an interesting dimension to the process of developing bicultural perspective for African American students at PWI. Between the stereotype threat in academic settings, the racialized marginalization in “dominant culture” spaces on campus and social isolation in ‘non-dominant’ culture spaces on campus, many African American students at PWIs may find themselves as outsiders in multiple settings. The fourth theme among participants begins to introduce steps toward gaining a sense of belonging.

5.4 Theme Four: She’s A Part of Me and I’m a Part of Her: Progress Toward Blended Perspectives

What after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be Both? Or is my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? Here it seems to me is the reading of the riddle that puzzles so many of us. – W.E.B DuBois, Conversation of Races
The riddle that DuBois presents represents the agonizing dilemma facing African Americans, particularly as they move through environments that offer dangerous opportunities for marginalization. To suggest that this puzzle is resolved during the first year of college is, of course, ridiculous. However, advancement towards healthy duality begins with development of a perspective regulated to handle complexity with grace.

Bicultural perspective develops when individuals, simultaneously socialized into two different cultures, building an ability to function effectively in multiple cultural settings (deAndra, 1984; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Valentine, 1971). A bicultural perspective challenges the assumption that distinct cultural systems are mutually exclusive, never intertwined or simultaneously available to individuals. Factors that contribute to the development of bicultural perspective include availability of cultural mediators, perceived status of the individual’s cultural group, experiences with discrimination, and contact with persons from other cultural backgrounds.

5.4.1 Pattern One: Cultural Mediators

Over the course of the year, participants described finding support from various individuals who contributed to their ethnic development and transition to Bayside University. For participants with older siblings, big brother and/or sister played a huge role in their ability to deal with external and internal pressures. For example, Anthony was grateful for his sister’s ability to support his new cultural exploration. “My sister has my back…(she) is one of those people that’s real good at like arguing or whatever and she had gone through the same thing with my mom when she came home from Duke.”
Anthony’s sister filled the gap that their immigrant parents may not have been able to fill – a role model successful in negotiation of an African American identity and transition towards initial bicultural perspectives.

Jada and Tara, a pair who attended the same high school but where not particularly close during that time, served to support each other through various issues of identity. Their interpersonal relationship developed over time, Tara recalling that ‘We’d just come across each other and we’d talk about a few things, and then from there, I guess we talked about more things that were less chit-chatty stuff. We talked about stuff that meant more to us so I guess we kind of connected.” They both recounted a bonding experience over an incident with a mutual African American friend after viewing a documentary on television about the role of light skin tone and European features on images of beauty among African American women. Jada states:

I was with Tara and (their mutual friend) asked us, ‘Does my nose look very wide?’ or something. And I was like, ‘No, why?’ and she said, ‘Oh, I was just wondering. I have Native American in me and my nose is really narrow.’ I kind of got the feeling that she was almost putting down what she considers very African American features, having a wide nose or something. I felt very offended by it. I really didn’t know how to handle that situation.

Tara had a similar account of the story, with a different response, “She’s always talking about…‘Oh, I love my nose! It’s so European!’ She says other things and I’m like, whoa…She just doesn’t seem like she has it together at all.” Tara later recounted how she and Jada both addressed the incident with each other during a late-night conversation in the residence hall lobby. “It didn’t really bother me as much as it bothered her…(pause)…Well I guess it might have. (Jada and I) talked about it and then we talked about it with (mutual friend).” Both Jada and Tara agreed that the opportunity
to talk through issues surrounding the perspectives of African American beauty served as a catalyst to be honest with their feelings instead of repressing them. Together, Jada and Tara were able to enhance their understanding of the issue from various points of view – as a daughter of Nigerian immigrants and as a daughter of indigenous African Americans.

For participants, not all cultural mediators came from a traditional source such as family or peers. Stephanie, who had performed well academically, struggled with her lack of contact with family stemming from their move to South Carolina. During a period of high stress, Stephanie recounted how a bad decision ultimately provided valuable sources of strength:

We were getting food from the dining hall and putting it in our purses and our bags. We weren’t supposed to do that…One of the Black women (an employee) spotted me. She was looking at me, saying, ‘No, no.’ And I just pretended I didn’t see her. And she finally came to our table and said, ‘You guys need to stop. You know that you are not supposed to be doing that!’ Not like mad, more like (pause) she didn’t want us to get in trouble, I could tell. After that, we just had a discussion and started talking to her and the other workers.

When I asked Stephanie about what her attitude was towards dining hall employees before the incident, she replied:

When I first came, I was like, ‘Why are there so many Black people working at the dining hall?’ It’s like all the Black people, the adults, vacuum. This one Black guy cleans up…I used to be like, ‘Why do you guys have these jobs? But I thought about it and not everybody has the income or ability to do that. And then I became proud because at least they’re working. They have a job here and they’re doing what they have to do to make a living. I became proud of them. …and I started to see that they were cheering us on as Black students, too. They were looking out for us. I can tell, they are like, ‘Go ahead’

By not acknowledging African American employees in the dining hall beyond their position, Stephanie appeared to be avoiding what she perceived as stereotypical African Americans. Ironically, it was the employee ability acknowledge Stephanie’s
identity beyond merely a “shoplifter” that saved her from a potentially embarrassing situation. Ultimately, this moment became transformative, as she focused on the relationship between her and ‘Miss Mary’ in her final journal entry, “I used to feel like I didn’t have to acknowledge her in any way. Now I know how wrong that attitude was. I guess we have a connection, like I am a part of her and she is a part of me. I’m really proud of her and I want her to be proud of me.”

Lam and Zane (2004) define cultural mediators as an individual who helps translate between the cultures in order to enhance understanding, share information, and create a relationship which supports students as full participants. In higher education, cultural mediators often are identified as administrative professionals, particularly in Student Affairs. However, no participant in this study identified such staff as role models during the academic year. Instead family members, peers, and dining hall staff were mentioned most often as navigating mediators of intertwined worlds. Perhaps during the first-year transition, participants were not fully aware of the resources available to them via administrative professionals on campus.

