From There to Here: The Experiences of Historically Black College and University Graduates in Pursuit of an Advanced Degree from a Predominately White Research University

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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From There to Here: The Experiences of Historically Black College and University Graduates in Pursuit of an Advanced Degree from a Predominately White Research University

Director of Dissertation: Peter C. Mather

As defined by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2010) HBCUs are “colleges or universities that existed before 1964 that have a historic and contemporary mission of educating African-Americans” (p.8). These institutions have served a critical role in research, diversification of the professoriate (Allen & Jewell, 2002), educational opportunity, and more importantly the pipeline used by some African Americans to graduate school (Louis, Phillips, Louis, & Smith, 2015). Over the past three decades educational research centering on Black students and/or HBCUs have often centered on the undergraduate level with focus on issues such as retention and academics and less on the impact of student experiences and higher achieving academic pursuits. This study explores the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University and examines how this sample of population makes meaning of those experiences.
Dedication

Camryn Skylar Giles

May you never stop dreaming…

Mom & Dad

You told me education can take me anywhere I want to go. Thank you for being right.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Lord above for your blessing, your guidance, and strength for which I depend upon. In Jesus name, I pray.

Thank you to those that have come before me. It is your shoulders that I stand upon as I walk into my greatness and your legacy that I will forever trail.

There have been so many family, friends, peers, colleagues, and total strangers that have supported, prayed for me, and encouraged me along this journey. It is often said that it “takes a village to raise a child”- I stand now before my village and say THANK YOU.

To my PARENTS, words cannot express the amount of love, respect, and gratitude I have for you. Dad, thank you for pushing me, challenging me (even when I hated it!) and molding me into the person that I am today. Mom, thank you for your sacrifice, your support, and spirit. I am honored to be your daughter and pray that you are proud of the daughter you have raised. To both of you I say thank you, I love you, and job well done! To my siblings- Edward, Wesley, Shanerra, Tamera, & Jay, thank you for your patience. We experienced many years apart due to my educational pursuits and I thank each of you for stepping up while your big sister was away. However, I’m back now to take full rein as only a BIG SISTER can 😊.

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WE did it!
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of HBCUs</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the Study</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Study</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Review of the Literature</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks in Higher Education</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Making</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans Pursuit of Graduate and Professional Education</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Development</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Race Performance ..........................................................................................................46
Stereotype Threat ...........................................................................................................48
Bronfenbrenner’s Model of Ecology ............................................................................54

Chapter 3: Methodology ............................................................................................58
Qualitative Research ......................................................................................................59
Phenomenology .............................................................................................................60
Description of the Researcher .....................................................................................61
Research Site ..................................................................................................................64
Gaining Entry .................................................................................................................66
Selection of Participants ...............................................................................................66
Data Collection ..............................................................................................................68
Interviewing ...................................................................................................................68
Data Analysis .................................................................................................................71
Trustworthiness .............................................................................................................73
Ethical Protocol .............................................................................................................75
Summary ........................................................................................................................76

Chapter 4: Findings ......................................................................................................77
Purpose of Research ......................................................................................................77
Participants .....................................................................................................................78
Participant Profiles .......................................................................................................80
Zoe. ............................................................................................................................80
Coming to America.....................................................................................................80
Standing on my own...................................................................................................81
Scholarly pursuits ......................................................................................................82
Taylor .........................................................................................................................84
Don’t believe the hype or should you? .................................................................85
To be just me ...........................................................................................................88
Lindsey .......................................................................................................................89
All in the family .....................................................................................................91
DO or MD? .............................................................................................................93
Reese ..........................................................................................................................95
A whole new world ...............................................................................................97
I’m doing it .............................................................................................................101
Melanie ....................................................................................................................103
The HBCU experience .........................................................................................105
Journeying north .................................................................................................106
Kirsten ......................................................................................................................109
Who we are. .........................................................................................................110
Power to the…? ....................................................................................................112
Who I am becoming ...........................................................................................114
Alex ..........................................................................................................................116
Natural disaster?!...but I’m a freshman. ..............................................................117
Rebuilding .............................................................................................................120
Moving forward ...................................................................................................125
Adrienne ..................................................................................................................127
Who am I? ............................................................................................................127
Making it ...............................................................................................................130
Kylie .........................................................................................................................132
Chapter 5: Cross Case Analysis

Themes

In or Out: Making the Choice

Program and professional interests/ opportunities

Debt and decision

Societal pressure

Adjusting to the Graduate Experience and Institution

Academic experiences

Social and cultural engagement

To Be Black in Graduate School

HBCU attendance: Help or hindrance?

HBCU attendance: Perceived benefits

Campus and Community Outreach

Institutional policies and programs

Will the real supporters please stand up

Inclusion and Engagement

Stereotypes and marginalization

Two worlds

Builders of the Pathway

Responsibility to HBCUs
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Student Participation Information</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1. Illustration of the Coding Process</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2. Developed Themes</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Literature as it relates to African American attendance in higher education has received considerable attention—specifically retention, academic achievement, social integration, faculty integration, faculty relationships, racism, achievement gap, and enrollment within the past three decades (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). However, much of the research centers on the undergraduate African American population, and less with the experiences of African American graduate students. To that degree, much of the research that has been conducted often presents a singular focus—academic achievement. Researchers Mow and Nettles (1990) noted, “Most [of the] studies stopped short of investigating how students’ experiences, such as feelings of alienation and isolation, are related to persistence and performance” (p. 77). Experiences shape the way in which students evaluate and make sense of the information they encounter both inside and outside the classroom (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). Experience affects students’ levels of social and academic integration (Allen, 1992; Malaney & Shively, 1991; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Turner & Thompson, 1993). The more integrative and corroborative college experiences are, the more likely students will persist until degree completion (Tinto, 1993).

Background of the Study

Graduate education is of significant importance in today’s society, particularly for Black Americans whose fiscal status lags behind that of White Americans (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, J. & Valentine, T. & Cervero, R. M. & Bowles, T. A., 2009).
During an economic time where an advanced degree is essential to upward mobility, African Americans remain underrepresented not only as students but as faculty and members of staff within the academy. (Adair, 2001). Despite population shifts, minority students continue to represent a lesser fraction of graduate enrollment in the U.S. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 2014 graduate enrollment of minority students (excluding nonresident alien) made up approximately 42.4 percent of the total population (NCES, 2016). The graduate enrollment rates of minority students have remained significantly lower than their White counterparts since 1976 (NCES, 2016). Although graduate enrollment of Blacks increased from 6 percent in 1976 to 14.5 percent in 2008, their graduate enrollment rate was 51.1 percent lower than the enrollment rate of Whites (NCES, 2016).

According to Cheatham and Phelps (1995) the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students in higher education has become an acute problem in graduate education and particularly so at the doctoral level. A gap in the graduation rates of African American and White students continues (Furr, 2002). For the past 20 years, the college completion rates of African American students have remained at about one half the rates of White students (NCES, 2011). Retention rates drop significantly for Black students transitioning from undergraduate to graduate studies in comparison to their Asian and White counterparts at 50 and 75 percent, respectively (Astin, 1982; Benderson, 1988; Nettles, et al.,2006). Of Black students beginning graduate study, 57 percent do not complete their degree (Brazziel, 1988). Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks report that during the 1999-2000 academic year, Black college graduates earned 9 percent
of all bachelor degrees and a dismal 5 percent of all doctoral degrees (Hoffman & Llgas, 2003).

Improving minority enrollment in graduate and professional education has become a policy goal over the past two decades (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990). The importance of increasing minority participation at this level is tied to the growing importance placed on attainment of an advanced degree in the 21st century. In today’s society, receipt of graduate or professional education has often become a necessity for entrance into leadership and professional positions (National Board of Graduate Education, 1976). It is characterized as “one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country” (Boyer, 1987, p.85). In addition to financial security minorities may obtain with a graduate or professional degree, alternative perspectives brought by minority members could greatly enrich professions in a global society (Moore, 1997). Lastly, select societal views have often proclaimed that African American young people are raised on the belief that academic success is not of common occurrence for Blacks. However, increased educational attainment of minority professionals dispel this notion and provide role models for younger generation (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990).

Research on Blacks in graduate education has often been centered on aspects of access and recruitment (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990), and less so on impacting decisional factors and their experiences after admittance. Access and recruitment are of extreme importance for minorities in higher education and have been the center of legislative directions throughout the course of American history. However, Blackwell (1987) asserts that enrollment in graduate school is only a necessary precondition for advancement into
actual professional status. The attrition rates for minority students have been found to be
greater than that for non-minorities (Astin, 1982). Unfortunately, little research has been
candoned investigating factors that contribute to the success of minority students
pursuing graduate education.

Taylor and Antony (2000) assert that student success at all levels, including post-
baccalaureate, requires successful socialization in the academy. Socialization is defined
as a process wherein the newcomer learns a set system of behaviors related to their areas
of strength and a collection of meanings and values related to these behaviors (Taylor &
Antony, 2000). In addition, experiences of students, as well as their campus environment,
make a difference in students’ persistence-to-graduation (Allen et al., 1991). Campus
environments have been found to significantly affect the participation, retention, and
daily circumstances of Black students (Allen, 1985; Blackwell, 1985, 1987; Bowen &
Bok, 1998). By establishing environments that are designed to be supportive and
nurturing of student learning, growth, and development, administrators are less likely to
formulate design structures that will negatively impact student potential.

In decades since the passing of legislature opening the doors of access in higher
education to minority students, Blacks have been awarded an opportunity to pursue the
advancement of their education from an array of institutional types, including Historically
Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), Predominately White Institutions (PWIs),
public or private, technical schools, or junior colleges. Enrollment rates indicate that the
majority of Black students presently attend PWIs. This is a dramatic change when
considering the enrollment of Blacks in higher education prior to the 1960s, when the
vast majority of Black students who entered college during this time attended HBCUs. In 2014, of the total number of Black student’s enrollment in higher education, only 14.5 percent of Black students attended HBCUs (NCES, 2016). Sissoko and Shiau (2005) report that HBCUs are undergoing a declining share of African American enrollment in higher education.

Researchers have often attributed the increased number of Black students attending PWIs to socioeconomic status (SES), academic reputation of the institution, financial aid, and the availability of program major (Hossler, 1985; Perna & Titus, 2004). However, many of these students are often not prepared for the actual experiences they encounter attending a PWI (Malaney & Shively, 1991). In addition to stressors facing most college students, Black students attending PWIs may experience additional stress because of their minority status, being called upon to be representatives of their race, and disconnectedness with their school and programs (Allen; 1988; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; Kim, 2002; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004). These additional challenges for Black students attending PWIs can affect their overall college experience and contribute to higher levels of attrition. Allen (1988) further notes that Black college students face challenges not faced by their White counterparts that. Minimum research has been conducted investigating the experiences of Black graduate studies attending PWIs. Of the studies that have examined these issues at the graduate level, they report similar concerns identified in undergraduate studies (Brown, 1986; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009).
The Benefits of HBCUs

There are 103 accredited HBCUs and they represent just 3% of the total higher education institutions in the U.S. and about 2% of the total U.S. college enrollment (NCES, 2016). As of 2009, fewer than 12% of Black college students attend HBCUs, however these institutions grant almost 20% of bachelor’s degrees earned by Black students (Dewan, 2009). Gurin and Epps (1975) described HBCUs as being an oasis of acceptance. HBCUs are institutions where Black students are perceived to be capable. It is a place where Black students who may not have had the opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning, are able to build self-confidence as they further their education (Willie, 2003). HBCUs provide Black students with a diverse environment with minority faculty and staff and a place where White students are able to experience being a minority (Willie, 2003). Comparative studies of HBCUs and PWIs have suggested that HBCUs provide varied culturally appealing sources of student engagement for Blacks, and can be more effective in positive development of student outcomes (Nettles, et al., 2006). Champions of HBCUs argue that these institutions provide environments in which African American students who might struggle academically can flourish (Dewan, 2009).

Positive outcomes associated with HBCU attendance include cognitive and intellectual skill development, moral and ethical development, psychosocial development, collective adjustment, positive self-image, and persistence rates. Recently, Rovai, Gallien, and Wighting (2008), presented research providing evidence that the racial achievement gap can be closed in a graduate education program based on findings
observed of Black HBCU graduates enrolled in graduate school. In comparison of Black students who completed their undergraduate education at a PWI and Blacks students who completed their undergraduate education at an HBCU, researchers found that “attendance at an HBCU may have provided Black students with a more secure academic foundation on which to base their postgraduate studies, despite the greater learning-style gap to overcome between an HBCU undergraduate experience and a PWI graduate experience” (Rovai et al., 2008, p.235). In addition, Black HBCU students have been found to spend more energy in academic pursuits and pursue advanced degrees (Harper et al., 2004, Wenglinsky, 1997).

Statement of the Problem

In 2006, the Spellings Commission Report on Higher Education placed considerable focus on the presence of minority students within our nation’s education system and the achievement gap of underrepresented minorities and White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The access and achievement gaps separating low-income and minority students in the U.S. have not only persisted, but have become wider (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). There are stark differences between the percentage of White adults who earn 4-year degrees by the age 25-29 (34 percent), compared to their African American (24 percent) and Hispanic (10 percent) counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). As the changing demographics of our society are reflected in college and university campuses across the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) America should no longer rely on the educational achievement of White upper-middle class students for sustainability (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson,
As the enrollment of underrepresented minority and nontraditional students increases, it is imperative that we appropriately and effectively address the needs of these populations. Education has become a vital aspect in the twenty-first century.

Researchers have alluded to HBCU attendance as a contributing factor to Black students success in graduate education (Allen, 1992). Black students attending HBCUs are identified as being significantly more engaged in college experiences and develop considerably more cognitively and personally. Others argue that there is no significant effect on Black students engagement or cognitive/personal development according to institutional type (Kim, 2002). Student interaction with both White and Black faculty has been found to be more prevalent at HBCUs, while other research suggests there is no difference (Pascarella et al., 2006). Other arguable factors that are perceived to impact the academic success of HBCU graduates pursuing post-baccalaureate education include a greater sense of cultural awareness, level of engagement, perceptions of self, and established support systems. Despite the importance of this issue, minimum research has been done investigating the experiences of Black HBCU graduates pursuing graduate and professional degrees at a PWI, and the cultural similarities and differences of these institutions and how these factors have shaped their meaning of these experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University (PWRU). This study is designed to gain a better understanding of HBCU graduate’s post-baccalaureate experiences at a PWRU. Students’ transition and perception of their
integration within the university were examined. Specifically, this study is meant to increase the understanding of how this sample of population makes meaning of their experiences at this PWRU. Black graduate students were selected because a significant portion of research on Blacks in higher education has consistently focused on undergraduates, who are decidedly different regarding age, curriculum, life experiences, and developmental stage. Findings from this study are intended to inform higher education policy makers and administrators, and to give voice to the participants.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU?

2. How does this population make meaning of these experiences?

**Significance of the Study**

During present economic times, the importance of and value placed on post-baccalaureate education cannot be denied. A college degree has now become as essential as the high school diploma decades prior. It is the attainment of a graduate or professional degree which finds favor in a capitalistic society. Such an accomplishment does not only bestow prestige, it bequeaths opportunity, freedom, and security.

In passing decades, educational research has focused on aspects of access, recruitment, and the academic ability of African American students. Little research has been conducted investigating the impact of experiences of this population who have successfully completed undergraduate education and are (or have) negotiating the pursuit of graduate or professional degree attainment. Ladson- Billings (1994) asserts that Black
students attending PWIs who are culturally connected or engaged within the African American community tend to perform better in their work environments and achieve greater distinction as a student. Thus, this dissertation will examine the experiences of Black HBCU baccalaureate recipients in pursuit of post-baccalaureate education at a PWRU. This study seeks to address how the experiences of HBCU attendance impacts Black students’ transition, integration, achievement, and persistence to graduation at a PWRU.

Members of the academy (i.e. professors, administrators, staff, etc.) devoted to the success of all students must be educated of student’s needs. Investigation of student experiences presents us with knowledge that will serve to help make informed decisions. Such understandings allow us to better design and implement policies and programs that will meet the needs of both majority and minority students. The knowledge obtained in the investigation guides us and gives voice to the participants.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of better understanding the study, the following terms are defined:

1. Academic Achievement- a measure of knowledge gained in formal education, usually indicated by test scores, grade point averages, and degrees attained.

2. African American or Black- Individuals who are of African descent. These racial and ethnic labels are applied interchangeably in this study. Dependent upon author preference and historical context, each is synonymously used throughout
the literature. Generally, these names indicate feelings of inclusion and
connection to distinct cultural communities.

3. Alienation- The feeling of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and social
estrangement. As alienation increases, students (especially students of color) are
likely to drop out of the university.

4. Black graduate student- Graduate students who are of African descent and
identify as Black, African American, West Indian, etc.

5. Black Identity- African Americans’ beliefs about the significance of race in their
self-definition and how they ascribe meaning to membership to their racial group
membership.

6. Culture- a set of behaviors, patterns, rules, and rituals of a group of people who
share interaction and common languages. Culture is the way that a group of
people define, create, celebrate, sustain, and develop themselves. In addition, it is
the way of life for people in a certain geographic area, particularly their ideas,
beliefs, values, patterns of thought, and symbols. Culture includes processes of
learning, knowing, and perceiving ideas, knowledge, symbols, standards, and
values. It consists of what people process cognitively and how the cognitive
processes are reflected in human behaviors and in the artifacts or objects that
people create.

7. Diversity- An umbrella term used to identify a state of differing forms, groups,
types, ideas, etc. (www.merriam-webster.com)
8. Graduate Student- Students enrolled in graduate study after the completion of an undergraduate degree.

9. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) - An HBCU is determined by the Secretary of Education as meeting the requirements of 34 Code of Federal Regulations Section 608.2. Colleges and universities that are degree-granting institutions of higher learning and were established prior to 1964 whose principal missions were, and are, the education of Black Americans. To date, 103 accredited HBCUs exist throughout the United States.

10. Predominately White Institution (PWI) - A college or university whose student populations is predominately and traditionally White. Individuals of other races and ethnicities who attend PWI’s comprise a minority of the student population. The PWI in this study is a research university with a student population that is primarily composed of students of Caucasian descent.

11. Predominately White Research University (PWRU) - A research university whose student populations is predominately and/or traditionally White.

12. Persistence- For the purpose of this study, persistence is a continuous process to create, maintain, and support ongoing strategies for meeting the academic, cultural, and social needs of students to ensure their academic success and graduation. Persistence also refers to those students who are continuously enrolled full- or part-time in pursuit of a college degree.

13. Racial Identity- Racial identity is defined as a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a
particular group. It assumes that certain stages of identity are healthier than others. Healthy and positive racial identity is viewed as identification with a reference group of the same racial heritage. Accordingly, one’s racial identity may influence a person’s activities, beliefs, and daily decisions.

14. Social support- Assistance with providing supportive feedback on problems or distressing feelings. High levels of involvement in church, fraternal, ethnic, and social organizations lead to satisfaction. African Americans tend to place more importance on family and social relationships for social support than they do on professional help.

15. Student Development- Student development involves the growth and progress the student makes in her or his developmental capabilities by virtue of one’s engagement in higher education (Rogers, 1990). Student developmental theories are philosophical approaches that help to guide professionals within the field. Through the use of student development theories, student affairs professionals are better able to address and understand the complex needs of students within postsecondary institutions, develop programs, and become more proactive. Factors that are or are not within the campus environment (i.e. challenge and support, marginality and mattering, etc.) have significant impacts on the development of students.

**Context of the Study**

For the purpose of this study, a PWI is defined as a college or university whose student populations is predominately and/or traditionally White. A Research University
(RU) is considered to be multifaceted and more intricate in functionality within higher education, presumably due to the focus on research across disciplines, and the scholarly preparation of future academics (Kuh & Hu, 2001). The highest status among colleges and universities are bestowed upon research universities (Lipset, 1994). For the purpose of this study, the participants’ institution of attendance is identified as a Predominately White Research University (PWRU).