5.4.2 Pattern Two: Sharing Culture

During the first interviews, participants in this study lamented the burden of representing all African Americans – from their experiences in advanced courses in high school and continuing in certain social and academic settings at Bayside. However, in the spring semester there were more examples of sharing their culture without feeling like “a token all the time.” Bridgette offers an illustration:
My roommate is really peppy and excited. She asks me the weirdest questions. At first it made me feel weird, I was taken aback. But then as we got to know each other, it became cool. I remember one day I washed my hair and I came out of the shower and she just looked at me… because she’s never been around Black people that much. She’s like ‘So what do you do with that?’ (Laughing) It was really an innocent question and I just told her…and then she asked me if I felt bad because she asked me that. I said ‘No you can ask me whatever you want.’

I asked Bridgette if she ever reciprocated and ask her roommate questions about her culture. She replied:

No, probably because I’m used to White people anyway. But she’s never been around Black people and it’s kind of something that she’s not been able to ask but now that I’m her roommate she can. And she asks all the time. I’ve got her singing Beyonce now…she’s never heard of her before Bayside. Can you believe that?

Anthony discussed sharing his culture with others on his floor, particularly with his ‘best friend’ who is of East Asian descent. “I like learning a little bit more about their culture and stuff…Like certain rituals that he does, like how he prays and certain spiritual rituals that he has in Hinduism.” In a follow-up interview after the break, Anthony mentioned his expanded interest in different religions. “I’ve been reading books…a lot addressing other cultures. I am just sorting stuff out, learning, you know? I also go research online just trying to learn about other religions and stuff.”

Among the first generation students, expanding cultural interest has included a redefinition of self that includes their parent’s ethnicity. Natalya mentioned her final journal entry that she now considers herself Jamaican American rather than African American. “I identify more with Jamaican Americans, especially joining Caribbean American Student Association. I really like the culture, the music, the food, I really have
to just claim it. Now, I have a nice (Jamaican) flag in my room, a big one.” Malik, who spent two years in Nigeria, comments offer another example during our final interview:

I mean, I know I’m African American but now I just say I’m African. I don’t know…One dude I talked to, I asked him where he was from and he told me ‘I’m from Maryland.” And I know, I can tell when I see an African person. And I said, ‘No, what’s your country of origin?’ And he said, ‘My parents are Nigerian. I’m from here.’ I said, ‘If your parents are Nigerian, that means you’re Nigerian too.’ If someone asks me where I’m from, I’m from Nigeria. I’m from Africa. I know I’m African American also, I was born and raised here - but I know that’s where I’m really from.

Research suggests that bicultural perspectives are grounded in the reciprocal relationship between a person and his or her environment (Birman 1994; Phinney & Decich-Navarro, 1997; Carter, 2006). For individuals, both past and current surroundings factor into the continuous development of biculturalism for individuals. In an environment where dominant culture is pervasive, the focus is typically on non-dominant groups adopting habits of the dominant group. However, in a diverse setting, bicultural development may be mutual – members of the dominant group seek to understand habits of the non-dominant group, illustrated by Bridgette’s developing relationship with her roommate. As the spiritual journey of Anthony suggests, a diverse environment also provides an opportunity for non-dominant subcultures to share customs and habits with one another, developing a multicultural perspective among individuals. Natalya and Malik demonstrate that for the offspring of immigrant parents, the blending of multiple non-dominant forms cultural capital is a greater challenge. Their shift in identity suggests that, as one alternates identity between two non-dominant cultures, they may choose to focus on the heritage that provides the least constraints.
5.4.3 Pattern Three: Developing Socioeconomic Identity

During the early conversations with students, an emerging pattern across many cases was the overestimation their socioeconomic status, particularly by participants on the lower half of the socioeconomic index scale. In the initial interviews, only Natalya presented a portrait of her family circumstances that reflected their limited socioeconomic resources. At the end of our first interview, Natalya, whose father had lost his job and her family was evicted from their home, asked if she could revisit an earlier question about her first days on campus.

Well, move-in day I can’t forget. I was actually really mad. Well, it has to do with my parents not having money to do certain things. I had to use scholarship money I had put away for certain things. I had to buy stuff for school and I had to use my own money. I was really mad about that. And my dad, it didn’t seem like he cared that I had to use my own money. He asked me for all this money and I was kind of mad too. He asked me for money to fix the car. It was crazy. And then I bought all my stuff, came here, had to pay for all my books, which was another bunch of money.

Later in the year, Natalya mentioned in a journal entry that she had become involved in a marketing business venture. In addition, she and her friends were “really trying to learn about real estate so we can invest and own a property by the summertime.”

When I asked about her focus on making money, she replied:

I want to stop that financial cycle that my family’s in. Just bad financial habits. It’s stopping right here. I’m tired of that. That’s what I’m thinking now. It might change ten, five years from now. But I want to do that because I want to set up, I want to have more, what’s the word? Generational wealth so my great-grandkids won’t have to worry as much like I did about money and stuff. Even though I don’t really worry about it, but just not have it be a concern or deterring factor or anything.
In our last interview, Natalya and I discussed her emerging identities including her Jamaican heritage and her growing intellectual development. When I asked her how she thought her family’s circumstances affected her development in those areas this year, she replied:

Actually, I think socioeconomic supersedes a lot of the other stuff. Just because money… I’m reading this book and it’s like, why aren’t we raised to go to school and own a business? It also depends on how you look at money. People see money as their way to…if people really want to do something, then is going to be a part of their lives a lot. Whereas someone who really doesn’t look at money that way, they’ll see different aspects of their life differently. That kind of supersedes the ethnicity thing. That’s what’s on TV nowadays, money.

Other participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds revealed an emerging socioeconomic identity during the latter stages of the study. For example, Imani described her family’s socioeconomic fluctuation as “definitely upper middle class, then definitely dropped, like middle class, lower middle class, now upper-middle class again, I guess.” In a later interview, we discussed how experiences during her first year at Bayside had heightened her awareness of her mother’s financial struggle, “I think I’m definitely more aware of money. I’m constantly thinking about, just…I definitely don’t want to be poor again. I saw how stressed out my mom was. Who wants to be poor?” Later, when discussing her shifting academic interests, she stated “I’m always like, ‘Oh, I want to be a history teacher!’ but then I’m like, ‘I’m going to be pretty poor if I’m a history teacher! I don’t want to be a history teacher!’ So now I’m like… I’m thinking about becoming a lawyer.”

Bridgette, who had one of the higher SES index scores among participants, displayed an awareness of socioeconomic status in our initial interview. She stated
matter-of-factly “Middle-class Blacks tend to look down on lower-class Blacks. I know I probably do, which I don’t want to do, but I probably do.” In a latter interview her analysis of socioeconomic division within the African American community was deeper:

It’s awful…if you’re born, if you’re born poor you’re gonna be poor, cause you can’t get an education in this country if you’re poor, a good one. Umm, it’s hard to escape this Black inferiority mentality and if it’s been beat in your head for so long and if you’ve been at the bottom for so long it’s hard to come up so I think this dialogue academically about Blacks that aren’t doing well has not been translated into cultural or social activism. People keep talking about it but they don’t do anything. I guess when I get out I want to do something about it, I’m not sure what yet, but I’d like to do something.

Perhaps because participants did not want to add a dimension of difference to their identity, they tended to overestimate their socioeconomic position early in the study. As discussed in Chapter IV, the scores generated by Hollingshead’s Index of Social Position did not hold to be accurate as students provided specific information about their family backgrounds. Given these two considerations, evaluating the impact of socioeconomic identity on academic and social development of students is difficult. However, as illustrated by Natalya and Imani, socioeconomic status may play a pivotal rule in shaping first year experiences. Additionally, as Bridgette demonstrates, as students reinterpret their socio-economic background, they may gain a better understanding of their inherited privilege and develop a commitment towards social change.

5.5 Summary

The themes and underlying patterns discussed in this chapter convey the challenges facing first-year African American students attending Bayside University. Participants described various experiences related to development of an ethnic identity,
including influences of various social contexts on reinterpretation of African American culture. Students spoke of access to dominant forms of cultural capital and, as they maintained or developed non-dominant forms of cultural capital, faced conflicts that limited their ability to convert capital in certain settings. For some students, stereotyping and racist experiences imposed serious threats to healthy identity development and movement towards bicultural perspectives. During the latter part of the study, many students began to appreciate other cultures as well as recognize socioeconomic distinctions within the African American population. Chapter VI provides a synthesis of the findings and the research questions posed in Chapter I, discusses the implications for practice and theory, addresses the limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.
Chapter VI

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

This study explores the first-year experiences of African American students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). The first chapter introduced the specific issue that influenced this investigation – the increasing socioeconomic heterogeneity within the African American population. Chapter II presented an original conceptual framework based on literature from higher education and sociology. The specific research methodology for this study was outlined in Chapter III. Chapter IV provided a description of participants in the sample and observations from background characteristics. Chapter V summarized major themes and patterns emerging from information provided by participants. This chapter clarifies these findings by returning to the original research questions posed in Chapter II, followed by a discussion of how key findings modify the conceptual framework developed in Chapter II. Discussion on how key findings support or contradict current literature on African American students at PWIs is also presented. Finally, this chapter will offer implications for practices and recommendations for future research.
6.1 Summary of Findings

*Question One: In what ways is the intersection of socioeconomic status and ethnic identity influential in shaping first-year experiences of African American students at a Predominately White, four-year postsecondary institution?*

Motivated by the increasing heterogeneity among the African American population, the primary inquiry sought to uncover ways socioeconomic background influence first-year experiences among African American students attending a Predominately White University. As outlined in the conceptual framework, the study considered links between African American identity development, family socioeconomic position and first-year experiences. The inquiry implies that the challenge of first-year transition is particularly complex for African American students entering a Predominately White Institution, perhaps varying based on family background.

The findings suggest that ethnic identity has considerable influence on first-year experiences for participants in this study. The struggle with duality begins long before entry to Bayside, often challenged by monolithic perspectives of African American culture cultivated by previous academic settings. In particular, the reactions from students about experiences in advanced placement courses are an interesting illustration of the early challenges to positive self-concepts. The relief expressed by participants in finding ‘like-minded’ peers supports the influence of critical mass on moving students from challenging stages of ethnic identity development to affirming stages. For African-American students from immigrant families, the impact of role models through a critical mass of African Americans at the institution (students, faculty, and staff) is especially
valuable, as they have an added challenge of going through a process that their parents did not experience.

The results of this study confirm previous research examining the relationship between critical mass theory and ethnic identity development (Brown, 1997; Renn, 2000; Torres, 2003). The presence of other African Americans within a majority White institution reduces feelings of marginalization among the African American population. However, as the narratives of students in this study about past experiences suggest, understanding the cultural and social heterogeneity which exists among African Americans is just as important for identity development as merely observing the physical presence of African Americans. Recognition of the diversity among African Americans allows students to consider their place along the broad spectrum of African American culture rather than subscribing to monolithic notions of African American culture that limits perspectives. As Brown (1997) concludes, a weakness of Cross’ African American identity theory is that the theory suggests that identity development originates from a negative encounter within an environment. By linking the value of critical mass to identity development, one may conclude that identity development may originate from a positive foundation if individuals find themselves in an environment that provides an African American presence representative of the multiple dimensions of African American culture.

It appears that Bayside University, with the nationally recognized Walker-Drew scholarship program and administrators of color on campus (including the University President), represents an enriching campus environment for African American students to develop a well-rounded concept of African American identity. However, even within an
environment with a diverse mass of African American students and administrators, the finding suggests that participants continued to experience challenges to their ethnic identity, which influenced their first year at Bayside. In particular, stereotype threat in academic settings and racist incidents in social settings had a profound impact on participant experiences.