Research universities

Attract many gifted students and faculty members, lead the world in great prizes awarded for science, and receive significant external support for their activities (Alpert, 1985; Noll, 1998). They train the vast majority of physicians and PhD recipients and are citadels of academic culture, where faculty autonomy and academic freedom are deeply rooted and fiercely protected (Rosovsky, 1990, as cited in Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Research institutions are collectively recognized for their selectivity, a common defining characteristic of the academic quality or excellence of a given college or university (Braxton, 1993). Such an assertion is borne from the linkage that institutional reputation and resources have with admissions selectivity (Braxton, 1993). Many colleges and universities attempt to “emulate characteristics of the research institution, such as the entrepreneurial ethos that drives an unflagging search of resources to support their ever expanding array of programs and activities” (Kuh & Hu, 2001, p. 1). As institutions holding high economic and educational value (Noll, 1998; Vincow, 1997), research universities are the standard to which most other colleges and universities aspire (Geiger,
1986). It is for this reason that I selected to recruit participants from a Predominately  
White Research University.  

Conceptual Framework  

The Ecological perspective of human development described by Bronfenbrenner  
(1994) will be utilized as the framework for analyzing the experiences of Black HBCU  
graduates during their attendance at a PWRU as graduate and professional students.  
“Ecological models encompass an evolving body of theory and research concerned with  
the processes and conditions that govern the lifelong course of human development in the  
actual environments in which human beings live” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.37).  
Bronfenbrenner (1994) purports that in order to understand human development, one  
most consider the ecological system in which growth occurs in its entirety.  

The campus environment is a central feature in the academic experience of all  
graduate students; to the extent that distinctive issues relating to students of color exist,  
they constitute a subset of the general experience (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995).  

A model that accounts for interactions among and between the various sub-
environments an individual encounters…… provides a means to examine the  
dynamic, fluid nature of college life, where students move from one setting to  
another, constructing and reconstructing identities in relationship with others and  
in reaction to the messages they receive from interacting environments (Renn,  
2004 p. 28).  
The model implemented by Bronfenbrenner accounts for both the individual and his or  
her interactions within the environment. The Bronfenbrenner model is centered around
two central axioms: (a) “development is an evolving function of person-environment interaction” and (b) “ultimately, this interaction must take place in the immediate, face-to-face setting in which the person exists” (1993, p.10). For the purpose of this study, the person-environment concept will be of upmost importance as the experiences of Black graduate students attending a PWRU and their negotiating of such an environment is examined.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, background of the study, statement of the problem, statement of purpose, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of key terms used in the study, and a context of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature that includes African Americans in higher education, models of degree completion, student development theory, racial identity theory, the influence of campus environments, and stereotype threat as it pertains to the college performance of African American students. The methodology is discussed in chapter 3, chapter 4 includes the participants’ stories, and chapter 5 provides an analyses of the data collected. Chapter 6 presents the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Blacks in Higher Education

Prior to the mid-1900s, American colleges and universities were populated by White males from middle- or upper class families (Brock, 2010). African Americans, like women in this country, were believed to have inherently inferior intellectual and academic ability; thus, teaching those complex concepts and skills was considered wasteful and unnatural (Willie & Edmonds, 1978, as cited in Kim, 2002). Nevertheless, in recognition of the limited educational opportunities for Blacks (Wenglinsky, 1997) and their promising potential, White benevolent societies and select religious organizations founded Black colleges (Kim, 2002). While African American students were disallowed from entering many other colleges and universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) gave opportunities for professional training and higher learning to these students (Wenglinsky, 1997). Presently, 103 accredited HBCUs are in existence in the U.S. (NCES, 2011).

Prior to the landmark Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education decision of 1954, directing higher education’s move toward desegregation, over 90% of African American college graduates were educated by HBCUs (Kim, 2002). The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision declaring that separate was not equal and discrimination in public education violated the U.S. Constitution, “initiated the process of expanding access to higher education for students of color” (Kinzie, 2005, p.40). Changes in federal policy, as well as attitudes and expectations of the public, further induced the dramatic restructuring of access in higher education. Subsequently, legislature such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964
and the Higher Education Act of 1965 were passed. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited institutions from discriminating based on race, color, or national origin from receiving federal assistance. The Higher Education Act of 1965, designed to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities, supported students, financially, in postsecondary and higher education (Brock, 2010). The Act increased federal money given to universities, created scholarships, and provided low-interest loans for students (Brock, 2010). Arguably one of the most important changes from a federal perspective during this time; the Act extended need-based financial assistance to the general population for the first time (Brock, 2010). These acts of legislature dramatically changed the landscape of higher education opportunities for Black Americans and set the stage for diversifying college campuses across the country.

The presence of African Americans in higher education has received increasing attention throughout past decades (Hedegard & Brown, 1969; Epps, 1972; Fleming, 1984; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Allen, 1992; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), exposing the challenges and opportunities inherent with this population. Presently, only 17 percent of all Black college students attend HBCUs (Kim & Conrad, 2006). With an increasing college enrollment of Blacks at PWIs, questions of whether these institutions are still needed (Kim, 2002) or whether there is a difference in academic achievement between Black students who attended PWIs and those attended HBCUs persist (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977). Despite historical contributions of HBCUs and their provision of most college opportunities for Black students, court rulings (i.e. United States v. Fordic) and desegregating legislature have led to a questioning of the value of Black colleges.
The merits of both Black and White intuitions, as well as the imputed differences of Black students’ development at each institution (Allen, 1992) have been the focal point of many discussions throughout society. The superiority of resources made available to Black students at PWIs is evident in areas such as quantity and quality of the library holdings, facilities, number of faculty with PhDs, and the size of the endowment or state appropriation. Blacks enrolled in PWIs are traditionally more affluent than Blacks in HBCUs (Allen, 1992), and have higher standardized test scores and high school GPAs than their counterparts at Black institutions (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Nettles & Thoeny, 1988). It is assumed that Black colleges do not provide educational programs which result in academic achievement equivalent to that attained at White institutions because of the many resources that PWIs possess (Jencks & Riesman, 1968). The problems of Black colleges presumably stems from institutional poverty, which affects student achievement and ultimately Black enrollment in graduate school (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971).

However, in light of this purported advancement in resources Black students do experience considerable adjustment difficulties when attending PWIs (Allen, 1992). Some of their adjustment concerns are common to all college students, while others are unique to Black students (Allen, 1986; Thomas, 1984). African Americans attending PWIs experience lower grade point averages, lower persistence to graduation, and higher attrition rates than do majority students (Nettles, 2006; Allen, 1992). Such characteristics of African Americans’ attendance to PWIs have been attributed to feelings of alienation, isolation, hopelessness, poor academic preparation, social and academic engagement,
marginality, and limited campus role models at PWIs (Beasley & Sease, 1974; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006). Differences in level of engagement and learning gains for African Americans at PWIs is frequently cited as the “chilly climate” of the campus environment (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Sedlacek, 1999), inadequate provision of services and programs reflective of African American student interests (Davis, 1991), and feelings of being an unwelcomed guest.

In comparison with Black college students matriculating at PWIs, the literature suggests that Black students attending HBCUs have different experiences (Bennett, Cole, & Thompson, 2000). Black students attending HBCUs reportedly come from families with lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Kim, 2002), are likely to be unmarried and younger (Wenglinsky, 1997), and have poor opportunities for advanced study (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Thomas, 1981).

Proponents of Black colleges argue that African American students are significantly more engaged (Fleming, 1984) and develop and learn more from an HBCU rather than a PWI (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Flowers, 2002). HBCUs are credited for making-up what they lack in resources by providing a more collegial and supportive learning environment for students and faculty (Kim & Conrad, 2006). Studies comparing HBCUs and PWIs suggest that students at HBCUs have more positive perceptions of the fairness of academic performance and higher grades (Cokley, 2000); possess positive self-images, strong racial pride, and high aspirations (Gurin & Epps, 1975); have significantly more academic and social integrations with faculty (Flowers, 2002) have more favorable psychological adjustment (Fleming, 1984); and are more likely to persist.
in graduate studies and aspire to post-baccalaureate degrees (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wenglinsky, 1997). Roderick Paige, former U.S. Secretary of Education, states that “the situation [of Black students in higher education] would be much worse without our historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which continue to be extremely valuable, as can be evidenced by the fact that one fourth of Blacks in college attend HBCUs, and these institutions have produced some of our finest graduates and keenest minds” (Hammer, 2003, p.6).

As evidenced, institutional effectiveness of HBCUs and PWIs regarding Black students is conflicting. Kim and Conrad (2006) conducted a study examining the effects of HBCUs on the academic success of African American students and in turn, the contribution of institutional factors in HBCUs contributing success. The researchers found that, despite having fewer resources (e.g., faculty salaries, physical facilities, etc.) HBCUs are performing equal to PWIs in producing African American college graduates. In addition, Kim and Conrad (2006) noted that HBCU students are also less well prepared, academically than their counterparts at PWIs, thus making this finding even more striking.

Many scholars (e.g. Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2004) have noted that the growing importance of graduate education for positioning professionals in contemporary society. While enrollment rates for African Americans in college are increasing relative to their White peers, rates for Black students entering graduate school lag considerably and are 75 percent lower than for Whites (Astin, 1982; Benderson, 1988; Nettles, Millet, & Oh, 2006).
Minimum research has been conducted examining the experiences of HBCU graduates seeking postsecondary education at a PWI, and even less so for how Blacks make meaning of their graduate student experience. Earlier literature examining the experiences of Black graduate students have often focused on their academic capabilities, factors related to persistence, impact of faculty, and utilized quantitative methodology.

**Meaning Making**

In this study, I examined the experiences and meanings attributed to the educational process among Black graduate students attending a predominately White Research University. In order to explore the way the participants make meaning of their experiences, Kegan’s (1982) and Baxter Magolda’s (2009) theoretical framework of meaning making were utilized. The concept of meaning making is presented within the holistic constructivist framework and integrates cognitive, *intrapersonal* (self-concept), and *interpersonal* (relationship) domains of development as part of a single mental activity rather than separate entities, and the progression of each domain from simple to complex (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2001). This allowed me to take into consideration the experience of the whole student rather than parts of student’s developmental process (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Kegan’s constructivist- developmental model focuses on the person as an “ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself a new form” (Kegan, 1982, p. 8); seeking “an exploration of just how much can be understood about a person by understanding his or her meaning system” (Kegan, 1982, p. vii). There are 5 orders of consciousness in Kegan’s theory that represent intricate “meaning-making structures” (Kegan, 1994; as
cited in Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). These structures are essentially a set of assumptions about what comprises the self and what is identified as other. These assumptions then shape how individuals manage their life experiences (Kegan, 1994; as cited in Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The first and fifth orders are not applicable to college students. According to Kegan (1994), children transition from the first to the second order between the ages of five and ten, long before college. On the other end of the spectrum, Kegan (1994) indicates that “it is rare to see people moving beyond the fourth order, but when they do, it is never before their forties” (p. 352).

In her study of students and graduates from Miami University, Baxter Magolda (2001) found Kegan’s third order of consciousness to be a common meaning-making structure for college students. In this order the self is identified in concrete relationships, and one’s own interests are subordinated (Kegan, 1994). Because of the immersion of self in relationships, the individual does not have a means for negotiating among conflicting relationships (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007). As students navigate this order, Baxter Magolda (1999) suggests that they are guided by formulas they received through their upbringings and their social milieu.

The fourth order, or foundational meaning making, is characterized by self-authorship. This order involves an ability “to subordinate, regulate, and indeed create (rather than be created by) our values and ideals—the ability to take values and ideals as the object rather than the subject of our knowing” (Kegan, 1994, p. 91). Self-authorship allows for authority over identity through “an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external
influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity” (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 12). Baxter Magolda (1999) asserts that fewer college students make meaning at the fourth order.

In the transition from third to fourth order, or formulaic to foundational meaning making, students are identified as being at a crossroad where their developing internal voices “came into conflict with external influences in which they reflected back on the external definition and found it troublesome” (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p.38). In essence, such a transition entails attaining self-authorship: the ability to “write” one’s own life (Baxter Magolda, 2009).

Certain complexities in life need to be explored in-vivo in order to fully understand the nature of the unfolding phenomena. Constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge is filtered and generated through individual lenses as the person attempts to make meaning of one’s experiences and in light of the constellation of one’s relationships, cultural setting, and identities (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). Accordingly, this study aims at examining the complexities of how Black HBCU graduates make meaning of their post-baccalaureate experiences at a PWRU, and perceived challenges and benefits of HBCU attendance in association with their experience and success as graduate students.

**African Americans Pursuit of Graduate and Professional Education**

Much of the literature examining the experiences of African American graduate students didn’t experience growth until the 1980s. However, one of the earliest studies noted examined the graduate school success of Black students from both White and a
Black college was conducted in 1977. Researchers Anderson and Hrabowski (1977) concluded that Black graduate students who attended PWIs and HBCUs as undergraduates were equally successful in masters and doctoral programs at a major research-oriented university. There were no significant mean differences in GPAs or retention rates for either group of graduate students (1977).

It was during the 1980s that researchers such as Allen (1988), Fleming (1984), Nettles & Thoeny (1988), and Blackwell (1987) began to introduce questions about the experiences of Black graduate students at PWIs; as well as differentiate between the experiences of male and female students. HBCUs were found to contribute substantially to the nation’s development of Black doctorates (Brazziel, 1988).

In addition to the investigation of graduate students of color, the 1990s brought an increase of studies investigating graduate student socialization (Turner & Thompson, 1993; Ellis, 2001). Nettles (1990), found that Black and Hispanic doctoral students perceived more feelings of discrimination than do White doctoral students, and that Blacks who came from the poorest socioeconomic backgrounds, also received the fewest teaching or research assistantships...Subsequently, factors weighed in deciding which graduate school to attend among African Americans were found to be rated higher for financial aid availability and program of study, and less for racial make-up of area and social life on and off campus (Nettles, 1990).

As the body of literature continues to grow, studies are expanding upon past literature to incorporate student background characteristics, varying types of support, campus environment, academic as well as social integration, and the presence of African
American graduate students at research institutions (Ellis, 2001). As previously indicated, fewer African American are receiving advanced degrees and even less from top universities within the nation. In examining the matriculation of Black Ph.D. students attending a PWRU researchers Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, and Smith (2004) found that this population often experienced feelings of isolation and felt they stood out. A common perception among the participants was that faculty and the community did not understand them or their needs and they were keenly aware of being “different” on campus. Learning to negotiate the system, student establishment of their own informal peer networks and mentors/allies were all key components to their success (2004). In spite of the continuous challenges Black graduate students encounter when attending PWIs, they carry a culturally grounded notion of a commitment to be undaunted and to persist (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2004).

Student Development

Little scholarship of development addresses the experiences of Black graduate students. Many of the current models do not adequately explore the growth and changes that occur for Black graduate students during their post-adolescent years (Hughes, 1987). Without models, it becomes difficult for professionals within the academy to appropriately address the needs of a diverse student body; thus, necessitating the inclusion of college student development theories.

Student development, as defined by Rogers (1990), is the way a student grows, progresses, and increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of the individual’s enrollment in an institution of higher education. Student developmental
theories are philosophical approaches that help to guide professionals within the field (Evans et al., 1998). Through the use of student development theories, student affairs professionals are better able to address and understand the complex needs of students within postsecondary institutions, develop programs, and become more proactive on campus (Evans et al., 1998). Factors that are or are not within the campus environment (i.e. challenge and support, marginality and mattering, etc.) have significant impacts on the development of students.

Evans et al. (1998) note that psychosocial development involves addressing life tasks related to self-definition, relationships with others, and life planning. Development occurs throughout entirety of one’s life through tasks that are often age-related, and sequential. Erickson (1980) noted that different stages in life present developmentally-related questions that need to be addressed in order for the individual to achieve success. While Erikson established the foundation for psychosocial theories, others built upon his ideas of development of sub-populations based on matters such as sexual orientation, race, and gender.

In Chickering’s (1969) examination of identity development, he proposed seven vectors that contribute to the formation of one’s self. He uses the term vectors as an indication that his identified aspects of development are not sequential; they interact with one another, and it is not uncommon for a student to have to revisit a previously addressed vector (Chickering & Reisser, 1995). The first vector of his theory is developing competence. It is during this vector that an individual develops the confidence to cope with concerns and achieve goals. During the second vector- managing emotions-
a student is able to recognize and accept emotions and develops an ability to control those emotions. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence, notes a student’s ability to move from the need of confirmation from others through affection. The fifth vector is a student’s ability to develop healthy relationships. Relationships with others help students’ form a sense of self. It is during this vector that the individual is able to accept and respect other’s for whom they are (Evans et al., 1998). The vector of establishing identity is formulated off the development of the other vectors. The last two vectors identified by Chickering, are developing purpose and developing integrity. When a student develops purpose, they are better able to identify what they want and establish goals accordingly. The development of integrity embodies the development of a moral compass, which impact the decisions a student makes and the steps they take.

Both traditional and nontraditional aged college students face challenges that can have short- and long-term effects on their lives (Evans et al., 1998). Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman’s (1995) theory of transition highlights context specific factors, being mindful of the unique features of the individual and the environment, which have a bearing on the degree of challenge and support inherent in the transition’s dynamic. The negative receptivity of PWIs can produce negative consequences for African American students in attendance. Researchers suggest that students matriculating at HBCUs are at reduced risk for psychological dysfunctions (i.e. depression, hopelessness) and psychological stressors (i.e. feelings of alienation, perceived experiences of racism) than those at PWIs because they are better supported and experience an environment where-in a strong cultural heritage is instilled (Nottingham, Rosen, & Parks, 1992).
Transitions, as defined by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), are events or nonevents resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, or roles. Multiple dimensions of a transition (i.e., type, context, and impact) must be fully comprehensible before a person is able to understand the associated meaning (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Reacting consistently, the transition process consists of a series of phases of “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.” Four sets of factors (or the four S’s) are identified as influencing a person’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Willie (2003), states that racial identity, like sexual identity or gender identity, is only one aspect of one’s relationship to the world. Student development theories may be utilized to assist the facilitation of one’s perception or understanding of his or her relationship to the world within a college environment. Schlossberg’s theory as well as other theories previously mentioned, have greatly enhanced the body of literature as it pertains to student development in college; however, they are often critiqued for their lack of applicability to diverse student populations, such as students of color.

**Racial Identity**

Recently, identity development has received growing attention in the literature as it pertains to Black college students (Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; Parham & Helms, 1985). There are particular challenges for Black students matriculating in PWIs, including issues such as racial discrimination, lack of academic support, and social isolation (Spaights, Kenner, & Dixon, 1986). Racial identity research on African American students attending PWIs highlights the reality that a lack of connectedness to
African American culture undermines African American students’ academic and social development (Taub & McEwen, 1992). Chavous (2000) asserted that the meaning and importance of race were related to their participation in activities that provided affirmation to their ethnic groups and identities.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s scholars began to examine the concept of psychological Nigrescence (Evans et al., 1998), a “re-socializing experience” (Cross, 1995, p. 97). Cross’s Theory of Nigrescence (1971, 1991, & 1995) addresses the development of becoming Black as a process of four sequential stages. In accordance to Cross (1991), it is psychologically unhealthy for a Black person to over identify with that of the dominant culture. Cross’s theory asserts that an individual moves from non-Afrocentrisim, to Afrocentrisim, and ends with Multiculturalism. Initially five phases, Cross (1991) amended his theory for a better depiction of African American development. The first stage, pre-encounter, is categorized into three clusters: assimilation, self-hate, and mis-education. During this stage, an individual is perceived to be unaware of his or her racial identity and development is viewed to be unimportant.

The encounter stage emerges after the occurrence of a triggering event. An individual becomes aware of the difference between his or her racial identity and that of the dominant culture. Feelings of anger, shame, guilt, and anxiety may emerge during this stage (Evans et al., 1998). The third stage is categorized into two clusters: immersion and emersion. It is during this phase that an individual may begin to immerse themselves in all things Black or Black associated. For instance, a person might become more actively involved in Black organizations or enroll in Black studies courses. An individual also
begins to increase his or her awareness and appreciation of other diverse ethnic and racial minorities (Cross, 1971, 1991, &1995). The last stage, internalization, embodies an individual’s journey from personal cultural development, biculturalism, and ends in the stage of multiculturalism (Cross, 1995). An individual has not only become knowledgeable of his cultural identity, but the cultural identity of other minorities as well.

Helms (1990) sought to enhance Cross’s model by using the same names but suggesting that racial identity is more accurately conceptualized as “statuses” rather than developmental stages. The dominant level of racial identity acts as a cognitive lens with its own collection of feelings, behaviors, and attitudes, which influences how they view themselves. The Helm’s model only consists of four statuses: are Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Integration (1990).

Ethnic identity, in contrast to racial identity, may be defined as identification with “a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (Yinger, 1976, p. 200). Phinney’s (1990) model of ethnic identity development maintains that the issue of ethnic identity is important to the development of a positive self-concept for minority adolescents. The construct of ethnic identity focuses on what people learn about their culture from family and community (Torres, 1996). Phinney’s model embodies three distinct stages: diffusion-foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement (1990). Through such a development, minority adolescents who are able to
distinctly explore their identity and resolve the inherent conflicts can develop an achieved identity (Phinney, 1990).

Researchers have often criticized Black identity theories for not being specific, dated, or expressed concerns that individuals often attempt to over generalize their applicability to other racial and ethnic minorities (Evans et al., 1998). However, in their absence, professionals are left with nothing to build a foundation. Studies, such as Sedlacek’s (1999) exploration of what Black students need to succeed at PWIs, provides professionals with a base of information in which they should build from. Utilization of Black identity theories allows members of the academy to gain a better understanding of minority students. However, use of caution is urged when applying theories in an effort to not over generalize such theories as the basis for all Black student development or rely solely on what is written to adequately address the needs of students (White or minority).

The concept of racial identity development in recent decades has received growing attention in the literature as it pertains to Black college students (Carter, DeSole, Sicalides, Glass, & Tyler, 1997; Gilbert, So, Russell, & Wessel, 2006; Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; Parham & Helms, 1985). For Black students matriculating in PWIs, the experience of being a minority presents challenges to the development of a positive Black racial identity such as racial discrimination, lack of academic support, and social isolation (Spaights, Kenner, & Dixon, 1986). Racial identity research on African American students attending PWIs asserts that mainstream views or lack of connectedness to African American culture is detrimental to African American students academic and social development (Taub & McEwen, 1992); others argue that African
American social and academic success at PWIs is related to lack of connectedness to African American culture (Hughes, 1987). Chavous (2000) found that both race’s meaning and salience corresponded to students’ experience of comfort in expressing their identity. Higher levels of comfort led to greater levels of participation in ethnic group affirming activities.

Recognizing the impact and value of racial identity is of significant importance for understanding African American students. Such an understanding may warrant even more recognition for Black graduate students attending predominately White schools where a racially insensitive or possibly hostile college environment can be psychologically distressing to students (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984). Graduate study in itself presents considerable challenges and pressures for all students. The additional experience of isolation and biases based on race for African American graduate students attending PWIs could interfere with their abilities to reach their full potential (Bagley & Copeland, 1994). In the presence of such consequences, students may begin to cast doubt on their ability and question their own identity. In addition, possible conflict between assimilation and pride may emerge.

**Race Performance**

In Sarah Susannah Willie’s (2003) book, *Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race*, she examined the experiences of African American alumni from both a historically Black University and a predominately White University enrolled between the late 1960s through the late 1980s. Willie uses this study of African American’s experiences in higher education to explore the challenges of constructing a
flexible racial identity, and the performance of such malleability so that one may better interweave themselves within infrastructure of the academy. In the participants’ depiction of race and identity, Willie (2003) asserts that:

In their memories of college and their present lives, Black alumni described the ways they consciously acted White in certain settings and acted Black in others. Although they saw themselves as Black, that did not mean they understood Blackness as something simple or simplistic. The people with whom I spoke treated race as sets of behaviors that they could choose to act out, as expectations they had of themselves and others, as physical difference, and as ethnicity and subculture. Consciously negotiating their identities, even when there was sometimes very little room to do so, the men and women in this study described performing (p.5).

Not to be misconstrued as being inauthentic nor deceptive (Goffman, 1959), the concept of performance extends dimensionality. Racial identity becomes another site of human agency, a characteristic or fact that individuals can and often do manipulate (Willie, 2003). Through White dominance in American society, Willie asserts that Whites have understood themselves to be the norm and implied that being anything other than White and yet having good values must indicate an imitation of Whiteness (2003). For minorities in America who have become materially and occupationally successful, is it assumed and perpetuated throughout society that they are acting White. Consequently, people of color are thus subjected to epithets such as Oreos, bananas, apples, etc. and are stereotyped as sellouts and wannabes. For Black college students, the subjection to
negative stereotypes regarding their intellectual ability may lead to a downward spiral in their academic success.

**Stereotype Threat**

Psychologist Claude Steele argues that the educational experiences of African Americans are uniquely affected by what he terms stereotype threat (1999); that is, a social psychological challenge emanating from the depiction of African Americans as intellectually inferior (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002.) Steele ascertained that by manipulating stereotypes of academic abilities, racial and gender differences on standardized tests were substantially reduced (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Stereotype threat, or the threat of being viewed through a disparaging stereotype, is common, and contributes to performance pressure on African American people (Steele, 1999). Indeed negative stereotypes exist in all identity categories, from nationality, gender, race, religion, age, etc. Stereotype threat presents an additional obstacle for African Americans who are highly identified with school

According to Steele (1997)

It is the psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype (p.614).
This fear for many Black students is often exhibited in situations involving testing, public speaking, or a token status, where apprehensions about being stereotyped can cause anxiety and self-consciousness (Taylor, & Antony, 2000).

Stereotype threat primarily undermines academic achievement in two ways: impairment of performance through induced anxiety and through disidentification (Steele, 1999). Disidentification is the psychological disengagement from achievement hypothesized to help students cope with stereotype threat and underperformance in a given domain (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2001). Each response could seriously impair students’ performance in college. The situational pressure of stereotype threat affects a specific sub-portion of the stereotyped group- the capable, bright, and confident students who are recognized as having significant prospects in the domain (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Taylor & Antony, 2000).

Their high degree of self-identification with this domain creates added internal pressure to be perceived in a positive light and to be successful. Thus, stereotype threat has the greatest effect on students who represent the academic vanguard of their group….making them vulnerable to being judged by racial stereotyping (Taylor & Antony, 2000)

A person’s level of risk by the prospect of being stereotyped is reduced for individuals who do not care about or are disinterested in the domain.

Taylor and Antony (2000) found that for African American doctoral students attending six different predominately White Carnegie- 1 research universities, their experiences of negative stereotyping was universal. Ways in which students experienced
stereotype threat included tokenism, marginalization, and labeling in a variety of situations (i.e. campus life, classrooms, faculty interactions, and curricular content) (Antony & Taylor, 2001). Students reported being reminded of the negative connotations of their group in a myriad of subtle and unsubtle ways; they expressed feelings of being viewed suspiciously that their presence was because of race, not credentials (Antony & Taylor, 2001). Despite the presence of some faculty perceived as obstructive, many students identified White faculty who were professional and helpful; 92 percent enjoyed a positive relationship with their advisor (Antony & Taylor, 2001).

In addition to the presence of stereotypes, African American students have also expressed experiences of marginality or double consciousness. All students are susceptible to feelings of marginality, but African American students, nontraditional students, and adult learners appear to be more susceptible (Cooper, 1998). As role transitions occur, feelings of isolation and discomfort may emerge- the root of marginality (Cooper, 1998). As the distance and discomfort grows between an individual’s old and new role, the more marginal he or she may feel (Cooper, 1998).

Though contextually different, alumni of each institution in Willie’s (2003) study expressed feelings of marginality and dual existence. For Black students attending Northwestern University, they were marginal to the greater campus community. In addition, there was evidence of marginal existence for Black students not embraced in the “fictive kinship” collectively established among the Black community on campus (2003). Many of the alumni used words such as kin and family to describe the cohesiveness of the Black campus community (2003). Such ties are not based on blood or marriage; they are
significantly constructed bonds among those who share racial traits and/or experiences. The term conveys the idea of brotherhood and sisterhood (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In the existence of two separate communities on one campus, African Americas who moved outside the realm of the Black community were deemed as “sellouts” or “Oreo” (p.51).

All college-educated African Americans experience what Hughes (1984) identifies as a status dilemma or a contradiction of status. According to Hughes, the more an individual acquires those elements of American culture which bring to others the higher rewards of success, the greater is the dilemma” (1984, p. 221). In accordance to Hughes, the American Negro and the American woman are marginal persons in spheres of prestige or power (Willie, 2003).

Marginality has often been a factor in a vast number of situations- including migration- and dual existence has been a common theme (Cooper, 1998). Robert Parks (1928) explored the human phenomenon of migration and noted the emergence of the “marginal man” as a consequence of migration (p. 881). The “marginal man” is an individual who finds himself striving to live in two diverse cultural groups (Parks, 1928 p. 882). This occurs when individuals migrate from one place to another and struggles to maintain their own culture or take on the culture of another group (1928). This struggle often leads to dual consciousness or existence. Cooper compares the existence of Black in the U.S. as individuals existing on the margins of two cultures (1998). DuBois mirrored this perspective in his assumption of Blacks within American society:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others……One ever feels his twoness,—an
American, a Negro; two souls, two thought, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body....The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing....to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world (DuBois, 1903, 1989, p. 3).

Lyubansky and Eidelson (2005) assert that DuBois’ depiction of double consciousness illustrates how alienation and disenfranchisement merged one seemingly inescapable identity with another identity appearing to be unattainable. Dubois explains that African Americans must look not only through their eyes, but through the eyes of the majority as well, if they want to survive within the majority-dominated society (1989).

For Black graduate students negotiating their environment within higher education, a dual existence emerges both inside and outside of the walls of the academy. Such an existence begets an ability to change ones dialect, terminology, and behavior to move within both worlds. A consistent interplay within both worlds; an individual becomes culturally versed in both and possibly stigmatized by all.

What does a person call an individual who is culturally versed to successfully negotiate interplay with both worlds? Dual Deviants is the terminology used by Conyers (2003) to describe the balancing act of Black graduate students. Schur’s (1971) concept of deviance as it pertains to human behavior is “to the extent that it comes to be viewed
as involving a personally discreditable departure from a group’s normative expectations, and elicits interpersonal or collective reactions that serve to isolate, treat, correct, or punish individuals engaged in such behavior” (p.24). Becker’s (1963) observation of deviant behavior asserts that “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (p.9).

McWhorter (2001) presents the common perception of Blacks as being anti-intellectual and the belief that scholastic success and applying oneself academically is seen as “acting White.” Academic success of Blacks may be undermined by accusations and the fear of “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Thus, Conyers (2003) asserts that being an educated Black can be seen as deviant in the Black culture. The population of Black graduate students may be stigmatized because of their race in educational institutions and because of their education in Black communities, subsequently becoming dual deviants.

In the investigation of the life of Black graduate students as they manage dual deviant identities- one in the Black community and the other in the academic world- strategies to manage their identities emerged: 1. passing and covering via language manipulation; 2. fronting via professionalism and realism; and 3. own and wise via a Black nice and membership (Conyers, 2003). The concept of passing was most prevalent for Blacks when enclosed in their ethnic communities. Their educational level was perceived as a discreditable attribute, but associated signs with the stigma were concealed by not “talking White.” Dis-identifiers used when in the Black community embodied the
use of contemporary ethnic slang. In the academic setting covering was implemented to
downplay stigmas associated with their racial group. Participants reported talking more
educated and showing their scholarly peers they also possess the knowledge to be
successful in their respected areas.

The aspect of fronting was evident by students accounting of professionalism
being a key component of how they presented themselves in their department. The
presentation of self was seen as an important factor in the reduction of stigma attached to
their race. The use of fronting in their home community is seen as “keeping it real” - a
mechanism designed to earn the respect of their ethnic peers in their community
(Conyers, 2003). It’s a strategy used by the students to validate their ethnic authenticity
within their community. Lastly, the theme of “own” and “wise”, reflective of Goffman’s
(1963) terminology, were the Black niche (the own) and mentors (the wise). As found in
Willies exploration of African American students in higher education, the niche is made
up of fictive kinship (group of members with similar traits who are available for support
and encouragement).

**Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology Model**

As a framework for research and theorizing about developmental environments,
Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the
progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and
the changing of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as
the process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p.21)

Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) model proffers that human development occurs through a complex interaction of the human being and the persons, objects and symbols in their immediate environment. Bronfenbrenner maintains that, in addition to the environment shaping the individual, the individual also shapes the environment (Renn, 2004).

Differing from other models, the ecology model (1) posits the individual as a “growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides” (p.21); (2) “the interaction between person and environment is viewed as two-directional”, characterized by mutual accommodation and reciprocity (p.22); (3) and the environment is not limited to the immediate setting containing the growing individual, but includes “interconnections between such settings, as well as to external influences emanating from the larger surroundings” (p.22). (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) model has four key components—person, process, context, and time (PPCT). Person refers to the individual, their present state of development, and characteristics that navigate his or her engagement in certain ways within particular environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Within the university setting this is characterized as features, academic impressions, and socially constructed identities or ideals unique to that particular student (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Renn, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner proposed that “the attributes of the person most likely to shape the course of development, for better or for worse, are those that induce or inhibit dynamic
dispositions toward the immediate environment” (1993, p. 11). The attributes, defined as “developmentally instigative characteristics” are suggestive in explaining the causality within development but not the path of said development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Bronfenbrenner proposed that there are varying forces and resources within the ecological system that impact and structure the course of a person’s development (1994). Similarly, Stanford's (1960) challenge and support approach to college student development identifies environmental balance of forces (challenges) and resources (support) in the developmental *process* (Renn, 2003).

*Context* places a person at the center of their environment with developmental influences disseminated around them in a structural system that is both proximal and distal (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; as cited in Renn & Arnold, 2003). The micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. Microsystems are defined as a collective of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the individual in a given face-to-face setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Microsystems within a university setting may include associated groups and organizations, classes, athletic teams, on- and off campus jobs, relationships, family, and housing (Renn, 2003).

Mesosystems encompass interactions amongst two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For college students, mesosystems include family, peer, and academic life (Renn, 2003). Each system has an effect on student development; they may reinforce one another or act against one another. For students, specifically minority students, embodying a form of duality in their existence, this may be heightened.

Exosytems, primarily unaccounted for in student development research, exist
when there is a setting not containing the individual, yet has influence on his or her
development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Renn (2004) identifies adult learners or individuals
residing off campus to include financial aid policies, parent's marital status, spouse
income, or daycare as an example. Through utilization of Bronfenbrenner's model, the
researcher explores these processes to seek what developmental influence they have on
the student.

*Time* is represented in Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem but is often omitted as a
component of the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This system takes into account matters
such as events that occur in the particular socio-historic time (e.g., the occurrence of
9/11), both during and prior to college. Renn and Arnold (2003) also note the
complexities of different engagement levels of students with their respective campuses.
For instance, students who live and work on campus may have very different micro-
systems than those who live and work off of campus—especially adult students, for
example.”
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was designed to gain a better understanding of HBCU graduates post-baccalaureate experiences at a PWRU. Students’ transition and perception of integration within the university were examined. Specifically, this study is meant to increase understanding of how students who attend the selected PRWU make meaning of their experiences. Findings from this study are intended to inform administrators at the institution and may provide information that could be of interest to policy makers. The study also gives voice to the participants. This chapter discusses the method used in this research to include design of the study, population and sample selection, data collection, and ethical protocol. This chapter concludes with review of the data analysis process.

I selected a single institution for the study to seek understanding of how participants at this institution interpret their experiences and what meaning they attribute to these experiences. Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study because, when working on one campus with a limited number of people, it is best to study their perceptions in-depth. In addition, there has been debate over the efficacy of traditional quantitative assessment methods when measuring issues related to nontraditional groups (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999), questioning its use to discredit the intelligence of people of color and create culturally bias tests (Gould, 1996). Thus, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University?
2. How does this population make meaning of these experiences?
Qualitative Research

Largely an investigative process, the intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction (Creswell, 1994). It entails descriptions of experiences and emphasizes the voice, experience, and culture of the participants (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). As explained by Creswell (1998), qualitative research is, “…an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Such an understanding is not an attempted predication of what may occur futuristically; more correctly it is an attempt to understand the nature of that setting, participants meaning of the setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, and what their worldview is in that particular setting (Patton, 1985). According to Ragin (1994), “Researchers use qualitative methods when they believe that the best way to construct proper representation is through in-depth study of phenomena. Often they address phenomena that they believe have been seriously misrepresented, sometimes by social researchers using other approaches, or perhaps not represented at all” (p. 102).

Creswell (1994) notes that there are essentially different characteristics in the design of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Each paradigm has its strengths and is utilized to address varying questions and purposes. Following an epistemological assumption, the relationship of the researcher to that being researched, the quantitative approach holds that the researcher should remain distant and independent of that being
researched (Creswell, 1994). Quantitative researchers attempt to control for bias, select a systemic sample, and be “objective” in assessing a situation (Creswell, 1994).

Alternatively, the qualitative approach encourages researcher interaction with that being studied, whether this interaction manifests in the form of some level of observation or actual collaboration (Creswell, 1994). Although some scholars may articulate that this interaction takes away from objectivity, the quality of qualitative research “lies in the power of its language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something about ourselves and our common humanity” (Buchanan, 1992; as cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 289). The nature of qualitative methodology makes no attempt to fit people’s experiences into predetermined standardized categories as typical tests or questionnaires do (Kuhns & Martorana, 1982). I believe that a qualitative approach using the lens of phenomenology enhances insight and understanding in regards to the lived experiences of Black HBCU graduates presently attending or have recently completed attendance at a PWRR.

**Phenomenology**

Patton (2002) notes the different dimensions of the term phenomenology. It can be a philosophy, a paradigm of inquiry or a research method. I am interpreting it as a way of exploring how human beings make sense of their experience. I believe that individual sense making is shaped by a host of factors, including culture and individual identity. According to the phenomenological paradigm, shared experiences relate to essence or essences (Creswell, 1998). Van Manen (1990) notes that essences are core meanings evolving from shared experiences. In this case, the participants shared an experience of
transitioning from an HBCU undergraduate experience to a PWI graduate experience. In this study, I attempted to ascertain the essence of this shared experience. Interviewing the participants, the primary method of data collection, was essential to obtaining the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of their experience (Merriam, 2009).

Groenewald (2004) notes that within this form of research, the researcher must “refrain from any pre-given framework and remain true to the facts” (p. 5). Thus, it was my aim throughout the data collection process to continuously encourage and express the importance of authenticity from the participants as they shared their lived experiences. The development of rapport permitted the participants to be transparent and comfortable with me as the researcher throughout the process. A phenomenological study ends with a “composite description that presents the 'essence of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure (or essence)” (Creswell, 2007, p.62). Through the use of phenomenology, it is my hope that the reader come away from this study with the feeling of, “I understand better what it is like for someone to have this experience” (Polkinghorne 1989, p. 46; as cited in Creswell, 1998, p.55).

**Description of the Researcher**

The researcher’s role in qualitative research serves as the primary data collection instrument and necessitates identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases (Creswell, 1994). I am an African American baccalaureate graduate of an HBCU, currently in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU. I am a product of the HBCU higher education system, as well as the higher education system of a PWRU. I believe that the researcher and one’s research are often intertwined. Who I am, as well as my
perception of HBCU graduates post-baccalaureate integrative experiences at a PWRU, is a result of my past experiences. Patton (2002) explains that within qualitative inquiry “the researcher is the instrument. As such, the credibility of qualitative methods hinges, to a great extent, on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork” (p.14). As the instrument, I had to be in sync with the presenting research as it unfolded while simultaneously bracketing any personal bias.