For students with formal access to academic resources – particularly students in the Walker-Drew scholarship – stereotype threat appeared to trigger an increased desire to “prove people wrong.” Some participants even joked about other perceptions, a stark contrast to pre-college experiences. These observations suggest that formal sources of academic motivation were influential in the academic adjustment of students in this study. The collective identity that was established through formal academic programs or events appeared to lighten the burdens of stereotype threat. Rather than bearing their fears as individuals, group identity appeared to provide relief, even empowerment, among students in these programs.

Interestingly, while female students not in the scholarship program tended to still excel through informal academic resources, male participants without formal access did not make a successful adjustment academically during the first-semester. The differing experience based on gender suggests African American males, already an increasingly scarce population in higher education, face additional barriers not accounted for by ethnic identity development alone. It appeared that Ron, Christopher, and Eric either reluctantly sought assistance or found unprompted guidance. This observation suggests that African American males may be more susceptible to monolithic perceptions of masculinity rooted in traditional behaviors and attitudes. In this limited perspective, male students may see
proactive request for assistance, formally or informally, as a sign of weakness. The added consideration of gender differences among participant experiences leads to the conclusion that ethnic identity is influenced by other individual traits, as suggested by the initial inquiry of this study. However, socioeconomic differences were less clear than the differences found along gender distinctions.

The racism experienced in the social settings at Bayside University provided further evidence of negative attitudes towards African Americans, even in an overall climate that exhibits ethnic diversity. These experiences appeared to reduce interactions between African American students and other ethnic groups, including White students. The assumption that students self-segregate through ethnic-centered student organizations is challenged in this study by the negative perceptions of participants towards student organizations geared toward African American students. Instead, students in this study tended to use informal social networks. This observation suggests that many students in this study had a different set of intellectual and cultural interests than what the primary ethnic-centered student organization had to offer them. Most participants seemed to feel more comfortable engaging with other students in informal social settings. Perhaps a result of first-year status, participants in this study did not feel empowered to proactively participate in these student organizations led by returning students. While most participants discussed attending events, few students in this study consistently mentioned involvement in these organizations. As opposed to the strength they received from a collective identity in academic situations, participants appeared to be more focused on individual agency in social settings during their first year.
The dynamic nature of socioeconomic status made it difficult to frame its varying influence among participants during their first-year. Social position scores based on the Hollingshead Index of Social Position (ISP) did not fully represent participant experiences. With the exception of Bridgette, participants discussed situations that suggested socioeconomic classifications earned through intergenerational mobility rather than inherited. In particular, students with immigrant parents discussed various moves – from living with extended family near the city to moving into a house in the suburbs. Along with gender, family immigrant status developed into backgrounds of interest. However, socioeconomic dynamics were not lost, reflected in the second question for the study.

**Question 2: Is Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory relevant to African Americans within the context of a Predominately White Institution?**

The increasing socioeconomic stratification among students attending postsecondary education inspired the second major question for this study. Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory suggests that the cultural reproduction process provides a distinct advantage for individuals from families with high socioeconomic status. Through resources provided by family status, individuals develop an increased ability to take advantage of particular social opportunities. This proficiency includes skills to interact appropriately in various contexts, knowledge of the unwritten rules of engagement in particular settings, and possession of credentials held in esteem in certain environments. Cultural capital theory suggests that the transmission of these skills and knowledge is bounded by certain social class status, creating an unequal opportunity for upward socioeconomic mobility among all individuals in a particular society.
Historical social and economic discrimination of people of color in the United States based on ethnicity has limited socioeconomic mobility, raising questions about the relevancy of the cultural capital theory for African Americans. In the shadows of legalized segregation, forms of cultural capital developed within institutions in the African American community, contributing to opportunities for upward mobility (Franklin & Savage, 2004). Nevertheless, during this period, socioeconomic mobility for African Americans had financial and residential limitations. In theory, desegregation freed the limits of mobility for African Americans. However, one may consider the cultural “price” African Americans “pay” in order to move beyond the historical boundaries of meritocracy in the United States.

Information provided by the participants in this study suggests that, to an extent, cultural capital is relevant for African Americans within Predominately White Institutions. The conceptual framework for this study links first-year experiences of African American students at Predominately White Institutions with possession of certain forms of cultural capital valued within the campus environment. African American students entered Bayside University with possession of dominant cultural capital, cultivated by access to institutional structures that supplied particular academic certification. While the degree of access to these environments varied based on socioeconomic background, participants from lower socioeconomic positions illustrated how purposeful actions by parents ensured exposure to dominant perspectives.

As a result of the possession of dominant culture capital by participants in this study, one may conclude that those who lack certain levels of cultural capital were eliminated through the admission selection process, confirming the relevancy of
Bourdieu’s theory for African Americans within the context of education. In a study of female students in California, McDonough (1997) illustrates how socioeconomic background impacts decisions to apply to and attend college. The social status of the family, as well as the dominant socioeconomic background of the high school, influence critical resources available to students, shaping college aspirations and attendance.

For those who were accepted to Bayside, the ability to convert accumulated cultural capital became a salient dimension of difference among participants in this study. The particular challenge for African American students in converting cultural capital is the emergence of non-dominant culture capital, cultivated by the process of ethnic identity development that seeks resources to affirm self-concepts of African American identity. The desire for ‘ethnic authenticity’ reflects a period of immersion into African American culture. For students who found non-dominant resources within a formal program, the ability to alternate between non-dominant and dominant cultures appeared to be less stressful. However, for other students, particularly in the face of stereotype threat and racist incidents, the ability to alter perspectives based on social setting appeared more challenging.