Researcher bias is a threat to the soundness of qualitative research (Maxwell, 1996) and essential to being accounted for in this study. As the researcher and instrument of analysis, the awareness of my status in this study was imperative to the development of my rapport with each of the participants and research process. Moustakas (1994), reports that phenomenology demands that a researcher transcend or suspend prior knowledge to recognize a phenomenon at a purer and deeper level. Husserl (1970) asserted that, we must exclude all empirical interpretations and existential affirmations, we must take what is inwardly experienced or otherwise inwardly intuited (e.g., in pure fancy) as pure experiences, as our exemplary basis for acts of Ideation…We thus achieve insights in pure phenomenology which is her oriented to real (reellen) constituents, whose descriptions are in every way “ideal” and free from…presupposition of real existence (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 84).

Epoche—“to be alert, to look with care, to see what is really there, and to stay away from everyday habits of knowing things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) was used in the achievement of depth in this research and bracketing bias. I sought to explore, through introspection, the prejudices, viewpoints and assumptions (Merriam, 2009) I held in
relationship to the studied phenomenon. This was important since I had preconceived notions about the experience—particularly as a person who shared the experience of attending an HBCU as an undergraduate and continuing my education in a PWI. My relevant assumptions are as follows:

1. There is a common essential experience linking graduates of HBCU’s in pursuit of advanced degrees at a PWRU.

2. Black graduate students attending a PWRU experience feelings of disconnect with their schools and programs. Such feelings of disconnect may negatively impact their social, cultural, and academic integration within the institution.

3. Attendance at an HBCU adequately prepares Black students academically for graduate study at a PWRU; however, students may face greater social challenges.

4. Students who attended HBCU’s have a greater sense of racial identity which positively impacts their level of self-confidence. Having a greater sense of racial identity and higher levels of self-confidence positively impacts Black students adjustment to the campus environment of a PWRU.

5. Black graduates of HBCU’s perceive higher levels of stereotyping in association with their HBCU attendance when pursuing post-baccalaureate education at a PWRU.

Objectivity embodies a researcher’s observation of what is happening around him/her without putting himself/her into the research, removing implication for bias. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective journal and utilized peer examination to bracket my observations, thoughts, and interpretations. I solicited
feedback from three peers throughout this research process. Each of the three peers had a background in counseling and/or higher education and were able to provide insight relative to this body of research. Each of the peer examiners were able to view copies of transcribed data, review my notes throughout the coding process and engage in in-depth discussion regarding my perceptions and findings. Peer examination assisted in my identification of threats to the study, personal biases and assumptions not otherwise noted, and potential flaws within the method (Creswell, 1998).

Reflective journaling is “a kind of diary in which the investigator on a daily basis, or as needed, records a variety of information about self and method” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). As the researcher, it was my intent through reflective journaling that all personal biases, assumptions, interests, and how they contribute to my interpretation and analysis of the data were recorded. Peer examination and reflective journaling equally contributed to my “establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). Additionally, I believe that my background and personal knowledge of HBCUs and PWRUs were advantageous to this research. Knowledge of the two environments is significant for credibility and trustworthiness of data. In an effort to reduce subjectivity before leaving the field, each of the participants were provided a first draft for validation.

**Research Site**

The selected site for this study was Ohio University (OU), a predominately White midsize research (high activity) institution with approximately 40,025 students (Ohio University, 2016). An estimated 5,736 graduate and professional students are in
attendance; 15.4 % of the overall student population identify as racial/or ethnic minority (e.g. African American, Asian American, Hawaii/Pacific Island, Hispanic, International, and American Indian/Alaskan Native) (Ohio University, 2016). Ohio University is a public 4-year institution in the Midwest, offering over 100 graduate and terminal degree programs. OU’s mission “holds as its central purpose the intellectual and personal development of its students” (www.ohio.edu). Inclusive of diversity and inclusion programs, the university provides an opportunity for students to engage academically and socially throughout their matriculation at OU.

Ohio University’s Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine is comparable to other medical programs throughout the US in that the students receive the same training in all areas as do allopathic physicians (M.D.’s) and both types of physicians complete residences after earning their degrees. A noted difference in osteopathic physicians (D.O.’s) preparations is the 200 hours of additional training they receive in a hands-on diagnosis and treatment approach called osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM). It is reported that OMM is used to reduce pain, increase mobility, and support the body’s natural functions and structure.

Ohio University’s Heritage College has 3 different campus locations in Ohio-Athens, Cleveland, and Dublin. The Athens campus is the main campus location for the medical college and the location that each of the medical student participants in this study attended. The college’s total enrollment (all 3 campuses) is 814, they offer five different degrees, has a 28% minority population, and 53% / 47% male/female percentage. The
College’s mission statement highlights an emphasis on “primary care, engages in focused research, and embraces both Appalachian and urban communities.”

**Gaining Entry**

In partial fulfillment of a course requirement during the 2009-2010 academic year at Ohio University, I conducted a research report exploring the academic preparation of three African American graduate students and HBCU alums at the selected institution. The richness and depth of their experiences exceeded my initial expectations of the research report. In interviewing the students, each indicated that a broader continuation of this study is essential for several reasons: dispelling select myths regarding the matriculation of HBCU graduates and experiences of students at each institution. This report revealed a need to give voice to such experiences; thus, the formation of my dissertation research began to take root.

After completion of the course assignment, my research interests began to spread among other Black students in attendance at OU who met similar criteria. I was approached by some of these students who expressed interest in sharing their stories if a need for additional information should arise. Many agreed to participate in a similar study in the future should I ever decide to do so and offered willingness to share additional contact information of other students at OU with comparable experiences.

**Selection of Participants**

Qualitative research entails purposeful selection of participants that will best answer the research question (Creswell, 1994). I employed criterion sampling—a form of purposive sampling in which the participants were chosen in an intentional manner to
provide information that could not have been acquired from other choices (Maxwell, 2005). Criterion sampling requires participants to be chosen based on their having experienced the phenomenon under investigation and ensures quality assurance (Creswell, 2007). Criteria used for this study was as follows:

1. Be enrolled (at least second year) or recently completed (within the last three years) graduate or professional degree students at the selected PWRU at the time of the interview.
2. Have attended an HBCU institution in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree for three or more years.
3. Be baccalaureate graduates of an HBCU.
4. Self-identify as Black or African American
5. Be able to participate in one 45-90 minute audio-taped interview.

The method of convenience sampling is availability sampling wherein the researcher relies on data collection from a particular group do to their convenience of availability (www.research-methodology.net). This study was a convenient sample because of my location.

With assistance from Ohio University’s Institutional Research department, I conducted a cross examination of student race, ranking, and baccalaureate institution. Search results indicated 124 self-identified Black/or African American students that were enrolled full-time at the institution’s main campus. Of the 124 students, 18 received bachelor degrees from Historically Black Colleges and/or Universities. After receiving
IRB approval for this study, the email information for each of the 17 students (excluding myself) was released to me from the identified university.

Emails were used as the initial form of contact with participants, serving to identify the purpose of the study and invite participation (Appendix A). Prospective participants interested in taking part in this research were prompted to contact me by responding to the email. Students were informed that all information would be recorded in separate files and stored by the researcher. Additionally, each prospective participant was informed of a provided pseudonym that would be recorded in their file ensuring confidentiality throughout the screening process. I received responses from 10 of the 17 students, each meeting the identified selection criteria and expressing interest in participating in the study. Each of the 10 students were then sent consent forms detailing salient information pertinent to the study (Appendix B). The consent form detailed the purpose, procedure, possible risks & benefits, confidentiality, withdrawal, and contact information. The interview guide was also included (Appendix C), detailing areas to be explored during the interview. All 10 identified students participated in this study.

**Data Collection**

In accordance to Creswell (1998), “data collection is a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 110). Interviewing was the primary data collection method used in this study.

**Interviewing**

Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue that learning about the world through qualitative interviews has not only extended our intellectual and emotional reach, it has roused and
satisfied our intellectual curiosity. Through the use of qualitative interviewing, we are
permitted to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often
looked at but seldom seen (Patton, 2002). Through utilization of in-depth interviewing,
designed for the purpose of improving knowledge (Wengraf, 2001), I was better able to
understand the experiences of the participants and the meaning they made of that
experience (Seidman, 1991). “Qualitative, in-depth interviews typically are much more
like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories” (Marshall
& Rossman, 2006).

The interviewing process involved a series of steps: identifying interviewees in
accordance to purposeful sampling, classifying what type of interview is practical and
will net the most useful information in answering the research questions, determining
place, obtaining consent (Appendix B), having questions at hand, and allowing time for
elaboration (Creswell, 1998). Interviewing permits us to enter into the other person’s
perspective; it begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful
(Patton, 2002). According to Seidman (1991), “if the researcher’s goal is to understand
the meaning people involved in education make of their experiences, then interviewing
people provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (as

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) assert that the competence and craftsmanship is
essential for the quality of knowledge when the researcher becomes the main research
instrument. As such, an anything goes approach would not be reliable. Fundamental
aspects of good interviewing in this study included establishing good rapport, asking the
right questions, active listening, structuring of pauses, observation of the participants’ body language and emotionality, and making connections (Creswell, 1999; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In addition to such fundamental aspects, as the key instrument, it was equally important that I remain cognitive of interactions which may solicit different responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Understanding my own personality, developing the ability to resist the urge to make strong statements of personal morality, and reciprocity were important aspects surrounding the developed conversational partnerships in this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

During this study I utilized Patton’s (2002) style of questioning. To start, background/ demographic questions such as age, education, and questions that identify characteristics of the interviewee as relevant to the research study were asked. Next, experience and behavior questions were asked as I sought to learn more about things the participant does or did (2002). Knowledge questions were used to elicit data about factual information about what the participants’ know (2002). Opinion and value questions were aimed at understanding a participant’s belief or opinion about an experience or issue (2002). Lastly, feeling questions were incorporated to elicit participants’ emotions towards their thoughts and experiences (2002).

Utilizing a semi-structured interview approach permitted a conversational-style interview that allowed flexibility and spontaneity during the data collection process (Patton, 2002). An interview questionnaire was developed containing 19 guiding questions. Probing questions relevant to participant responses were also asked.
Additionally, participant responses permitted additional questions illuminating the research topic and adding to the depth and richness of the study.

**Data Analysis**

Recognized as the most difficult part of qualitative research, data analysis is the process of making meaning (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis involves the consolidation, reduction, coding, and interpretation of what has been said, as well as what I as the researcher has seen and read (Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell (1998), the researcher is “involved in the data analysis process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p.142).

Merriam (2009) states that data analysis should occur simultaneously with data collection; without ongoing analysis the data can become unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Although various recommendations for analyzing data exist, this researcher utilized Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) seven phases for analytic procedures: (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretation through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understanding; (g) writing the report or other format for presenting the study (p. 156).

In accordance to Glesne and Peshkin (1999), the analysis process involves organizing the data to develop patterns, make meaning of the collected data, and linking together the stories told. For this study, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis by myself. This was a time intensive process that involved countless hours of listening, typing, editing, and re-editing to ensure accuracy of the
transcription. Interview time ranged from 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours long. One hour of tape took over three hours to transcribe. After transcription, over 100 pages had been compiled to be organized, coded and analyzed for this research. To ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data, member checking was employed.

Following transcription, immersion in the details and repetitive reading of the transcripts preceded coding and theme development. Categorizing, which is the act of coding (Taylor- Powell & Renner, 2003), involved extensive re-reading of the transcripts and identification and grouping of the data. Words, expressed emotions, and information relevant to the research objective were highlighted and collated during the coding process. Follow-up interviews of 3 randomly selected participants were conducted to confirm emergent themes. Similarities and differences were examined and compared, and summary and interpretation of the findings were inclusive in the analysis process. Lastly, a cross-case analysis was conducted, which is the mobilization of accumulated case knowledge/data subjected to comparison and contrast for the purpose of producing new knowledge (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). The technique of peer review was used to ensure objectivity and contributed to additional reflection of process and content in this study (Tuckett, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates an example of how codes were merged into themes.
Trustworthiness

Solidifying distinction, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed alternative terminology to be used in qualitative research. In addressing trustworthiness, the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the language of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Trustworthiness, in a phenomenological study, may be demonstrated by thorough and authentic data collection and rigorous analysis (Merriam, 2009). A variety of strategies including member checking, peer review, triangulation of theories, thick and rich description, and reflective journaling were used to establish rigor in this study.

Member checking, the most critical technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), entailed my soliciting of feedback from interviewees regarding emergent
findings. This assisted in “ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying….biases and misunderstanding of what[1] observed” (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, the use of peer review provided an external check for this research process (Creswell, 1998). During this study, a total of 4 individuals within academia reviewed and provided feedback on my research. These individuals provided alternative analysis, a fresh outlook, and challenged researcher assumptions. Member checking and the use of peer review each aided in the assurance of accuracy for the transcribed and analyzed data collected.

Triangulation may be best understood as a “combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical material, perspectives, and observers in a single study “(Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 8). Theory triangulation consists of using more than one theoretical lens in the interpretation of a phenomenon (Padgett, 1998). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model and Magolda’s theoretical framework were used for the purpose of triangulation in this study. Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecology model was used as a framework for understanding the person-environment interactions that influence and impact participant experiences. Baxter Magolda’s (1999) theoretical framework was used to understand how this sample of population makes meaning of their experiences.

The use of triangulation added rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to this research inquiry (Flick, 1998, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Thick and rich description allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through detailed description, readers were enabled to transfer information
to other settings and to determine whether their findings can be transferred (Creswell, 1998). Lastly, reflective journaling serves a number of purposes: a record of any decisions made throughout the study; an assurance of bracketing; outline of logistics and schedule for the study; and initial coding and early attempts of analysis. This contributes to my “establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327).

**Ethical Protocol**

Throughout the course of the research process, the ethical guidelines by the institution’s Institutional Review Board were followed to ensure maximum safety and minimal risk for participants. Each participant received a consent form detailing the following information: (a) purpose of the study; (b) data collection procedures; (c) participant right to refuse participation, withdraw from the study at any time, or to extract their words at any time without impunity; (d) strategies implemented to protect participant confidentiality; (e) indication statement of known risk to the study; (f) and expected benefits of the study.

Participant privacy and confidentiality were reinforced through use of pseudonyms. At the start of the interviews, the purpose of the study and the participant’s consent were reaffirmed. All tapes and transcripts were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office. Audiotapes were retained until the conclusion of this study; following conclusion, all tapes were destroyed. Each participant received a copy of the consent form and the originals remain on file with the researcher.
Summary

In accordance to Cohen, Manion, and Marrison (2000), “the purpose of the research determines the methodology and the design of the research” (p. 73). I used phenomenological methodology because I wanted to give a voice to the lived experiences of HBCU baccalaureate graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU and how they make meaning of these experiences. I interviewed 10 individuals who self-identified as Black or African American, are baccalaureate graduates of an HBCU, and who were currently enrolled at the selected PWRU. This chapter discussed the methods used to conduct this study as well as the guiding research question. Chapter IV will present findings from the study.
Chapter 4: Findings

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University. Experiences serve as a form of filtering through which students evaluate and make sense of information in and outside of the classroom (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). Student persistence to degree completion has been found to be greatly impacted by the level of integration into the college experience (Tinto, 1993). Researchers have alluded to HBCU attendance as a contributing factor to Black students success in graduate education (Allen, 1992). Therefore, the research questions for this study were:

1. What are the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU?

2. How does this population make meaning of these experiences?

In search of an inclusive understanding of Black HBCU graduate’s transition and perception of their integration within a PWRU, this chapter presents their story.

Ten graduate students in pursuit of an advanced degree at a PWRU give voice to their experiences and served as the primary source in answering the research questions. The chapter opens with a profile of the participants in an effort to provide context for the information provided. Emergent themes are then presented in distinct sections. Each story is diverse and unique to the student’s transitional experience and is the heart of this analysis. Participants were candid in their responses and thankful for an opportunity to share their story.
Participants

In this section, profiles of the ten participants are presented so that the reader may have some degree of familiarity. Pseudonyms are used and the name of the undergraduate institution in which the participants attended is not provided to ensure the confidentiality of the students who volunteered for this study. At the time of the interview, seven of the participants were pursuing medical degrees, one student was pursuing a master’s degree, one was in pursuit of a doctoral degree, and one was a recent graduate of a masters program. Nine of the participants self-identified as Black and/or African American and one as Nigerian American. Nine of the participants attended HBCUs in southern states that include South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina, and one student attended an HBCU in Maryland. Participants ranged between 22-32 years of age. The participants of the study were unmarried. Each of the participants were identified in a cross analysis consisting of class status, undergraduate university code, and race conducted by the institutions Office of Institutional Research. A summary of the student participant information is presented in Table 1.
Table 1. Student Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Academic Classification</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location of HBCU</th>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
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<td>Black American</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrienne</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>4th yr Medical Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
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<td>Kirsten</td>
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<td>5th yr Doctoral Student</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Black/African American</td>
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<td>Zoe</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Jacksonville, FL</td>
<td>Master’s Level Graduate</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

Zoe. Zoe is a Nigerian American second year medical student from Maryland. Prior to her attendance at an HBCU, her knowledge of the institutions was minimum and often garnered from her older brother’s experience who also attended an HBCU. It is because of her brother’s attendance that she selected to attend a historically Black college. Zoe began attending school in America as a child but relocated to Nigeria at the start of her junior year in high school. During her attendance at a Nigerian high school, she decided to take the SAT early as a form of practice. Her mother, who resided in Maryland at the time, aided her college application process by mailing materials to and from Zoe. As a stipulation of the standardized exam, test-takers must identify schools of his or her choice as recipients of their exam scores. Zoe had never studied for the SAT and was unfamiliar with various colleges in America. It is for that reason that she selected to have her test scores sent to a local community college, the HBCU her brother attended, as well as a few other local schools. Selecting these institutions was done as a formality and she did not anticipate feedback. Months following the exam Zoe received information from the selected HBCU that she had received a full scholarship from the institution. Her family was in full support of her decision to return to America and attend college. At that time, Zoe was sixteen years old.

Coming to America. Reflecting back on her undergraduate experience, Zoe expressed that attending an HBCU was beneficial to her during a time in her life where she was returning to America as an adolescent. As a child, she grew up in an all-African American community, attended an all-African American church, and then relocated to
Africa in a place full of Africans. At sixteen, Zoe was most familiar with cultures similar to her and felt it was best—culturally speaking—to remain in her comfort zone. Zoe stated:

I think for me, that is what I needed because I was so young. All I knew was Black and African culture and if I had departed from that at such a young age, I think I wouldn’t have done well. Socially, it would have taken a larger toll on me. It was good for me to stay in my comfort zone for that period of time.

Unfortunately, Zoe quickly learned that life in America was no longer how she remembered it as a child. She acknowledged feeling “out of the loop” amongst her peers when she returned. Having left America at the age of 10 and attended junior high and high school in Nigeria, many of the childhood friendships Zoe had once shared were no longer there. “I left America when I was ten and all of my friends from elementary school were no longer friends because we had spent so much time apart and had grown apart. I really didn’t know America so much anymore. “Zoë returned to America feeling a little naïve and out of the loop. As a sixteen year old first year college student thousands of miles away from home and feeling substantially out of place, Zoe began to focus her attention on academics.

**Standing on my own.** The institution of Zoe’s undergraduate study was described as being pretty typical for an HBCU in the sense of organization, administration, and social life. Academically, Zoe expressed that her undergraduate institution seemingly invested heavily in the development of future PhDs and less so on the professional and academic development of students interested in a career in medicine. Her undergraduate institution implemented visible programs that assisted with research opportunities,
internships, graduate school applications, and offered GRE test prep and financial assistance for graduate exams. Zoe expressed that this level of preparation was not made available by the university for students interested in medicine. “For medicine, we didn’t have that type of dedication. We had one pre-med advisor which was more of a formality. She didn’t really know anything, she couldn’t tell us about the MCAT.” As a biology major, Zoe stated that she had to “go at it alone” in preparation for admittance to medical school.