In particular, the conflict between types of capital and the process of determining which capital has value within the multiple settings at the institution appeared to impact males not situated in formal academic programs. Perhaps, because of the strong negative stereotypes of African American males pervasive in American society, these students (Christopher, Eric, and Ron) were penalized more for their struggles in duality. As important as the support of formal programs such Walker-Drew, the “authenticity” they provide to male participants provides greater leniency in the lack of skills to
“appropriately” interact within various contexts or lack of knowledge about unwritten
rules of engagement in various systems of the institution. The inability to convert
cultural capital effectively influenced first-year experiences and potentially may affect
persistence at Bayside University.

For African American participants from immigrant families, the conflict between
dominant and non-dominant cultural capital resources appeared to affect their
relationship with family. The pressure to reject African American culture in favor of
maintaining homeland traditions was a source of stress, particularly as students returned
for the extended winter break. At the beginning of the year, students seemed intent on
merging into the African American community at Bayside rather than the African or
Caribbean communities. However, towards the end of the year as finding ways to merge
various cultures came into their consciousness, students from immigrant families
appeared to be redirected towards their parent’s home culture. In contrast, African
American students from families with multigenerational history in the United States did
not report significant conflict with parents or other family members. For many of these
participants, family members were a source for both dominant and non-dominant forms
of culture capital.

An interesting observation linked to the questions of cultural capital relevance for
African Americans students attending a Predominately White Institution is the poor
academic performance of the participants classified in the middle-class according to
Hollingshead’s Index. While upper-class participants (ISP scores 11-20) accumulated a
3.9 grade-point average and lower-class participants (ISP scores 36-77) accumulated a
3.8 grade-point average, students from the middle-class (ISP scores 21-35) only earned a
1.5 grade-point average. African American students from middle-class backgrounds were most likely to have experienced rapid intergenerational mobility during their childhood. Therefore, based on their past experiences in various educational and social settings, one would assume these participants would have less difficulty the process of determining which capital has value within the institutional settings. However, middle class students might find themselves in an interesting paradox similar to the males in this study - they have the credentials to survive the admissions process, but lack supplementary skills to convert their cultural capital (which upperclass students may have) and they are without the assistance of formalized programs to proactively provide these necessary skills (which lower-class students may have experienced through programs).

Overall, observations related to the relevancy of cultural capital theory for African American students attending Bayside revealed that participants possessed various forms of cultural resources. The success of converting cultural capital varied among the students, influenced by gender, history of family in the United States, and socioeconomic status. The conversion of cultural capital was also dependent on the development of a bicultural or multicultural perspective. The maturation of this perspective and its connection with the social and academic adjustment of students is addressed in the final question guiding this study.

*Question 3: How is cultural capital used differently among African Americans to develop social and academic connections within the institution?*

The third question arose from the assumption that cultural capital would be relevant for African American students within the context of their first-year at a Predominately White Institution. It was evident that participants in this study utilized and
converted forms of cultural capital to varying degrees based on background (gender, SES, and family history) and continued access to resources (formal and informal; dominant and non-dominant) at the institution. As the study advanced, many participants, influenced by access to various cultural resources, began to move toward initial stages of developing bicultural perspectives. The development of this perspective appears to be associated with participant’s academic and social connection at the institution.

In the initial interviews and journal entries, students provided illuminating illustrations of how their ethnic identity influenced experiences prior to arriving at Bayside and during the first few weeks on campus. For Walker-Drew scholars, the formal academic program and accompanying social component – resources of cultural capital - provided opportunities to establish connections with the community. For students not in formal programs, connections to the institution developed from informal networks with peers in the residence hall. Initially, few students identified other student organizations as a primary mean for networking and establishing connections. The peer networks established were primarily with other African American students, suggesting the continued desire to access non-dominant resources towards building a healthy ethnic identity.

Although relationships with students other than those of African American ethnicity were common, participants suggested that these relationships took greater time to develop and often heightened participants’ awareness of difference. It appeared that only after developing a healthy self-image were students able to share their non-dominant perspectives with non African American students. As African American students tended
not to need additional insight into White culture, this sharing was often one-sided with participants addressing inquiry into African traditions and customs.

The cultural dialogue in informal settings demonstrates a benefit of diverse settings, particularly once students from all backgrounds develop confidence to share experiences without fear of marginalization. Various studies have considered the benefits of ethnic diversity in educational settings (Milem, 2001; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Chang, in press). While studies have, for the most part, focused on formal settings such as classrooms, observations from this study highlight the importance of informal pedagogy among students. In a curriculum grounded in personal experiences, peers become engaged teachers and learners of culture, potentially moving enlightened individuals beyond merely tolerating non-dominant culture values, but serve to decentralize dominant values which have served to marginalize and disconnect particular students at the institution. For participants, these conversations tended to be more cursory than profound, but the observation that this dialogue was beginning to occur more frequently and with more depth during participant’s first year is an encouraging sign for Bayside University.

The conclusion that participants exhibited initial development of a bicultural perspective does not indicate that the process of ethnic development is complete, nor is its impact on college experiences rendered insignificant. Instead, participants appeared to begin to repeat the process in search of a deeper understanding of identity, adding other ‘worldview’ perspectives to the complex process – including, but not limited to, gender and socioeconomic consciousness. Additionally, cultural capital becomes more salient in
its influence as students accumulate various resources whose value they must ascertain as they move through multiple contexts.

The observation of students processing the intersection of various identities through experiences in multiple contexts suggests that ethnic identity development is a cyclical, rather than linear, process (Brown, 1997). Linear development suggests step-like progression through identity stages, were individuals must complete a level before moving to the next. A cyclical development represents blended movement across identity stages, deepening in meaning with every rotation and continuing throughout a lifespan. From a linear perspective, development of multiple identities occur parallel to each other. In a cyclical approach, boundaries of class, ethnic, and gender identities overlap and individuals are able to grasp a deeper meaning of how their multiple identities blend within various environments.