As a minor throughout much of her undergraduate attendance, Zoe’s social exposure to college life was limited. Zoe stated:

I really didn’t get into the social aspect; I never went to a single party. I was really young and I didn’t attend middle school or high school here. My roommates were my friends. I had one or two friends in the honors program and if you weren’t an honor student, then I didn’t know who you were.

Zoe described the environment of her undergraduate institution as a fashion show where students dressed up to go to the cafeteria, stating that she never “got it” socially and instead decided to place more emphasis on academics. With expressed disinterest in the social experience of college and the knowledge that she was on her own in preparation for medical school, Zoe committed undergraduate experiences to excelling academically. She completed her undergraduate degree in three years.

**Scholarly pursuits.** At age 19, Zoe felt ill prepared for medical school due to her lack of preparation and opted instead to pursue graduate programs in the field public health. Admittedly, if she had selected the PhD route she would have felt prepared and
assured in her admittance to a program prior to her undergraduate graduation. “I graduated at nineteen and I wasn’t ready. The university made sure everyone was in a graduate school before they left, good schools too. That was not the case for those interested in becoming MDs, we were left flailing.”

After the completion of her graduate degree in public health, Zoe took an additional two year break before applying to medical school. Admittedly, she expressed feeling that her lack of preparation at the undergraduate level hindered an immediate pursuit to medical school but she was happy with her degree in public health and with the route she had taken. Due to an interest in a more holistic approach and osteopathic preventative medicine, she elected to apply to all DO (Osteopathic Medicine) medical schools. Zoe’s decision to attend Ohio University was financially motivated as was her undergraduate school of choice; the university offered her the most in terms of scholarship.

Similarly to her undergraduate attendance, much of Zoe’s focus as a first year medical student had been on academics. Academically speaking, she expressed the significance of having room to grow and an allowance for individuals to make their experiences for however they may want them to be. “That may not be everyone’s opinion; some may have a more rigid view. OU’s medical program is very fluid, they tweak it every year based on the feedback and things get better as you go along.” Zoe added that by taking initiative, a student can make their experience whatever they want it to be and that’s something she likes.
As an experienced traveler, Zoe has lived in various places that include Maryland, rural Maryland, Washington DC, and a village and a city in Nigeria. She has settled into varying environments but nothing comparable to Appalachia. The Ohio culture is different from what Zoe is accustomed to and she is without any family. Zoe stated:

I’ve lived in a lot of different environments but never Appalachia and it’s interesting. Athens is a college town and it’s also in the boondocks. You feel lonelier, obviously and the culture is different, and none of my family is here. Not only am I African American but I’m also African and the culture is double different for me. You feel more alone here.

Zoe’s peer group has remained consistently small with not many friends at either institution. She clarified that in medical school she has no friends, only acquaintances and a good deal more accountability. Differing from undergrad where she lived in a residence hall, Zoe now lives in an apartment, has to pay bills, and recognizes a greater sense of responsibility. Zoe’s social engagement outside of the academic arena is limited however she does lead various academic related organizations and facilitates different activities within her program.

Taylor.

“If I set my heart on succeeding then I will succeed no matter the type of institution.”

Taylor is a recent master’s graduate of Ohio University from North Carolina. Growing up in a household consisting of six individuals, it was instilled in Taylor that in order to achieve in society you will have to pursue an education—not just education for
the sake of earning money but an education for obtaining knowledge. In describing her knowledge of HBCUs prior to her attendance, she reportedly received “poor” and demeaning information (i.e. party schools, granted degree not sufficient for obtaining employment after graduation) about the institutions from “outsiders who’ve never attended an HBCU.” Identifying her eldest sibling as an alum of an HBCU and a role model, Taylor believed their depiction of HBCUs to be stereotypical and not factual. Having these beliefs from outsiders pushed upon her served to only increase Taylor’s defense of HBCUs and her interest in attending a Black college. “I knew that the information these individuals were providing me were not factual. I think hearing these comments only pushed me more toward wanting to attend an HBCU because I knew those stereotypes were not true.” Additionally, Taylor felt that by attending the same HBCU of her eldest siblings, she would carry on a family tradition and allow herself to be around other academically driven students on campus that she could identify with. She said, “It is a historically Black University and I felt as though I could succeed socially and academically at an institution where I felt comfortable and that was accredited.”

Don’t believe the hype…or should you? Academically, Taylor stated feeling challenged at her undergraduate institution. Differing from some of her peers- that did not attend HBCUs- who were given assignments and their completion was viewed as negotiable as well as their attendance. It was Taylor’s experience that the academic culture of her HBCU was inclusive of accountability. She stated:

…unlike some of my friends who did not attend an HBCU who were given assignments and if they did do it that was fine and if they didn’t show up to class
that was fine also. At my undergraduate institution, you had to check-in and if a
deadline was given you had to meet it.

The academic rigor combined with university scholarly expectations crafted a
positive and affirming experience for Taylor. At times, the proper resources were not
available to the students but she expressed feeling this made her strive even harder to
ensure that she earned her degree. Taylor’s enthusiasm for her undergraduate institution
and HBCUs in general remained high throughout the interview. Socially, her
undergraduate experience was described in one word: Awesome! Taylor felt connected
and inclusive within her campus environment, stating that it “felt like home, as if I knew
everyone. “She routinely interacted with faculty, staff, and peers, and stated that she
“never had a negative encounter with anyone on campus” throughout her attendance.
Taylor added that her high level of social and cultural comfort positively impacted her
academic performance and sense of belonging. She stated:

Being in this comfortable family environment also made me do well
academically. The social and academic aspect went hand-in-hand. In class, if
asked a question, I didn’t have to feel intimidated. I could just raise my hand and
provide an intelligent answer.

In addition to providing a family oriented environment, Taylor identified her
undergraduate institution as being very diverse. The racial make-up of the institution as
with many other HBCUs is primarily Black; however, that is not where the diversity
ends, but where it begins. Moving beyond race, Taylor explained that diversity was
evident on her campus in varying ways, including ethnicity, origin, gender, sexual
orientation, community service and beliefs. She states that the institution was “very
diverse in every aspect that you can think of.”

With a self-proclaimed commitment to academics, Taylor completed her
undergraduate degree in three years. She immediately began searching for graduate
school possibilities after the completion of her junior year. Taylor stated that attending
graduate school was something she knew she would accomplish, but was unsure of what
direction to take. It was during the reflective period that many of the previously identified
“outsider” comments surrounding HBCUs began to impact Taylor’s decision-making
process. Taylor didn’t believe the stereotypes negatively cast against HBCUs but the
continued insistence from others that her degree from an HBCU would limit her
marketability began to implement seeds of doubt within her. Taylor stated:

“I think going back to hearing rumors that I heard during my senior year of college
that “attending a Black university you will not get a good job” [impacted my
decision]. Even though I didn’t buy into that stereotype I somewhat did.

Taylor stated that making the decision to attend an HBCU pleased her family.
They were happy for her and felt HBCU attendance was becoming a family tradition.
However, the prospect of her attending a predominately White institution elicited an even
greater response. Her family was ecstatic about the opportunity for her to attend a PWRU
because it was higher ranking and seemingly more prestigious than an HBCU. Taylor
recalls hearing her mother brag about her attendance at a PWRU whereas her attendance
at an HBCU now seemed mediocre.
As a student, Taylor’s measurement of academic rigor emphasizes time and effort. Accountability and diligence positively enhanced her undergraduate experience. However, as a graduate student she expressed displeasure with the academic rigor of her program. Taylor categorized her experience in the classroom as being “non-challenging and time consuming.” She explained that in her graduate experience, if a professor assigns homework the assignment could be completed one to two hours before class, whereas during her undergraduate attendance she had to invest greater effort in the completion of her assignments. Although the lack of academic rigor was not anticipated, Taylor expressed great satisfaction with the role of her graduate advisor. She adds that her advisor was very efficient in assisting her navigation throughout the program. As an out of state student, Taylor stated that she didn’t have anyone to turn to and was gratified with the role of her advisor.

**To be just me.** Despite not feeling challenged in the classroom, Taylor expressed having a smooth academic transition to graduate school. In describing her level of inclusion with the university outside the realm of academics her sentiment is different. She stated that “it wasn’t a day that I didn’t think about my race or my gender at this place.”

Taylor explained her feelings as the result of being “thrust” into the environment of a predominately White institution. Taylor stated that “to be Black at an HBCU means to attend class, to earn a GPA above a 2.9, to join a sorority, to give back to your community, and to pave the road forward for the next class just as someone before you did for you.” She stated that “to be Black at a PWRU means going beyond studious to be
a scholar, to always have a professional demeanor - not speak broken English and to always be on point. “Taylor explained that “to be on point” signifies being accurate at all times and to know how to conduct yourself in professional and non-professional environments. Taylor emphasized that “being on point” has an impact on social engagement. The interaction with her peers within the environment of her graduate institution was described as being somewhat uptight and never letting anyone know the real Taylor. She stated that while attending an HBCU, she felt able to converse with anyone but stayed to herself while attending a PWRU. Taylor reflects that it was not because she had a problem but because she recognized a difference in treatment amongst herself and those of her peers that identified as Caucasian. She described an encounter with her peers and their response to her natural hair. During a quarter of her last semester, she allowed her hair to be in its natural state which is curly. Taylor explained that her classmates’ facial expressions changed dramatically - as did their response - when they saw her. After a few moments it dawned on her that her hair was different which made her appearance different. Taylor stated:

As long as I had my hair was straight, I fit in more and [I] was more accepted. When my hair was in its natural state they saw me more as the “Black” person. I was seen as the Black person whereas before they would use the term African American when describing me.

Lindsey. Lindsey is a second year medical student from New Jersey and has an interest in Women’s Health. She was raised in the Northeast and with the exception of the HBCU Howard University, had no real awareness of HBCUs prior to attending. Her lack
of knowledge of the institutions greatly contributed to her initial disinterest in attending a Black college. It was at the encouragement of her father- who had never himself attended an HBCU- that she made the decision to apply to an HBCU. Lindsay stated:

Originally I did not want to go to an HBCU. I had my heart set on this college back in New Jersey. At this time I was living in Delaware and I wanted to go back to New Jersey. My dad was the one who told me to just apply to an HBCU, to just pick one or actually he picked one, he picked my undergrad.

It is common in the college selection process that once an applicant has received a letter of acceptance from a college or university, that student is then invited for a visitation. Lindsey visited every institution that she received a letter of acceptance from. Identified as the college farthest from home, the most expensive with the least amount of financial assistance offered in comparison to her other university options, the HBCU on Lindsey’s least was categorized as being the least enticing with regards to selection criteria. However, after arriving on the campus of her HBCU for a visit, she was “in love”.

Lindsey’s family was thrilled with her decision to attend an HBCU, but the acceptance did require a period of adjustment among her parents. Her mother, whose opinion was identified as the most important, was not thrilled with the thought of her daughter living so far away. Lindsey added that the college was the farthest away and her mother had hopes of her attending a school in New Jersey, only two hours away. Lindsey’s father- a proponent of HBCUs- remained supportive of her decision to attend, stating that “it’s okay; I feel that’s where you should go also.” Although encouraged to
apply, Lindsey admits having a hard time informing her parents of her decision to attend the college due to its location and lack of financial assistance.

**All in the family.** Described as a place where you can come and gain a second home and family, Lindsey admittedly remains as in love with her undergraduate institution today as she was during her first visit. The education she received from her undergraduate institution is viewed as being well-rounded and sufficient for what she needed. She described being introduced to many different theories and concepts of life during her attendance. “Things I never stopped to think about before, I feel that my undergrad exposed me to and I feel that I got a chance to do research, I did do research.”

Lindsey’s undergraduate institution was described as a liberal arts institution not known for conducting research. She expressed delight and appreciation discussing her intellectual exposure and research opportunities as an undergraduate student. Lindsey further highlighted the significance of her academic experiences attending an HBCU with emphasis on her professional development. She stated:

Different professional and people from the community would come and talk to us and just expose us to new things, and try to give us life preparation to get us where we need to be. Academically speaking, I feel I couldn’t have gotten any better.

In addition to being a liberal arts institution, the college is also all female. Lindsey expressed initial qualms regarding her decision to attend an all-female college, but stated that she graduated with a deeper realization on the importance of good female relationships within society. She added that socially, the college expanded her outlook
and fostered her growth and development into a more well-rounded and responsible person. Described as being comparable to many other Black colleges that provide an engaging social experience, Lindsey expressed that her HBCU also placed emphasis on shaping students into individuals who want to contribute to the world.

Lindsey described the culture of her undergraduate institution as a sense of community which promotes academics and social responsibility, spiritual growth, and working together; an establishment where an individual feels a sense of connectedness because of the unique experiences that you are exposed to. She stated:

I feel attending my HBCU, you go and it’s almost like you can compare it to a child being raised and being exposed to new experiences. Hopefully all those things contribute to creating a good person. I feel the culture is a place where you have a strong sense of community that promotes all the things that you need to face the world.

Additionally, Lindsey described a reinforced idea within the fabric of the college and imbedded throughout the curriculum that emphasized the uniqueness of their students throughout the world, particularly Black women. She characterized the institutional make-up as being designed to cater to the development of the Black woman. Lindsey further elaborated that by “attending this institution as a Black woman, you are unique, that you have your own history, and to be proud of it; to look at where we come from, the legacy”. A central concept of the college and embraced by the campus community is that students are part of a legacy. Lindsey stated that this concept serves as a push, adding that
“it makes you feel that you can accomplish great things because look at the women before you- the Black women before you have done.”

**DO or MD?** Lindsey stated that her decision to attend a PWRU was greatly impacted by the university’s provision of a summer program for potential medical students. OU reportedly provided more exposure for her to “see if it was the right fit.” Lindsey stated that she initially reviewed HBCUs as potential medical school options but selected a PWRU due to her interest in the Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) route. The selected PWRU of this study provides an osteopathic medical program that differs in treatment approach in comparison to traditional MD schools. Lindsey described the DO treatment style as being better well-rounded. Students learn how to treat, prescribe, diagnose, in addition to the body’s innate ability to treat itself; it’s a different philosophy. Lindsey stated that she was unfamiliar with the concept that as a physician, you have two different philosophies. She selected osteopathic medicine after becoming more informed but learned that no HBCUs have an osteopathic medical program. Lindsey added that she ultimately made the decision to attend a PWRU by default because of the medical philosophy she wished to pursue.

When comparing the education she is received as a medical student pursuing the DO route to that of a traditional medical education (i.e. MD), Lindsey expressed that she felt up-to-par and learning everything she is supposed to learn. She added that you can’t really compare it to other curriculums because there are multiple ways to be taught in the field of medicine. The current institution utilizes an organ base system. Lindsey stated
that “I feel my education has been good…I have been able to learn and follow what they really try to teach us.”

Lindsey discussed that at each institution, she has been encouraged to interact with her peers to assist her scholarly development. She described a more cohesive method utilized at her undergraduate institution, stating that the college promotes working together amongst the students. As a medical student, Lindsey stated that although the environment is somewhat less cohesive, it does not encourage competitiveness; adding that attendance to a non-competitive medical school is reassuring to her. Lindsey explained that the environment is serious, stating that “you come to study and get a degree” but describes the culture of the program as having a singular focus on the development of the student. She expressed that the medical program places minimum effort on the holistic development of the students. Lindsey stated that as an undergraduate student, the formation of a community amongst the students was strongly encouraged. The institution dedicated an entire week of orientation for undergraduate students to assist with the bonding process among their students. Lindsey added that she arrived to her PWRU with the same level of expectation for togetherness and a sense of community. She stated that:

At the medical school, which is even smaller than my undergraduate institution, it wasn’t the same; the institution didn’t have the same goal to promote a community. The community is that you all want to get your degree, not that you want to establish other relationships.
Lindsey added that the lack of the unification that she experienced attending an HBCU negatively impacted her transition to a PWRU. She stated that her transition was hard because she had those expectations of community and forming new friendships and that is not what she found when she arrived to medical school. Lindsey added that she did recognize that graduate and undergraduate school are two different levels and noticeably the graduate level is harder, but admittedly did not anticipate a considerable cultural and social difference.

Although a sense of community is not strongly encouraged, Lindsey stated that the program does attempt to promote well-rounded physicians. As a medical student, the program is science or curriculum driven with little emphasis on the social development of the student, but the program does provide medical lunch lectures and seminars. Additionally, Lindsey added that opportunities to go abroad are available. These options are not built into the curriculum and must be personally selected, but they are permissible.

Reese. Reese is a second year medical student from Mississippi. As the daughter of a military parent she described herself as being accustomed to living in different areas and has been exposed to racial diversity, but added that even with such experiences she was still “sheltered” growing up. This is highlighted in her depiction of a past educational experience involving racial inequality. Reese’s family lived in Georgia during her childhood. They moved to Colorado, relocated back to Georgia, and then relocated to Kentucky. Reese added that Kentucky is where she was raised from first grade to about fifth or sixth grade. The family moved to California for two years for seventh and eighth
grade and then on to Mississippi for her freshman year of high school. Reese stated that it was not until the family relocated to Mississippi that she realized for the first time she was Black. Growing up within a military family, her lifestyle was a constant culmination of diversity. With members of different families constantly going off to war or traveling overseas, those left behind become family; the military culture is a family. Reese noted that when you are all going through things such as deployment and trying to support each other. An Asian person may become your brother and your sister is Hispanic. Race becomes less of a factor; at the end of the day you all have to support each other.”

Reese went on to add that during her time in California, Caucasians became the minority. She described the area as being heavily populated with Hispanics, Asians, and Blacks. When her family relocated to Mississippi, she asserted that she became immediately aware of a lack of diversity, stating that “all you saw was Black and White.” Reese stated that the schools were unofficially separated racially and it was evident that if you want a good education, you go to White schools. Reese attended a White school.

Reese stated that while living in California she had already begun high school and was actually higher up in school than an average ninth grader when the family moved to Mississippi. However, the Mississippi school system identified Reese as not being ready for advancement. She added that the only thing the school system knew about her was her color. It was during this occasion Reese noted that she began to consciously resonate the meaning of oppression, discrimination, and injustice. Reese added that her father had to battle with the school board in order for her to be properly academically assessed. Reese remembers being placed in a class full of seniors as a freshman and receiving a grade
average of 1.00.

_A whole new world._ At the opening of the interview, Reese laughingly admitted that she knew absolutely nothing about HBCUs or their existence prior to her attendance. She remembered arriving to her undergraduate institution and having people ask her “what made you want to go to an HBCU?” while thinking “what’s an HBCU?” and everyone responding “you’re at one!” Reese stated that her decision to attend her undergraduate institution was greatly impacted by her father’s encouragement and subsequent death months prior to her attendance, and financial considerations. Prior to Reese’s completion of high school she completed the ACT and received a score of significance. It was because of this score and the possibility of a scholarship that during a college fair she was encouraged by her father to apply to an HBCU. Reese’s father passed away after she took the ACT exam and prior to her receiving her scores. She admittedly had thoughts of attending a more prestigious Ivy League institution as an undergraduate student. However, after the death of her father and becoming the recipient of a full scholarship, Reese made the decision to attend an HBCU.

Differing completely from any institution she had previously attended, Reese jokingly reflected that her immediate thoughts after arriving at an HBCU were, “it’s a lot of Black people!” She added that she hoped she turned out “fine” and that the experience would be wonderful. Reese stated she did fall in love with the family feeling and orientation she experienced after her arrival. Adding that after her father passed away before the start of college, she found the presence of positive male influence to be rewarding for her during that stage in her life. She described having various professors
who were great; some worried about her starting college so young and offered their support. Reese added that she was able to establish significant rapport with select professors and was provided with their cell number in case of an emergency—many of whom she can still call today if needed. She highlighted that the relationship and level of support she received from faculty and staff members was significant. At any time she began to doubt herself or her capabilities, members of the campus community were always there to provide her with a push of encouragement. Reese stated:

My undergraduate institution was totally different from the White institutions that I attended. I fell in love with it and I don’t think I would have gotten that anywhere else. With my dad passing away and having those male influences, I had different professors who were really great and offered that support. My chemistry professor, organic chemistry professor, having those male influences was really great for me during that time. I have cell phone numbers; it was just that kind of a relationship. It was just amazing.