It appears that the cyclical process of identity development among participants was stimulated by the ability to convert non-dominant and dominant forms of cultural capital within the institution. As students processed their experiences (negative and positive; past and present) through self-reflection, a transformation of ethnic identity appeared to emerge which expanded characteristics of African American “authenticity” beyond monolithic observations. This transformation also allowed participants to consider how other identities, including gender and family background, also influenced their perspectives. As a result of this expanded self-identity, students began to develop roots in the social and academic systems of the institution. For the participants in this study, identity development and academic and social adjustment were not mutually
exclusive processes. Rather, they were intertwined processes linked by development of multicultural perspectives and cultural capital access.

6.2 Conceptual Framework

Returning to the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter II, the themes and patterns emerging from participants are added to provide a detailed framework (Figure 6-1). The underlying patterns within the theme ‘constructing an ethnic identity’ are placed around the reinterpretation of self-experience. The accusations of ‘acting White’ (A1) appear to represent an encounter that triggers self-analysis of ethnic identity. As the influence of social structure on individual agency is determined by characteristics of the community, it is placed within the conceptual framework in both dominant and non-dominant ‘worlds’ (A2). Finally, the presence of a critical mass of African Americans is embedded within the reinterpretation experience (A3), as it appears to have significant influence in this arena. The theme ‘Converting various forms of cultural capital’ is placed parallel to the theme of constructing ethnic identity, suggesting a link between ethnic identity development and cultural capital as stated in the primary inquiry for this study. The process of accessing dominant forms of cultural capital (B1) often requires students to take a position that aligns with dominant perspectives. The conflict between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital (B2) develops as students move toward positive African American identity and find themselves in a position to alternate perspectives. The conversion of accumulated cultural capital is placed between
perspectives (B3), signifying its vulnerability to both institutional characteristics and individual agency.

The latter two themes introduced in this study follow a more general pattern within the stages of African American identity development. Experiencing stereotype threat (C1) serves as a catalyst for moving toward a period of immersion, cumulating in desire for experiences that are grounded in a ‘world of blackness.’ This experience can be further stimulated by racist interactions within the environment (C2). Instinctively, it would seem appropriate to connect ethnic-centered student organizations (C3) as an outlet to fully express intense focus on African American culture. However, students in this study tended to rely on individual relationships. Instead, the student organizations were perceived to maintain monolithic perspectives of African American culture, a conclusion that may signal a period of emersion for students. The emersion period is further influenced by the presence of cultural mediators (D1). Cultural mediators help participants internalize ethnic identity and develop a new worldview that blends cultural experiences, leading to comfort in sharing African American heritage with others (D2).

Finally, the developing consciousness of other perspectives (D3) (including additional ‘worldly’ perspectives added as orange and yellow spheres), suggests a replay of the process that seeks a deeper understanding of ethnic identity along with a development of gender and socioeconomic identity. The interesting question outside the scope of this study is whether the lessons and experiences of this process can be passed down from generation to generation, adding a unique dimension of cultural reproduction.
Figure 6-1: Conceptual Framework: Adding Observed Patterns

Socioeconomic Identity
Gender identity
American heritage (dominant perspective)
African heritage (non-dominant perspective)
Stereotype threat
Stages of ethnic identity development

A1 Acting White
A2 Influences of institutional structures
A3 Value of critical mass of African Americans
B1 Access to dominant forms of cultural capital
B2 Conflict between dominant and non-dominant cultural capital
B3 Converting accumulated resources
C1 Experiencing stereotype threat
C2 Racism in social settings
C3 Negative views of ethnic centered student organizations
D1 Cultural mediators
D2 Sharing culture
D3 SES identity
6.3 Implications for Policy

Based on the findings from this study, there are several implications for practice that should be considered:

1. The influence of critical mass of African Americans on identity development of first-year African American students at Bayside highlights the continued need for PWIs to proactively recruit and retain African American students, staff, and faculty. However, recruitment and retention strategies should not be focused on just numerical diversity – establishing a diverse community is more than just changing the way the community looks, but changes the climate to be inclusive (Aman & Bangura, 2000). For example, at many institutions, a centralized office (such as the Affirmative Action or Equal Opportunity Office) is often responsible for evaluating recruitment and retention efforts of people of color by departments. However, as these offices typically exist outside of specific departments, they are often unaware of negative behaviors and practices trivializing people of color until they become extreme and are reported. Institutions who are proactive in addressing and monitoring diversity issues across the institution, rather than remain passive until racially charged conflicts on campus occurs, often are better able to create and maintain a climate of inclusion.

2. The observation that socioeconomic status is not a stationary variable among African American families challenges suggestions that affirmative action polices based on socioeconomic background may adequately replace race-based affirmative action policies with little consequence for African American postsecondary enrollment. The
rapid intergenerational mobility of African American families tends to place them at statistically higher socioeconomic positions based on snapshot socioeconomic measurements – education, occupation, and income. However, as Patillo-McCoy (2003) argues, the lack of wealth accumulated among African American middle-class and upper-middle class families renders socioeconomic comparisons across ethnic groups unfair. In this study, only one student could be considered having upper-middle class background past on family background. Additionally, while they may have accumulated levels of cultural capital to decrease lingering impact, students from statistically middle-class or upper-middle class families were not shielded from discrimination or stereotype threat on campus. This finding further supports the danger in arbitrarily replacing ethnicity with class in forming institutional policies.

3. The lack of academic success among males in the study who did not participate in a formal academic program suggests the need for programming which proactively supports these students. African American men have the lowest persistence rates among both sexes and all ethnic groups on campus (33.8%) and the gender gap among African Americans is larger than any other ethnic group – women make up 54% of the overall undergraduate population, while African American women make up 60% of the overall African American undergraduate population (Cuyjet, 2006). The long-term consequence of this trend is highlighted by research on the impact of father’s education on educational attainment of children (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). While high-achieving African American males often find support, those who toil underneath the radar may be the population most at-risk, but the least likely to find support.
4. The impact of out-of-class learning experiences on first-year experiences of participants illustrates the importance of co-curricular activities developed by student affairs professionals in higher education. The largest adjustment for students appeared to derive from the responsibilities of living on their own. Yet, this living adjustment was also the most important for the identity process. Many studies have examined the impact of residential living on student development and academic adjustment (Kuh, 1993; Pike, 2002; Pike and Kuh, 2005). Living on campus has significant impact on student engagement, intellectual development, and openness to diversity. Over the course of the year, through shared experiences, most participants develop respect and appreciation for their differences and the diverse thoughts of others – both within the African American community at Bayside and among other ethnic populations. Because participants in this study tended to express the additional burden of serving as cultural resources in these informal discussions, it is important that formal programs supplement these casual conversations. Intentional linking of formal and informal learning by institutions may deepen awareness of issues surrounding diversity.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provided valuable insight to the first-year experiences of African American students, there are several areas that warrant further examinations. The decision to use a single institution for this study provided an opportunity to develop in-depth data collection strategies. However, it is possible that the unique context of Bayside University – with an African American president and a strong presence of African
Americans among the faculty and staff – may have produced unique observations. Future studies should consider the questions outlined in this study across multiple institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), private institutions, and community colleges. The ability to find consistencies and differences in experiences across various institutions will contribute to further understanding how the college experience influences identity development among African Americans students.

Although gender was a unit of analysis for this study, the stark differences in experiences between males and females suggests the need for future studies to further explore differences in first-year experiences among African American students based on gender. In particular, the lack of success among African American males in this study not involved in formal academic programs is an important observation which warrants further examination. An in-depth study of transitional experiences of African American males may further identify the unique challenges these students face during their first-year of college.

Although not an inquiry of interest at the beginning of the study, this investigation provided a few illustrations of differences between multigenerational African American students and African-Americans from immigrant families within the context of Bayside University. Explicit investigation of differences between these groups, as well as African/Caribbean students would provide deeper insight about the heterogeneity of experiences among Black students within a higher education context.

In considering how home community connections shape educational experiences, due to limited time and resources, this study collects the student perspective only, excluding perspectives from parents and other important home figures. These important
individuals for participants may have information that is critical to understanding access to cultural resources and the process of developing a bicultural perspective. Future studies should attempt to collect data from family and other important community figures.

The initial goal of this study was to capture the untold stories of African American experiences at a Predominately White Institutions, specifically among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the students identified by such backgrounds provided valuable insight to their experiences, it was clear that other narratives were still undiscovered. In particular, examination of non-residential students – likely to be disproportionately disadvantaged – should be considered in future studies on African American and low-income students.

Lastly, future studies should consider longitudinal, qualitative research design – following a group of students from their first year until departure via transfer, dropout, or graduation. By following the same group of students throughout their college experience, researchers may be able to better identify significant moments that may otherwise be missed in time limited studies.

6.5 Conclusion

To expand knowledge about experiences of African American students in higher education, scholars have called for research to move beyond monolithic treatment of African American backgrounds (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2004; Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004). This study attempts to contribute to this appeal
by exploring the complex ways in which ethnicity and socioeconomic background interact to shape experiences of African American students attending at Predominately White Institutions. Overall, the findings of this study support previous research that suggests African American students face unique challenges at Predominately White Institutions (Sedlack, 1987; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Willie, 2003). The accounts of African American students in this study illustrate the continued stereotyping and racist attitudes that exist at PWIs and its influence on shaping first-year experiences. Although the majority of students in this study demonstrated success in their academic and social transition, the stress associated with their additional burdens was evident throughout the academic year.

By investigating family background, this study added a component to investigations of African American student experiences at PWIs. The use of cultural capital theory follows similar studies conducted at the secondary level (Laureau and Hovart, 1999; Lareau, 2000; Carter, 2003). While it was difficult to frame differences in experience based on socioeconomic position, background information provided by students illustrated the conscious decision-making process among families to find proximity to institutions that promote dominant perspectives. As a result, when students begin to develop a strong ethnic identity, they often face a conflict between dominant perspectives - grounded in White, middle-class standards of style, music, and speech – and non-dominant ideology. While this conflict begins long before arrival to postsecondary institutions, it is intensified by students extended departure from their home community.
Evidence from participants of this study contradicts previous research literature on the importance of African American student organization as agents for social integration (Guiffrida, 2003; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2006). At least during the first year, students appear more likely to seek out other African American students through informal networks rather than formal social student organizations. Only towards the end of the academic year did students begin to become more formally involved in ethnic-centered students organizations. Perhaps the unique context of the institution used for this study, including the presence of a critical mass of African American students, provides more opportunities to interact with other African American students beyond formal networks.

This study further illuminates research on cross-cultural interaction among students attending a PWI (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004). Illustrations from participants highlighted the continued pressure to acculturate to the dominant perspective, rather than acknowledge value of non-dominant perspectives. As a result, students appeared to self-segregate as a response to hostile interactions in the classroom or social settings. Towards the end of the semester, as a blended perspective developed and students became comfortable with their ethnic identity, they provided examples of initiating interactions with White students as teachers to culture.

This study also contributes to the growing recognition of diversity within the African American ethnicity. The lack of clarity has potentially masked the disproportionate segment of African American students from immigrant families in postsecondary education (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007). To the surprise of the researcher, over half of the sample for this study consisted of students from
immigrant families, primarily from countries in Africa. Although not initially a variable of interest, it was clear that these students experienced both unique benefits and challenges stemming from their family background.