Reese admittedly loved her undergraduate institution, but as a self-described individual who thrives in the scholarly environment, she stated she was not surrounded by individuals of a similar mindset. In discussing her academic experience as an undergraduate student she added:

I felt it was good academically, I actually loved school. Well I don’t love it anymore now that I’m in medical school (laughter), it’s just that we have to study so much. I was always into school so the academics were good, the studying was good. I thrive in that element. I felt a lot of people didn’t have the same mindset
about studying as I did.

Reese stated that she is unsure of whether she is generalizing her institution by making that statement or if that is how college students at the undergraduate level are in general. She recalled that the library was only ever heavily populated during finals. She added that students who placed a heavier focus on academics were an outcast and much of her studying was often done alone.

Reese expressed a noticeable difference between herself and many of her peers in and outside the classroom. Socially, she described the environment of her HBCU as very active. She stated:

Many parties were on and off campus. The typical undergrad drinking and weed use was very prevalent. A lot of people hanging out and playing music in the cars, just a lot of people enjoying themselves and the nice sunny days.

Reese expressed that she was very sheltered as a child and this was her first encounter with high risk behaviors associated with college attendance. Smoking marijuana and having sex were identified as the main recreational activities for many of the students who would then go to parties and get drunk afterwards. “If you are not doing that type of stuff then you wouldn’t be out”. Reese adds that because her undergraduate institution was located in a rural with limited activities for students, HIV became a big concern on campus.

Reese identified herself as being more standoffish and on her own. She added that she initially befriended a female student at the start of her enrollment but ended the friendship and placed more focus on her studies when the female started to engage in
As a self-identified scholar, Reese explained that she has always excelled academically. She matriculated quickly through her high school classes and graduated from college in less than four years. However, she experienced difficulty with standardized testing as evident with her MCAT scores. Reese completed her undergraduate education before many of her peers and boasted a high GPA as well, but her MCAT score was not adequate and she was not initially accepted to any medical schools. She stated:

I love school, it’s always been a part of me and then I come to college and loved organic chemistry which is what doctors’ hate. I take the MCAT and I can’t do good on it. I study for it and I love to study but I could never get a descent score and my mother and I were just bewildered by that. Such a test is really important if you’re really interested in medical school. I had a 3.96 and the MD schools wouldn’t even look at me because of my MCAT scores. The learning is great but at the end of the day if we don’t have that standardized test taking skills, we are not going to get anywhere.

Expressing disappointment and confusion over her denial of acceptance to medical school, Reese made a decision to look at other options and search for alternative routes to medical school. It was during her research that she learned more about a holistic approach to medicine. In search of a program that would increase her MCAT scores, she enrolled in a program in GA and found an apartment. Prior to her attendance to the summer program in GA, she received an invitation to participate in a summer scholars
program for medical students offered by the selected institution for this study. Reese stated she arrived to the program thinking that it would be a good preview of medical school. She jokingly acknowledged that the program was hell on wheels! She stated that “it was an intense 8am-5pm Monday- Friday summer program. One student had a panic attack and had to go home.”

Reese reflected that her faith grew in God during this time. She made a friend, but the majority of her time was spent alone studying. After completing the summer scholars program, Reese was invited to attend post-bac and began medical school a year later.

Reese described post-bac as an intense program that is the equivalent of medical school in six weeks. Throughout its duration, she was unable to exercise and had very little time to attend church. Religion and health are of great importance to Reese and the thought of not having an opportunity to incorporate them into her life left her reevaluating her decision to attend medical school. The program is described as a “weeding” out process for those not automatically accepted into the medical program. The idea is that if you can survive the program, then you can make it through medical school. After learning that the medical program does not cram material into a six week time frame- spread out over the course of a year, Reese stated that she was able to reconcile and persevere through the program. She received admittance to the medical program with the new class the following year.

I’m doing it. Reese acknowledged that she has had an interest in the medical field for many years. As a student, she was most familiar with the MD route and didn’t become familiar with osteopathic medicine until her junior year of college. She expressed
an interest in holistic medicine but was informed by her advisor that although that was a possibility, the university did not have any funding for that field of interest. Reese stated that it is for that reason that she continued to follow the MD route as an undergraduate student. When she was not accepted to any MD schools because of her MCAT score, she expressed being grateful to find a medical program that looked beyond her exam scores and saw her potential. She stated, “I’m thankful OU-COM did not look at my MCAT because I’m obviously doing medical school and that shouldn’t be something to hold someone back.”

After navigating through the summer scholars program and surviving post-bac, Reese described life as a medical student as amazing.

I was afraid it wouldn’t be but the staff and admissions department in the medical school here have been amazing. I feel you have to put forth an effort to be kicked out of the medical school here because they have so much here to help, so much support. They picked us for a reason, they believed in us…if you’re not doing well then they stop to see if anything is wrong or if they can help.

Reese added that although some professors—generally speaking are not open many of them are open and accessible. She described herself as “not being the type of student that goes to the office and talks to you type unless I’ve really gotten to know you and a rapport has developed but knows that option is available here”. Additionally, Reese admitted that academically speaking, she is comforted by the likeness amongst her peers. She stated:
I felt a lot of people didn’t have the same mindset about studying at my undergrad as I did and that’s what I like about medical school. Everyone in medical school studies and you can form study groups whereas when I was at my undergrad you couldn’t say “hey lets go study!”

Reese stated that although she does not love the location, she does love the school. The classes are described as being big but the students are found to be friendly, adding that many of the different races and cultures do tend to gravitate to each other. Reese admitted that she is still quiet but has become involved in a few organizations, stating that there is much that goes into being a medical student.

Melanie. Melanie, an international study major with a concentration in Latin American studies, is a native of Florida. In discussing her introduction to the world of HBCUs, Melanie stated that

Being in Florida, we have two of the most well-known HBCUs, well actually three. The two most popular were attended by people in my family and people in my high school. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University and Bethune College, which is now Bethune University.

Melanie added that she always knew what an HBCU was, stating that “it was in my family, my upbringing, my social network as a child.” It is for these reasons that Melanie felt it was only natural for her to gravitate toward an HBCU. She added that although her mother attended the University of Florida, which is a predominately White institution, she knew attending an HBCU was something she would do because of her consistent exposure to graduates of HBCUs. Melanie went on to add that although no one told her
specifics in regards to the institutions, she knew as a high school student that attending a Black college was an option for her, “a good option.” In describing what makes historically Black colleges and/or universities a good option Melanie stated “I think the education and success of others made it a positive option for me.”

Melanie reflected that her family was supportive of her decision to attend college, regardless of the type of institution. “I think if I had gone to a PWI, my family would have been just as happy but it was just the opportunity to go to college that I needed to fill.”

Her family viewed attending an HBCU out of state as a good opportunity for her to branch out and find herself. Although a general positive response surrounded her decision to attend an HBCU, some resistance was encountered. Melanie stated that her grandfather did express reservations toward her decision to attend a Black college out of state. She added that he placed primary concern on her being far away from home and had doubts about the acceptance of a degree from a Black college in the professional world. Melanie stated that she did acknowledge the reservations of her grandfather and the future implications. She admitted to understanding at a young age that “people do look at your resumes and make decisions based on what they see.” With the awareness that attending a Black college may be negatively perceived by others, Melanie made the decision that she wanted to attend an HBCU. She wanted to experience what it was like to attend an institution where she is surrounded by other Black intelligent students. As a Black female attending a predominately White college prep high school ranked within the top ten in the country, she had never encountered such an experience. Melanie stated that:
I did take heed to what my grandfather was saying, but I didn’t feel like attending an HBCU would hinder me in any way academically. I’m in the same position of many of my white counterparts from high school if not better positions than they are. It just hasn’t changed anything.

**The HBCU experience.** Melanie completed her freshman year of college at a predominately White university and transferred to an HBCU where she completed her bachelor’s degree. As a graduate of a highly ranked college prep high school, academically speaking Melanie described college as a breeze. She described the population of the student body as being the primary difference between her attendance at a PWI and an HBCU as an undergraduate student. She added that she “did not feel challenged” in the classroom at either institution. Melanie attributed her lack of challenge to her college prep high school attendance. She stated “I had a heavy work load at high school and it prepared me for the reading and the challenge of being in a college setting.”

Melanie was all smiles and laughter in describing her social experiences throughout her tenure at an HBCU. She described her social experience as being vibrant and fun. Melanie stated that this was largely due to the location of her undergraduate institution. The HBCU of her attendance is located in Atlanta, GA, a city she described as a hub-bub of craziness and diversity. This level of diversity witnessed was noted as being visible on the campus of her HBCU as well. Melanie stated that because the demographic of HBCUs are majority Black, it is the assumption that most Blacks are the same and the institutions lack diversity. Melanie added that attending an HBCU, as with any other college, exposed her to a variety of individuals and personality types. She stated:
For me, attending an HBCU was the first time that I had ever met so many different Black people because they come from all over the world. You had your skate boarders, your smokers, your drinkers, your elite prestigious Blacks, your Blacks that were poor or from the hood, your agnostics, your atheists, your bible rocking Black students…you just had so many different kinds.

Melanie added that the culture is rich and diverse at an HBCU because you do have so many different people. Melanie indicated that she also remained active throughout her undergraduate experience. She had a lot of friends, participated in various clubs and started one of her own. She stated:

I started a club called KEY. K-E-Y stood for Keep Educating Youth. It was for a high school about 4 or 5 blocks away from my undergrad and we would go to the high school and tutor for SAT and ACT prep.

Melanie added that the KEY club began while she was in high school and she felt it would be fun for her to bring her community service interest with her to college.

**Journeying north.** Melanie began applying for graduate school during her senior year of undergrad. She stated that she initially planned to attend the PWRU of this study immediately following graduation but deferred her enrollment, returned home and found employment. Melanie stated that she used this time to reflect on her future and to determine if graduate school was the right decision. She added that she “felt rushed” to begin graduate school and wanted to be assured of her decision. Melanie enrolled in graduate school one year later.
Melanie stated that the decision to attend the PWRU of this study was not without reservations. She added that her parent’s preferred choice was The Ohio State University. I actually started an application for Ohio State but I never finished it because I heard from this university first. They offered a scholarship and Ohio State didn’t, so I didn’t bother completing the application because I knew I would be unable to come without the financial assistance. Melanie stated that her parent’s expressed displeasure with the location of her selected graduate institution. She expressed that they knew very little about Athens, OH and were not happy with her decision to relocate. They were not happy about me coming to Athens, we didn’t know anything about Athens…we didn’t even know where Ohio University was. To look it up on a map and see that it was in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains was very disturbing for my parent’s. Melanie added that her family was concerned for her safety. “We didn’t know what kind of people were here. My parent’s ideas were people that were racist. That was just the way it was, they were not happy.” Melanie expressed that her father was very uneasy when he drove her to OU to visit the university, describing it as being an “uncomfortable feeling for him.” She added that her family did research by reading stories online about things that happened in the city Athens and the university and were not impressed. Despite her parent’s anxiety regarding her graduate institution, she was disinclined to allow fear to change her course. She expressed an interest in a program provided by the institution and was unwilling to
give it up. “For me, I’ve never been afraid of anything. I knew the program for which I was coming here for was very good.”

With an interest in international studies, Melanie believed the center for international programs at her graduate institution as being really good. She described the faculty and staff as being nice, helpful, and made her feel comfortable; adding that they made her feel her academic experience would be good here. Melanie asserted that it is for these reasons that she made the decision to attend the PWRU of this study.

Relocating to the north from the sunny state of Florida proved to be a more significant transition than academics. Melanie stated that leaving the south and coming to Ohio and not seeing a familiar face was challenging. “I didn’t know anyone or any faces. Coming to a place that was freezing cold, it was kind of lonely and cold. It was just different.” Melanie’s transition emphasized geographic differences but was not without adjustment academically. She added that her transition was challenging academically, but noted that is to be expected at the graduate level. She stated:

They expect so much more from you, which they should from graduate students. I don’t think it was any way to prepare for graduate school, no matter if I had ten more papers to write in undergrad, I still don’t think it would have prepared me for graduate school. I think it’s just the level of critical thinking skills that basically have to mature throughout graduate school. It was a challenge.

Outside the classroom, Melanie reflected on the uniqueness of Athens and the social and cultural implications. Relocating from an area such as Atlanta, she stated that it’s not easy to have a comparable social life in this area, but she had made friends and
she does go out. Melanie added that she cannot compare living here to anything she has previously experienced and feels socially, it is not the most fulfilling.

It’s like a little nest that’s tucked away. It’s not a city, so it doesn’t seem diverse for me. Coming from Florida and Atlanta, which are very diverse, to a place where you see a little trickle of this or that is very different for me.

Culturally, she described the institution as being segregated. Melanie stated that although you do see different types of students in attendance, they are always huddled together. “We have a large student body of international students here and I know that because I’m in international studies, but beyond the classroom you see no integration.” Melanie added that with the exception of sitting next to them in class, the students go his or her own separate way when they leave. “I think culturally, it is very segregated. I don’t think people are aware and I don’t think they are open to what this university actually has to offer.

Melanie stated that the institution has a lot of diversity amongst its student population such as African and Asian, and believes the university could be a very good place to learn about different cultures. Unfortunately, she does not think a lot of students who come here are prepared for that. Melanie stated this is mainly because a lot of the students- with the exception of international students- are from Ohio and they are used to their own little world. “They are used to being around all White people every day because that’s what they grew up with.”

**Kirsten.** Kirsten is a fifth year doctoral student from North Carolina. Her decision to attend an HBCU as an undergraduate student was greatly impacted by parental
influence and a desire to escape marginalization as experienced prior to her college enrollment. Kirsten attended a predominately White high school and recalls often feeling as though she was a representation of the entire Black race. She stated “I felt like everyone was watching me and waiting for me to do some type of stereotype so they could be like see, that’s how Black people are.” Kirsten remembered attending school dances and being too timid to dance for fear of being stereotyped. She would see other Black students dance and feel they were doing “too much” in the presence of a perceived judgmental atmosphere. “I felt like that was playing into White people’s stereotypes so I wouldn’t do it. I was just real marginalized and overly self-conscious and always felt defined by my race.”

Kirsten stated that she wanted to attend an HBCU where she believed for once she would be able to just be herself within an academic environment. She added that she didn’t want to be known as the “Black girl who’s a cheerleader”, or the “Black girl that’s in the honors classes”, or any description beginning with the identifier as “the Black girl” or the attachment of all the preconceived notions about Black women. Kirsten wanted to be herself and acknowledged that included being free to do “Black” things without feeling like White people were watching and waiting to comment that “oh, yeah that’s how they act.” Kirsten expressed wanting to establish a separation between herself and her race where she is identified as herself and not by her race.

**Who we are.** Kirsten was exposed to HBCUs prior to her attendance due to her parent’s open encouragement and support of HBCUs and disinclination towards PWIs. In reference to her parent’s support of HBCUs Kirsten stated that “they were very very very
very influential. Unless I got a full ride to a PWI, they weren’t supporting me going to one.” Kirsten’s parents were both graduates of HBCUs and she had additional relatives that were HBCU alums as well. Her father attended North Carolina A&T and her mom attended Bennett College. All of her aunts and uncles on each side of her family attended HBCUs. Her only grandparent that attended college also attended an HBCU. Needless to say, the idea of attending an HBCU within her family was a well-received notion. Kirsten described her parents as being very pro HBCUs, jokingly adding that she believes she was brainwashed by them. She did apply to a predominately white university following her high school graduation, but her parents were not supportive of her attending. She stated:

They really wanted me to go to an HBCU, I mean they really just wanted to go! They would talk bad about kids that graduated and went to a White college. They would say things like you know “they could have gone to an HBCU and their parents don’t think an HBCU are any good but they need to go to an HBCU.” So yes, brainwashed.

Everyone in Kirsten’s town was familiar with HBCUs due to the existence of an HBCU in her hometown. If you were Black or White and lived in that but didn’t know about HBCUs, then you had to have been living under a rock. Although the existence of Black colleges and universities was known throughout the town community, not everyone understood Kirsten’s decision to attend an HBCU.

A couple of my friends, best friends in high school, some of their parents were anti-HBCUs. They were Black but they felt an HBCU wasn’t the place to go
because in their words “the world is not Black” so you need to go somewhere that reflects how the world is. They kind of looked down on HBCUs but I had some friends that also went to HBCUs. It was a mix.

As an eighteen year old, the influence of peers on college choice can be substantial, but this was not the case for Kirsten. In addition to her parents’ formidable persuasion, she did want to attend an HBCU.

*Power to the…?* Kirsten was admittedly excited about the prospect of being around Blacks at her undergraduate institution and was in search of an “authentic” experience. She stated: “I was just so excited and all these Black people doing Black things. The Greeks, the quad, and the yard and …the set where everybody hung out... It was overwhelming, but it was also great!” Although Kirsten attended a majority White high school, she stated that she was not isolated from Black people growing up. Most of her friends in high school were Black and she grew up in a Black church. Kirsten stated that being around all Blacks was not a strange concept to her but the idea of this occurring within a higher education setting was unfamiliar. She embraced the unknown and was full of anticipation surrounding the experience of attending a Black college. In a household where parent’s encouraged education and openly discussed issues of racism and oppression, Kirsten had a distinct impression of what she thought attending an HBCU would be about. She admitted envisioning political activism, the idea of being a Black person standing together in unification with other Blacks for something they believed in and were willing to take a stand for. She visualized marches and a mantra of
“we as Black need to do ____ to change the world.” In reality, this was not the culture she encountered upon her arrival.

I felt good as a Black person, but my idea that everyone thought like me didn’t hold true. I went to my undergraduate institution and the Black people there didn’t care about a lot of the issues…they just wanted to have fun. They would say that I’m a racist and all this other stuff because of the kind of stuff that I would talk about. Culturally, it was a little different from what I thought.

The university did have political groups on campus such as the Marcus Garvey club, but Kirsten realized they were extremely pro-Black and too much for her. She stated they were activists; they wore afro-centric clothes and she was not on their level. Learning that her initial assumption of the “HBCU experience” was somewhat distorted, Kirsten accepted the change and realized that the difference wasn’t a bad thing. She expressed love for her university and feels she had a great experience. Kirsten became very involved, feeling that there was always something to do. She attended every single home football game throughout her entire four years of attendance. Kirsten stated that she loved the school spirit and although the university was not what she expected in terms of activism, she was able to participate in a march while she attended.

My freshman year, the student government did lead a march to the state capital but unfortunately I don’t really remember what we were marching for. I was very caught up in the excitement! It was something about a tier… Now they were angry about that. Yeah we marched to the capital and we sang hymns at the capital.
Even though my eighteen year old self wasn’t quite sure what I was marching for, but I loved it!

Kirsten described her academic experience as being “good for the most part.” She had some professors that were good and others that left her questioning. One professor in particular, a white male, she described as leaving her puzzled and unfulfilled. “He had nothing good to say about the university, he didn’t challenge us at all, his classes were way too easy, and I felt kind of cheated by him.” The professor taught in Kirsten’s major area and many of her classes were taken with him. The department was very small and two people were the primary professors. The lack of a diverse selection among professors and faculty members’ lack of enthusiasm took away from Kirsten’s experience academically. She added that if you only have two people teaching classes in a department, students are not getting the richness of experiences learning from different people. Additionally, because of the small classes, not a lot of revenue was generated for her department and students were not exposed to various resources that may be present at larger schools.

**Who I am becoming.** After completing her undergraduate education, she obtained a master’s degree in the field of horticulture and worked for two years before enrolling in a doctoral program. She stated:

I immediately wanted to go to graduate school after undergrad because I didn’t know what else to do. I was like “I should go to grad school because I don’t know what else to do” and I’m very glad I did.
Kirsten described her master’s program as being good experience but realized that horticulture was not the research field she wanted to be in. She was not passionate about the research and made the decision that if she returned to school it would be to pursue an area that she was passionate about. She utilized the following two years after completing her master’s degree to redefine what she wanted to do. Based on previous classes that she enjoyed, Kirsten made the decision to pursue molecular biology; specifically plant systematic, the study and evolution of the classification of plants. She added that her decision to attend the PWRU of this study in pursuit of a doctoral degree came in response to welcomed feedback she received from a professor at this institution.