Overall, observations from this study provide an in-depth snapshot of the first-year experiences for fifteen students attending Bayside University during the 2006-2007 academic year. The voices presented in this study illustrate the progress our society has made since the 1960s, as well as the challenges still to be faced in the 21st century. These challenges extend not just across ethnic populations, but within them as well. While monolithic, stereotypical perspectives of identity serve to simplify a complex society, inevitably they limit our progress. In the limited scope of this study, the contributions of the participants provided a greater understanding of varied first-year experiences, confirming results from previous studies while challenging other conclusions. Most importantly, the experiences of these students raised valuable questions for future consideration.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collected</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First set of interviews with students (Classes began August 2006)</td>
<td>October 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First set of journal entries collected from students</td>
<td>October 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second set of interviews with students at host institution</td>
<td>December 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second set of journal entries collected from students</td>
<td>December 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative records reviewed</td>
<td>January 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final set of journal entries collected from students</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final set of interviews with students at host institution (Classes ended May 2007)</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Personal Information Form

Age: ____________________________

Sex:  ☐ Male  ☐ Female

Race/Ethnicity: ____________________________

Are you a U.S. citizen?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

What was the highest level of education your Father/Guardian completed?

☐ High School  ☐ Some College  ☐ Two-year degree  ☐ Four-year degree  ☐ Graduate Degree

What was the highest level of education your Mother/Guardian completed?

☐ High School  ☐ Some College  ☐ Two-year degree  ☐ Four-year degree  ☐ Graduate Degree

Father/Guardian Current Occupation ____________________________

Mother/Guardian Current Occupation ____________________________

What is your intended major?

________________________________________

At this point in your education, what type of career are you planning for after graduation?

________________________________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

I am conducting a study examining first-year experiences of African American students at Bayside University. This project is not related to any academic evaluation and will not be used for any administrative purposes. Your honest response to questions about your experiences at Bayside University is for a dissertation study at Pennsylvania State University. Your input is greatly valued and appreciated. To protect your confidentiality, you will be asked to select a pseudonym which will be used during our interviews and in the study. With your permission, this interview will be recorded.

QUESTIONS FOR FIRST INTERVIEW

Where are you from? [Prompt student to detail characteristics of home community/neighborhood, whether they moved often (if so, why)]

Tell me about your family? [Probe: What do your parents do for a living? Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are they younger or older? Are you close with your extended family?]

Who in your family, if anybody, previously attended college? [Probe: What institution? How did they describe their experience?]

From what you recall, did your parent’s encouragement inspire your academic motivation or did your academic motivation trigger parent’s encouragement?

Where your parent’s involved with your teacher/school (through parent-teacher conferences, Parent-Teacher association)? Why or why not?

Can you identify role models (teachers, family, or friends) that were influential in shaping your interest in pursuing postsecondary education [Probe: When did you first think about going to college? Who was influential in supporting your interest?]

Tell me about your high school environment? [Prompt students to discuss peer culture, academic rigors, and relationship with teachers]

As a self-identified African American, do you think your race influenced your experiences in high school, why or why not?

Why did you choose Bayside University? [Probe: How did you first hear about Bayside University?]

What other institutions did you consider? What information was most important in influencing your decision? Did you consider other types of institutions – HBCUs, for example]
GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW II (SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ALSO ASKED BASED ON PREVIOUS INTERVIEW, JOURNALS, AND WEB PROFILES)

Thinking back to your first day on campus as a student, what events do you remember most? [Probe: Did your family come with you? How long did they stay? Was it difficult for your family when they left? Was it difficult for you?]

So far, what do you think are the biggest differences between your high school environment and the environment at Bayside University? [Probe: Are there population differences? Academic differences? Social Differences?]

Would you consider the friends you have made at Bayside different from you friends in high school? [If so, how? If not, what similar characteristics do they share?]

Do you feel you have found a comfort zone as an individual at Bayside University? [Probe: What experiences helped or hindered your ability to be comfortable? Have you established a connection academically and socially, or one more than the other?]

Describe your initial contact with faculty and staff at Bayside? Have you been able to develop a connection? [Prompt student to describe specific encounters and experiences]

What student organization, if any, are you interested in? [Probe: Why are they attractive? What has been your experience so far? Pay attention to student’s focus or lack of focus toward ethnic-centered organizations (i.e. Black Student Association)].

Tell me about what it’s like for you as a African American (male or female) transitioning to life at Bayside University. [Probe for positive, as well as negative aspects if needed]

Are you currently working? [Probe: If students is working, do they have an on-campus or off-campus job? How many hours a week? Is this job for extra income or to assist with you tuition? If student is not working, are they receiving extra financial support from family?]
What is your reaction when seeing another African American student on campus that you may not personally know? Has your reactions changed from when you first arrived on campus? Do you have a positive, negative, or neutral reaction? Do these reactions change based on the situation?

What majors are you considering at this point? [Prompt student to discuss the process in choosing their major, how sure they are about their chosen major. If study is undecided, inquire about possible options and how the student will explore these options]

At this time, what are your career plans? [How long have you considered this as your primary career goal? Is there an individual who was a primary influence in your career development?]

How have you maintained communication with your family during this academic year? Has it been difficult? If so, in what ways?

Are you returning to Bayside University in next fall? If so, what experiences are you looking forward to academically and socially during your second year at Bayside University? If not, what are your plans for the future?

What advice would you give incoming first-year students about transitioning from high school to Bayside University?
Lorenzo DuBois Baber

Education

Doctor of Philosophy  Pennsylvania State University  August 2007
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Dissertation: First-year experiences for African American students at a Predominantly White Institution: Considering influence of ethnicity and socioeconomic status through cultural capital theory

Master of Education  University of North Carolina at Greensboro  May 2000
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2nd Place, Pennsylvania State University Office of Educational Equity Research Exhibition, 2007
Bunton-Waller Fellowship, Pennsylvania State University, 2003-06
Young Scholars Editorial Board, Journal of Negro Education, 2004-Present
Conrad Frank Fellowship, Pennsylvania State University, 2004-05

Higher Education Research Experience


From 2003-2006, provided research support to Dr. Beverly Lindsay, Professor of Higher Education and Senior Scientist in the Center for the Study of Higher Education. During 2006-2007 academic year, worked with Dr. Carol Colbeck, Director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education and Associate Professor of Higher Education.