I just did a Google search and I found the professor who is actually my advisor now and I found people from other universities and I started contacting them. He was the only one that seemed excited about the possibility of working with me.

Kirsten was encouraged to visit the university after continued communication with the professor. The university offered a free multicultural visitation program at that time for minority students interested in graduate school. Kirsten stated that she did not initially want to come and visit the school. She questioned the location of the university and campus demographics. “I didn’t want to come. I was thinking, where is this place? I’m going to be the only Black person in town, oh my gosh!” After visiting, Kirsten expressed feeling comfortable in her ability to succeed in the program, stating “I can do this.” Academically, things have been great throughout her tenure as a doctoral student. Kirsten stated she has learned a lot, including how to be a researcher. Additionally, she noted that her advisor had been really helpful and she has been provided an opportunity
to do a lot of teaching which is identified as something she enjoys. Kirsten added that as she has gotten older her social needs have changed. As an undergraduate student, Kirsten reflects that she was very engaged in the campus environment and enjoyed clubbing with her peers. Admittedly, arriving to a PWRU immediately following her undergraduate experience would have been more challenging.

I think if I was younger it would have been much more of a shock for twenty-two year old Kirsten because I like clubs, not bars. Bars are not my thing so it would have been kind of hard. What do I do? Who do I hang with?

As an older student, Kirsten expressed that she is developmentally more mature and has grown in comparison to the type of student she was as an undergraduate. The main social construct of interest to her when she arrived as a doctoral student was finding a church. Most of her weekends are spent in church. She is there on Saturday and Sunday and all of her true friends, not acquaintances, are at church.

Alex. Alex is a second year medical student from Texas. At the start of the interview she very clearly stated she had zero knowledge of HBCUs prior to her attendance. Her mother attended Prairie View and is a HBCU alum, but her knowledge of HBCUs was zilch. She had heard of two of the most popularized HBCUs, Morehouse & Spelman, but her awareness didn’t venture beyond the names. It is not uncommon for a person to be unfamiliar with HBCUs, however this tends to be less apparent when the person is the child of an HBCU graduate; regardless of the graduate’s experience. Alex added that her mother’s HBCU attendance was admittedly something that was never
brought up in discussion among her family. “She never really forced me to look that way. She really wanted me to keep an open mind with universities.”

It was at the encouragement of a school counselor that an HBCU became an option in her college selection process. All of the institutions Alex applied to were small Catholic Universities. The school counselor had a nephew that attended a particular HBCU that she felt suited Alex’s interest and was suggested to her in conversation. Alex had never been to the location of the university, but she did have family in the area. Her decision to attend the university was impacted by personal selection criteria and an interest in trying something different. Alex stated that she had attended predominately White and Hispanic institutions prior to her enrollment in college, but never predominately Black. Upon learning of the institution’s demographics, she felt it would be a good fit for her. “…it was a Catholic University, it was a Black University…it was very small…it was perfect for me.”

Not knowing about HBCUs prior to her attendance presented Alex with an opportunity to learn about the institutions with a fresh perspective not unaffected by the perception of others. Alex added that it was not until later with the addition of her pre-med interest that she became more directed toward her HBCU of choice after learning that 80 to 90 percent of Meharry medical students come from her school. “I didn’t know about the in-and-outs of HBCUs so I had a chance to learn. I would hear this or that and think “oh, I didn’t know that.” It’s a lot of HBCU some small and some big.”

*Natural disaster?!..but I’m a freshman.* Prior to her undergraduate enrollment, Alex attended a summer program offered by the university that offered chemistry credit.
The program was identified as her audition. If she liked it, she would stay. Alex stated she was hesitant due to the school’s location in New Orleans. This gave a perception of a party atmosphere and a party school.

We went and visited before I graduated high school and my parents were able to see that although the surrounding may be partying, the school was very focused on graduating pre-meds and pharmacy students, which they are well known for and pass rates were very high. It was a good institution.

After viewing the school and learning more of the institutions rigor and prestige, Alex’s parents were able to relax. Until Hurricane Katrina hit!

One of the most destructive storms in history made landfall in southern Louisiana in the summer of 2005. Hurricane Katrina was a category 3 hurricane that caused severe destruction along the gulf coast, leaving a death toll of over a thousand and the displacement of hundreds of people. Submerging 80 percent of New Orleans underwater and leaving over a million people without power or drinking water. The severity and devastation in the aftermath was felt around the world.

Alex was in her first semester of college living in New Orleans and hundreds of miles away from her family when Hurricane Katrina hit. She stated:

I was there. That day our dorms told us you could evacuate if you would like, but you didn’t have to...which I thought was shocking...but no one thought the levees would break. That was the biggest thing. It wasn’t the fact that the hurricane hit, but that the levies broke.
Alex was in the gym when she was instructed to evacuate. Her best friend and roommate extended an invitation for her to leave with them. “I had my one bag, my computer, and my two pairs of clothing. I thought...we figured we would be back within a week or so.”

The group evacuated to Lake Charles. A trip that typically takes two hours, Alex and her friends spent nine to ten hours in traffic. She remembers that all lanes on the highway were open to go out but no one could enter New Orleans. Alex described the experience as the longest car ride of her life. She remained in a designated area with her friends and their family for several weeks until her parents were permitted through and reach her. At that point, they were then transferred to a different location while she was at home. Fear summarized the emotion most prevalent amongst Alex, her family, her friends, and many other individuals connected to Hurricane Katrina (whether directly or indirectly) during this time.

Just fear I think. I couldn’t get a flight out and I didn’t have my car. I’ll forever be grateful to my friend’s parents because they didn’t have to do that. They actually took another girl too….just so we could get somewhere. I would say fear because the not knowing, not being able to call.

The University closed down for a semester and reopened in January. Her dorm was completely flooded except for the top floors. She lost all of her belongings. Her best friend/roommate lost everything including her family home.

We lost a lot of professors; a lot of students didn’t come back. I entered with maybe a thousand and only four or five hundred came back initially. In January, some came back a little later. A lot of the buildings closed, a lot of the professors
were living in the FEMA trailers just so we could come back early. We lost a lot of money, a lot of athletics because of budget cuts.

Alex remembered friends and classmates that were forced to stay and witness all of the destruction and chaos that ensued. “I understand why a lot of people didn’t come back because it was a scary experience.” Alex identified an even greater fear that her parents encountered after the Hurricane; her decision to return to the school. “They had to trust me on going back and know that I was making the right decision…which I did.”

**Rebuilding.** Alex expressed that she and several other students felt committed to their university. The students expressed a desire to finish what they had started and too obtain a degree. Alex recognized that the school wasn’t the safest place to be at that time and probably wasn’t fully ready to open when they did but, she felt compelled to return and support her school. Additionally, the experience of a natural disaster was perceived as a positive. It served to spark Alex’s interest in community service and highlighted the true aurora of a family environment that many people often speak of when discussing HBCUs.

Looking at the University, it had a good impact. I saw how when we evacuated, the university still kept in touch. The pre-med office still sent us emails keeping up with this or that…I was able to look at our university faculty wise, staff wise and know that they were doing everything they could to help us reopen. We kept up with our pass fail rate and things like that.

Despite variables of uncertainty surrounding her return, Alex arrived to a rigorous academic environment on-par with the University’s reputation. The curriculum was
described as being challenging from the beginning. Starting out, the university required attendance to all pre-med meetings, personal statements, and maintaining a B average for students interested in the medical field. Alex strived beyond what was required. She felt a need to strive beyond that because of the perception that you have to be much better than average to get into an advanced degree program. She added that a stigma often surrounding HBCUs is that they are an easier route from an academic standpoint. However, Alex would arguably deny this statement based on her experiences and feeling of academic preparedness. “I have learned at my HBCU that it is not an easier route, it was even harder. I felt academic wise, the university made sure they prepared you.”

Alex learned early in her tenure at her HBCU that completing assignment in a timely manner, studying in advance, and not procrastinating makes you a much better student. Additionally, learning how to take notes and organize her thoughts, and receiving one-on-one attention from faculty greatly impacted her academic performance. Alex felt really comfortable reaching out to many of her professors who demonstrated a willingness to help the students in and outside of the classroom. She stated:

A lot of the professors who came back after the hurricane felt bad about our cafeteria, it was very sad times. At times, it wouldn’t be open and we would be hungry. A lot of things that were around in the neighborhood were not open and it wasn’t safe to really go out. They would host parties at his or her home and things like that for us. I think it’s just a family atmosphere.

The university’s family atmosphere and smaller classes was conducive to Alex’s academic performance as well. She had professors that knew not only her personal story
but knew her parents on a first name basis as well. Differing from student who may have attended a larger university, Alex felt comfortable going into any office on campus and asking for help.

I have no problem emailing or going to the office. I want that one-on-one and I think being at a larger university that is harder to do. I just talked to my pre-med advisor about three weeks ago and I called her. It’s that kind of interaction where you felt that you always had that support no matter what.

Alex recently traveled to her undergraduate institution at the time of the interview and discussed the feelings of welcome she received and the overall positive atmosphere. This was reflected in her description of a retired chemistry professor at the university that she encountered. He is an unofficial academic advisor and a staple of the institution. He is an older white male around 80 or 90 years old that provides assistance to students with their medical school applications and implementing programs.

In my pre-med office, we have this older man who is great and pretty much like “I built this institution.” He’s been around and probably won’t retire until the day he dies. He’s funny, he cracks his jokes. He is a White male and he will tell you until the day he dies that he is not a white male. It’s a program called the Howard Hughes program which is in the summer. Funding got cut for that and out of his salary, he took from his salary and paid for that. He probably doesn’t get paid for anything he does and he knows everybody. The Dean of Admissions here, they have a one-on-one relationship with him. He is awesome and one of the only people I have ever met that is really close to the students.
If you have never been to New Orleans, Alex described it as being its own. It is its own type of people, its own type of personality, and very distinct. She emphasized that this description differs greatly in comparison to the rest of Louisiana. It is characterized as a fun place where you will see things and meet people that you have never encountered before, including the accent. The unique and engaging atmosphere of New Orleans is present throughout the campus community as well. Alex recalls sitting outside on the yard and eating crawfish with the student government association several times a month when it was hot outside. The university had dorm step-offs and Greek Fest but also crawfish bowls and catfish and gumbo every Friday in the café. Alex pledged a sorority during her attendance and became very involved with her organization, conducting community service, and participating with campus ministries. She lived about five hours from home but doesn’t recall ever going home because it was always something to do. She stated: “I’m not going to lie, I’m [was] in New Orleans! Socially I was able to establish my personality as being outgoing. Now I can go anywhere and meet someone and be fine.”

The atmosphere of her undergraduate institution was described as being open, allowing an individual to be themselves. A lot of Greek organizations, including academic fraternities, were seen as helpful in building well-rounded students. Alex added that by being at an HBCU you all have commonalities, with a more noticeable one often being race. However, you were also surrounded by people that have a common goal toward higher education. “Having a keen population focused on going to medical school was a big thing; that was a big motivator for me.” Alex remains in contact with all of her
friends from the institution and feels the combination of rigorous academics and an engaging social life makes for a positive college experience. “While it is fun in a culture sense it is also challenging academically, you get the best of both worlds.”

Alex participated in the Summer Scholars program offered by OU for potential medical students at the conclusion of her junior year as an undergraduate student. The program provided exposure and greatly impacted her post-undergraduate interests. Alex described the program as a six week cram course of anatomy, biology, and chemistry. It was described as being a very challenging program but it permitted her an opportunity to see what the university had to offer. Alex was interviewed at the conclusion of the summer program for admittance into medical school and was wait-listed. She had another year of college to complete and decided to use that time to explore other options, but she was admittedly already in love with the school. Alex stated that she was committed to attending this PWRU and did not apply to any other medical school during her senior year of college.

I took a risk, but I really did enjoy the school. One reason being I felt the homey feeling that I had at Xavier. When I met the Dean of Admissions during my first year, he always remembered my name and where I was from, and it was nice to have that.

Although she did not apply to any other medical programs, Alex was not without back-up plans. She stated her plan B was to obtain employment with a professor as a student researcher. This would allow her time to apply to other programs the following year. Alex had a degree in chemistry and explored the idea of applying to a Ph.D.
program as plan C. Not many people entered Ph.D. programs in the field of science preferring to stop after completion of a master’s degree. She made plans to take the GRE and retook the MCAT. Alex added that she was comfortable with the route she had chosen, but was slightly disheartened on the day of graduation. With the exception of a job opportunity, she had no firm plans. She had not received any news regarding her medical school application and found the situation to be disturbing.

I didn’t get news of being accepted into the post-bac program until the day after graduation. At graduation, everyone was asking what am I going to do and I’m like “I don’t know. I have all of these options so we will see.” It was nerve racking but I was excited to get into the post-bac program.

Alex stated she was excited about her admission not only because this was her first choice school, but also because she had heard great things about the program. The post-bac acceptance was not ideal but Alex acknowledged that she did need a year for preparation. She was ready to start classes and did not want to spend a year doing anything that wasn’t going to help her for medical school. “I didn’t want to be sitting at home and get a regular job. That wouldn’t help me and it was kind of nerve wrecking because I was kind of ready to start.”

**Moving forward.** After beginning classes for medical school, Alex stated she was able to accept that attending the post-bac program was good for her. As expected of any graduate level coursework, the curriculum was different and challenging; a lot of the material was unfamiliar. The provision of tutors and an atmosphere of encouragement were identified as positive attributes of the institution. The climate of the university and
the town is perceived as being “hippish” and very laid back, but not connected. Alex added that the school is much larger than she is accustomed and that although she does see a lot of people, they all appear to be individualized and self-segregated. This description however is not reflected in her observation of her medical department on campus. The program is described as having the homey feeling that she is most familiar with. This is attributed in-part to the departments level of disconnect from the campus community.

Socially, Alex described things as being slow. Beginning her program as a young 22 year old relocating from New Orleans, she admittedly wanted to have fun. Alex knew a few people from her participation in the summer scholars program but experienced difficulty building social connections. Coming from an all-Black institution where you now only see one or two Blacks in passing was a challenge.

I found it hard also coming from the south. We are welcoming. We will say hi even if we don’t know you. It’s not like that here. I see a couple of student[s], a couple of Black students and they don’t speak, they just look at you. Especially being in a sorority, I thought that is where I would find many, but it has been difficult.

In spite of the challenges encountered, Alex stated she has taken advantage of the social opportunities made available. She has attended meet and greet sessions for graduate students, explored campus organization fairs, and attended university concerts and athletic events. Alex expressed that coming from an institution where financially
many of these opportunities were unavailable, she is appreciative of the nice events that are available to students.

**Adrienne.** Adrienne is a fourth year medical student from Alabama. Adrienne’s father was employed at a historically black college but she knew very little about HBCUs prior to her attendance. Adrienne reflected that her college choice was greatly impacted by financial considerations and location. She added that she had no significant desire to attend an HBCU, but was even more disinterested at the prospect of leaving home for college. Adrienne received a full scholarship to a university in her hometown where her father was employed and the decision was made. “I wasn’t really ready to go off to college, to leave home. I went to school in my hometown, they gave me a scholarship. That’s what really helped make my decision. I’m like free ride? Let’s go!”

**Where am I?** As a student with aspirations of becoming a medical doctor, resources and education are equally important. For Adrienne, the lack of proper resources as well as rigor inside the classroom was seen as impairment to her higher education experience. The lack of resources at the institution left Adrienne pondering the benefits of attending a predominately white institution.

I was a biology major and we just didn’t have some of the things we needed. Some of our microscopes were old and outdated. We needed some maintenance for stuff and I just don’t think we had the funding. I feel like I may have fared off better at a PWI institution as far as materials. They could probably afford a lot better for my major.
Adrienne questioned the rigor of her classes in terms of preparation for medical school, adding that she did not perceive many of her classes as challenging. She stated that the classes that did appear challenging as an undergraduate, paled in comparison to the academic rigor of medical school. In reflection of her undergraduate experience, Adrienne felt she should have been challenged more academically and the professors should have demanded more from her as a student.

Some classes were harder than others. Some professors’ classes that I felt were too hard in undergrad; I didn’t feel like they were hard enough when I got out. I wish they were harder on me, just pushed me harder, just demanded more of me. The lack of rigor inside of the classroom left Adrienne questioning her peers and faculty as well. She stated she felt surrounded by students that she perceived to be “kind of lazy” and instructed by professors who “were just a little burnt out trying to get students on their level and live up to their potential.” Some of the professors were described as wanting to push the students harder but appeared to grow tired of fighting the students in an effort to make them want to learn.

I feel I wasn’t pushed to my fullest potential because I was surrounded by people who wanted to skate by on the bare minimum. I think the teachers hands were kind of tied, supplies weren’t up to par, the money just wasn’t available to get the items needed for basics in the classroom, and some of the student just didn’t seem like they were there to learn. It sounds bad but I think that is what happened.

Throughout life, Adrienne described only attending predominately white schools; she had no familiarity with being surrounded by all Blacks in an educational setting.
Attending a Black college was the first time she had ever been surrounded by all Black people and the experience left her in a state of shock. “That was the most I had been around Black people and the most time I had spent around a whole lot of Black people.” Adrienne added that she didn’t immediately process the idea of being in a predominately Black college setting when she made the decision to attend an HBCU. Her thoughts were focused on financial security and remaining close to home.

I didn’t think much of it till I got there because again, I’m thinking I have the money, so of course I’m going to go. I didn’t want to come out with my degree and be in a whole lot of debt. I never really gave it much thought.

Adrienne described the experience of attending an HBCU as being “different.” “It’s just really hard to describe how it was; it was just different, even down to the financial aid.” Financial aid was described as being a big challenge for Adrienne. The office was viewed as being disorganized. Stipends and/or book vouchers weren’t received amongst the students until weeks into the semester. This left a lot of students, including Adrienne, feeling frustrated.

Despite some of the encountered drawbacks in and outside of the classroom, Adrienne stated that she remained a focused student. She mainly kept to herself; school and the science lab were her life. Adrienne stated that she did not begin to branch out socially until the end of sophomore/beginning of her junior year in college. She joined a sorority during her senior year, but added that she never got into going out or “clubbing” even after she became a member of the organization. “I crossed over in 2006 and I
graduated a couple of months later. I didn’t really get to go out and have fun as much as some people thought I should have.”

During her senior year of college, the Dean of Admission— for her present medical program—conducted a site visit at her undergraduate institution. This was her first exposure to Osteopathic medicine. She conducted research and learned about the PWRU’s summer scholars program for medical students. Adrienne completed the summer program following her undergraduate graduation and received an opportunity to interview for medical school. Adrienne did not receive admittance to medical school. She was wait-listed and brought into the institution’s post-bac program a year after. Amid her completion of the summer scholars program and attending the post-bac program, Adrienne being working on a master’s degree in biology at her undergraduate institution.

Making it. Coming into medical school, Adrienne described feeling challenged and again wishing she had been pushed harder as an undergraduate student. She added that succeeding in classes that lacked substantial rigor flawed her perception of her ability to compete academically.

When I get to the PWRU I’m thinking I did fine in undergrad. I graduated with a 3.5 and with a 3.7 or 3.8 overall GPA. I’m thinking I’m going into the post-bac program and I’m going to be doing biology courses. I was a biology major so I’ll be fine. I expected to kind of skate. I was quickly humbled!

The course work for medical school was harder and came at a faster pace than Adrienne was accustomed. Additionally, she was adjusting to the transition from
semesters to quarters. She expressed that the change in educational level parallel with the fast cycle of quarters started to become overwhelming for her.

I’m not trying to put down my undergrad at all because I do love [them]. I probably bleed maroon and white, [I] love them... I just wished I would have been pushed a little bit harder maybe then I wouldn’t have struggled so much in the post-bac program.

Attending a PWU returned Adrienne to an academic environment that was familiar to her in terms of racial make-up. She described the experience as being almost back to what she was use to before her undergraduate attendance. The difference being that the university was slightly more diverse than the k-12 system in her hometown. Despite the experienced familiarity of a predominately white environment, Adrienne stated she had grown accustomed to being surrounding by Blacks at an HBCU and their absence did not go unnoticed.

I had got used to seeing all the Black people and I kind of missed them. I felt kind of isolated here. I was used to seeing a lot of Black people and then they were no longer around. Things were different, a lot harder.

Adrienne described herself as having no social life after arriving to medical school. Due to the shock of the pace, she expressed needing time to grow accustomed to the demands of the program. Simultaneously, she battled a severe case of homesickness. Adrienne had previously never lived away from home and the first few months away were described as being very challenging. “I had never lived on my own, I had never
lived outside of my parents’ house, never been to the North. I was dealing with a lot of stuff. I didn’t really think about socializing.”

Adrienne talked with classmates but very rarely went out because she was trying to keep her “head above water.” She added that after episodes of crying and moping, she often engaged in prayer and talked to her mom. Adrienne stated that knowing that God has a plan for her and speaking to those that support her is how she has remained strong throughout her program. She has more of a social life now as a fourth year medical student, but recognizes that it did take time to adjust to the change of being a medical student at a PWRU. Participating in the university’s post-bac program and working through the changes then assisted in her adjustment and level of comfort during her first and second year of medical school.

Kylie. As a fourth year medical student with an interest in obstetrics and gynecology and a member of the military reserves, to say that Kylie is a focused and self-disciplined student would be an understatement. After being introduced in a fitness class and learning of a sisterly connection, the thought of an immediate bonding between Kylie and myself takes root, yet isn’t easily feasible as one would imagine. In the life of a graduate student, one often experiences minimum time to socially engage with others, especially those of differing programs of study. Although plans were often made to meet-up and get to know one another better, Kylie and I were never able to follow-through due to time constraints and program requirements.

It came as a welcomed surprise to learn that Kylie matched the selection criteria when conducting the search process and was often mentioned by other participants when
questioned of any other prospective participants they would suggest. Kylie was most agreeable to participate upon learning of the study and expressed interest in sharing her story. When asked about her HBCU experience, Kylie stated she made the decision to attend her undergraduate institution due to her exposure of HBCUs growing up in the South and for what she identified as wanting the “Black experience.”

My knowledge of my undergraduate institution was that this was a college with mostly African American students who had a good time while they were in college. The thing that was in the forefront for me was the football games, the Classics! I enjoyed those and thought it would be fun to go to an HBCU.

With the exception of a cousin who attended an HBCU, no other relatives had ever attended an HBCU. Kylie added that her cousin’s attendance had no impact on her decision. Her family was very supportive of her decision to attend a Black college. She expressed that they were more concerned about her going somewhere. “It was never an option of whether I would go to college. It was just which one are you going to and whichever one you go to we know you will be successful.”

*About that life.* When asked to describe her experiences while attending her undergraduate institution, Kylie’s demeanor became animated as she took a moment to reminisce. Socially, it was a good experience for her. Although there were some divisions in what Kylie described as “who’s who” on campus, the environment of the institution was identified as being inviting and friendly. She stated that the students established the tone of the university. Many were from southern states and as a generalization of the south, were seen as being more hospitable and accepting of others.
Kylie became involved in a lot of organizations, was able to meet a lot of new people that had similar interests, and all around was able to enjoy daily living.

I was in a music fraternity. I spent a lot of time doing music house, musical performances, and community service. I was also in the biology club so that kept me on my toes in the science field, National Medical Association, and an athletic trainer for the entire athletic department. Other singing groups, because I was on a partial scholarship, opera workshops and myster singers.

Academically, Kylie acknowledged facing challenges early-on and working through them. She had an established interest in the healthcare field and started taking sciences that were a little harder for her. The classes were more of a struggle starting out during her freshman year and became progressively easier to handle.

You have more generalized classes with more students, one hundred plus students in the class. That was a little more challenging for me. I consider those classes to be the weeding out classes. As I progressed on to sophomore, junior, and senior year, the classes were more manageable.

Kylie stated that by the end of her senior year of college she already knew she wanted to attend medical school. She had taken her entrance exams and applied to different programs immediately upon graduation. Kylie stated that she applied to a select group of medical schools but was not accepted to any. This placed a temporary halt on her medical career aspirations. She worked at Bio Life Plasma Center following the completion of her bachelor’s degree before enrolling in the University’s summer scholars program for potential medical students a year later. She completed a year of graduate
courses in the area of sciences during this intervening year. Kylie expressed that her undergraduate provided the foundation of a general science background, but an additional year of graduate courses in the sciences further solidified what she felt she needed in preparation for medical school.

_I can do this._ Starting out as a medical student, Kylie stated that she was without any “buffer” classes. Buffer classes are identified as elective courses such as voice lessons or Black art whose content greatly differ from the curriculum of your major course areas, thus offering a “buffer” in your schedule. Kylie added that she had never taken a course load without any buffers and the change was initially challenging.

Although challenges were experienced academically, this was less evident in Kylie’s social and cultural adjustment to a PWRU. She has a select group that she identifies with within the medical school. One of the characteristics Kyle stated she likes most about her present institution is the diversity. She described this as being very evident within the medical school but is less sure about the university overall. “The medical school works specifically to create that diverse environment for use, which I think is great. As far as the entire campus, I’m not really sure but I think that it seems to be pretty diverse as well.” The program creates this diverse environment through a multitude of ways. Kylie learned about the program through word of mouth and identified this as being a tool utilized by the University. She stated that the University’s heavy recruitment efforts at HBCUs during career fairs and summer scholar’s programs also aided in the continued efforts to establish a diverse environment. Kylie added that
these outreach efforts indicate the university’s interest in targeting minority students and underrepresented cultures for enrollment.

**Andrew.** Andrew is a third year medical student from Virginia. Although not identified as a family tradition, Andrew has a significant family history of HBCU attendance. His father, grandmother, aunts and uncles all attended HBCUs to include South Carolina State, Claflin, Benedict, and North Carolina Central University. However, his family’s HBCU attendance held little persuasion in his decision making process. At the start of Andrew’s college search, HBCU’s were not on the list.

It’s funny because at first when I was first looking at colleges for undergraduate, I really didn’t look at HBCUs and there was not a specific reason why, but the list of schools I had... I just didn’t think about it.

Andrew’s high school guidance counselor- the parent of his best friend and his godmother, greatly impacted his decision to attend an HBCU. She introduced him to a scholarship opportunity offered by the institution that became the deciding factor in his college choice. Andrew selected an HBCU that many of his relatives had previously attended and were well known throughout the university community.

It was just ironic how I ended up going down there. It wasn’t for that reason but it ended up working out that way. With all the family relations down there, plus the scholarship, that’s how I ended up down there. In terms of “oh I must really go to an HBCU” it wasn’t really like that. That’s just how it worked out, but I’m glad I went.
Andrew’s first day of class wasn’t his first day on an HBCU campus. His ability to immediately identify the significance of bands and football classics as it pertained to the culture of HBCUs demonstrated an understanding ascertained with previous exposure. Growing up Andrew remembers watching HBCUs compete in the Battle of the Bands, classic athletic tournaments, and attending Homecomings where stepping competitions are legendary.

Every time I thought about HBCUs I thought about the bands. Every year the Southern and Grambling game comes on and I love watching that game mainly for the halftime show. My dad always went to the basketball tournament every year that they had in March at the coliseum. My senior year in high school, I went with my dad to attend Claflin’s Homecoming and they had a good step show, I really liked it. That’s what I really remember from that time so I could say those are my perceptions. Additionally, he felt comfortable and assured in his ability to succeed in an environment where higher education was promoted.

Going there I was thinking…the high school I went to was half-and-half but when it came to honors classes, it was only me and one other Black guy so I was thinking “yeah I can go down to an HBCU”… a collegiate environment, an environment of higher education. I’m thinking I’ll meet some people who are more like me. Those were the perceptions I had going into an HBCU.

**Just call me doctor.** Andrew immediately began applying to medical schools during his last year of undergraduate study. It was a fraternity brother who introduced
him to the DO route and subsequently Ohio University as an option. As he learned more about DO programs, he found them to be similar to MD programs with the addition that you are also able to learn manipulative techniques. “It’s like physical therapy but you learn that along with everything MD’s do. The way I see it it’s like an MD plus. You learn the same thing they do plus just a little more.” With a new interest in DO programs, Andrew discovered the PWRU of this study in his research as a potential institution of attendance. Learning that the school was less than eight hours away from his home increased his interest.

I didn’t want to be that far away. I’m not a homebody but I didn’t want to be so far away. I can drive more than eight hours but it’s not that bad. Once you’re past eight hours, it’s like “oh my god!”

Andrew enrolled in medical school immediately following the completion of his undergraduate degree. He stated that his transition academically had been fine, adding that he had passed all of his blocks and was surprisingly impressed with his expanded ability to retain information. “What I really like that’s been a boost academically is the amount of information I can retain- forced to retain.” Additionally, his performance on his board exams had been a high point for him as well, stating that he had not always performed well on standardized exams. “I got into medical school. My MCAT was not that great but because I had everything else I had, I was able to get through the gate. “Andrew stated that he grew tired of doing just barely well enough to get to the next step. He added that while attending a PWRU as medical student, school prep courses are made available to the students at a discounted rate, this he explained was something that was
not available at his HBCU, but acknowledged that it would be beneficial for students pursuing advanced degrees.

Andrew identified his academic performance as going well. Challenges have been encountered in his transition, but he expressed he felt it was less to do with coming from an HBCU to a PWRU and more so with the change in level from undergrad to a professional school. “I’ve talked to people who have come from OSU and other places…it was the same struggle at first…the information you have to study.” Andrew added that initially he did break down a few times at the sheer thought of having to retain such a significant amount of information, but stated he never reached a point of complete loss of control.

My first bio exam I remember looking at my notebook and it was only about after four weeks of class and it was about three of my undergraduate binders put together. It was…I’ve broken down a few times- not like “oh my god I’m going to kill myself” but I have broken down a few times at the beginning because I’m thinking how am I going to retain all of this information for the exam.

Throughout his matriculation in the program, Andrew has become more comfortable with tasks before him and more assured in his ability to complete them all.

I laugh back at it now because I have binders bigger over a six or seven week period. I think the struggle at first was just the information that I had to study and the fact that I had to study more.
Andrew added that as an undergraduate student he could review material once and comprehend the information, but admittedly has to review the material as a medical student multiple times to achieve the same results.

I think coming in to medical school I already knew it was going to be different. Coming from undergrad to medical school that’s just common sense. The challenges in terms of mainly the information I had to study, I knew I had to study more.

Andrew identified focus and perseverance as contributing factors for achieving his personal academic standards.

I have always been the type of person not to give up on anything. I knew I just can’t live with that. I’ve always been taught to push through things; it’s not the first challenge of my life. Once I recognize what that challenge is, I put a solution in place to help me overcome that challenge.”
Chapter 5: Cross Case Analysis

According to Ryan (2012), “cross-case analysis relates to comparison being made across different places, or of the same place across different times or indeed of different places at different times, but related to each other by the commonality of a theme identified by the researcher”. At the completion of each participant interview, I listened to and reviewed participant transcripts multiple times to identify themes. I then coded and categorized the emergent themes throughout the data collection process, as described in greater detail in Chapter 3. The identified themes illustrate the participants lived experiences that impact transition and integration in their pursuit of an advanced degree.

Results following the cross-case analysis of the participants were used to answer the research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU?
2. How does this population make meaning of these experiences?

The following sections examine themes generated through use of cross-case analysis as the ten participants describe their experiences transitioning from an HBCU to a PWRU in pursuit of an advanced degree. The quotes selected were chosen to best convey the participants’ voice, conviction, and depth of their experiences in rich detail.

Themes

The following themes were drawn from the cross-case analysis of the student participants: 1.) In or Out: Making the Choice, 2.) Adjusting to the Graduate Experience and Institution, 3.) To be Black in Graduate School, 4.) Campus and Community
Outreach, 5.) Inclusion and Engagement, and 6.) Builders of the Pathway. Figure 2 illustrates the themes drawn from the cross-case analysis.

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<th>In or Out: Making the Choice</th>
<th>Adjusting to the Graduate Experience and Institution</th>
<th>To Be Black in Graduate School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Program and Professional Interests/Opportunities</td>
<td>• Academic Experiences • Social and Cultural Engagements</td>
<td>• HBCU Attendance: Help or Hindrance? • HBCU Attendance: Perceived Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Debt and Decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Societal Pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus and Community Outreach</th>
<th>Inclusion and Engagement</th>
<th>Builders of the Pathway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Institutional Policies and Programs • Will the Real Supporters Please Stand Up</td>
<td>• Stereotypes and Marginalization • Two Worlds</td>
<td>• Responsibility to HBCUs • For Those to Come • Do Over</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Developed Themes**

**In or Out: Making the Choice**

For each of the participants, attending graduate school was a naturally anticipated progression as they navigated through their undergraduate programs. With the question of “if” eliminated, participant focus centered on “which” and “why”; program and
professional interests or opportunities, financial assistance, and societal pressure were prominent factors in the decision making process.

**Program and professional interests/opportunities.** Nine out of ten of the participants identified program and professional interests as being significant factors in their graduate school selection process. For example, after spending two years in a graduate program with an emphasis on horticulture, Kirsten reflected that it was not the right area of interest for her. She took time off to reexamine her passion and identify professions that included some of the aspects of horticulture she enjoyed.

I took a year and a half to two years off and I was able to sort of refine what I actually want to do and I figured from the classes that I had…that I wanted to go into plant systems, the study and evolution of the classification of plants. Then I looked at professors, I just did a Google search and I found the professor who is actually my advisor now and I found people from other universities and I started contacting them. He was the only one that seemed excited about the possibility of working with me.

Five out of the ten participants identified specific programs offered by the university as noteworthy because of their academic preparation, each of them medical students. The university’s medical college offers a summer scholars and post-bac program. The post-bac program is a one-year program inclusive of pre-matriculation engagement for students. Program participants are guaranteed admission to OU-HCOM for the academic year following their post-bac program if they maintained a 3.0 GPA and participated in additional required activities. Only 12 seats are available and to qualify,
students must have applied to OU-HCOM, completed the interview process, and been
denied admission to OU-HCOM. Summer Scholars is a rigorous 5-week program
designed to give students an intensive and realistic introduction to the first year
curriculum at OU-HCOM. Each year, 22 applicants are selected to participate in
preparation for the challenges and rewards of medical school. Eligible students receive a
guaranteed interview for a spot in the next entering class. Participants were reimbursed
for their travel cost to and from the program, received a modest stipend, and expenses of
room, board, and program materials were covered.

In addition to traditional medical school curricula taught by medical college
faculty, graduate students and upper-class medical students, the program focused on case-
based problem solving and small-group team work. Participants in the program benefit
from lectures, clinical experiences, and study and time management skill sessions in
addition to workshops on cultural competency and research methods. Students who
participate do not receive academic credit but are evaluated by medical school faculty
based on their class participation, test performance, general attitude, and an assessment of
his or her potential success in the medical curriculum. The program is designed to
provide a realistic view as to what medical school will be like, but because of the
condensed time frame, it can be overwhelming for some.

It's a killer. The whole thing is if you can do that then you can definitely do
medical school. It was intense, I didn't get to exercise, and I could barely go to
curch. It was just so intense that if that was what medical school was like or
being a doctor, I wasn't going to do it. I have to go to church! My religion is very
important to me and if I can’t do that and exercise is just being healthy. If I can’t do that then I’m going to die an early person because I want to be a doctor? I was over it but then they were like this is just this program, it’s really intense. With medical school, you get a whole year to learn it all. If you can do this then you can definitely do medical school (Jessica).

Debt and decision. Post an open question on any of today’s vast social media outlets (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.), any political or news blog discussing the price of college- particularly inflation- and an individual may become overwhelmed with the volume of responses. President Barack Obama made headlines in announcing his plans for “America’s College Promise,” an initiative to make two years of community college free for students. Student loans have become an important factor in financial assistance and students are beginning to carry over considerable debt from undergraduate to advanced degree programs (Heller, 2001). The average grant aid per student has only increased 20 percent while the annual amount borrowed by students has more than doubled in the past two decades (Heller, 2001). Whether on the left or right side of the fence, the affordability of higher education is an often discussed topic within the U.S. and sometimes the very core of a students’ college-going decision. Many of the participants included financial considerations in their overall decision making process. Two out of the ten participants identified financial reasons as their top reason for attending this PWRU.
When I interviewed they loved me and the admissions office said to do anything they can to get me to come here. They just kept throwing money at me until I said yes because at first I wasn’t going to come (Zoe).

Melanie agreed that finances played a significant role in her selection process as well:

My parents preferred that I attend Ohio State. I actually started an application for Ohio State but I never finished it because I heard from OU first. They offered a scholarship and Ohio State didn’t, so I didn’t bother completing the application because I knew I would be unable to come without the financial assistance.

Financial reasons may not be the sole reason for a student’s decision to attend a particular university, but for many of the participants in this study it was a factor. Melanie stated:

When I came and visited, at first I didn’t want to come. I was thinking ‘where is Athens, OH, I’m going to be the only Black person in town? Oh my gosh!’ I came to visit and after the visit I was like “I can do this.” I then applied and got accepted. They had a good package for me and I came.

Societal pressure. Selecting an appropriate graduate institution was a personal decision, owned by the individual, but was also shaped by the perception of others. Participants often dealt with the perceptions that HBCU’s were subpar or inferior to predominately White institutions. Participants noted that people such as guidance counselors weren’t always fully supportive. Taylor indicated that attending an HBCU was a family tradition that she was honored to continue, but the negative feedback she received from others because of her decision to attend an HBCU as an undergraduate
student caused her to question the merit of having a degree only from a Black College.

She stated:

Going back to hearing rumors that I heard during my senior year, that “attending a Black University you will not get a good job.” Even though I didn’t buy into that stereotype, I somewhat did and so I decided to attend OU.

**Adjusting to the Graduate Experience and Institution**

**Academic experiences.** Eight out of the ten participants found their academic experience to be positive overall. Zoe expressed that her academic experience has been positive, stating that students have a lot of room to grow and make their experiences however they want them to be. Lindsey commented, “academically I feel it has been good, and I have been able to learn and follow what they really try to teach us.”

Of those 8 participants, 4 expressed that they have grown a lot professionally, were exposed to good opportunities, and found the staff to be helpful. Kirsten commented that she had learned a lot, including how to be a researcher. Reese remarked that academically her experience has been amazing and stated she received a lot of support and help from faculty and staff. The remaining 4 commented that the experience has been challenging academically but felt that was to be expected. Andrew summarized his experience and academic challenges as being in conjunction with differing levels of expectancy.

Academically, at first of course it was different and I don’t think this had anything to do with me coming from a HBCU and going to a PWI. I think it was more me coming from undergrad to a professional school. I’ve talked to people who have
come from OSU and other places; it was the same struggle at first- the information you have to study. I’ve broken down a few times, not like “oh my god I’m going to kill myself” but I have broken down a few times at the beginning because I’m thinking “how am I going to retain all of this information for the exam?”

Andrew acknowledged that for him to perform well academically he had to adjust his perception to adequately perform at the advanced degree level. He stated:

I think the struggle at first was just the information that I had to study and the fact that I had to study more. In undergrad I could look at something once and get it, in medical school I have to look at something multiple times. In terms of my performance, my performance is well.

One participant expressed that academically things have been difficult and left her feeling overwhelmed and unprepared at the start of her transition. Unlike other participants, Adrienne emphasized that the level of challenge and rigor she experienced was not anticipated.

I feel like I was challenged a lot. When I got to OU, I’m thinking, “I did fine in undergrad, I graduated with 3.5.” I’m thinking I’m going into the Post-bac program; I’m going to be doing biology courses. I was biology major, so I’ll be fine. I expected to kind of skate. I was quickly humbled! The course work was harder and came at a quicker pace. I was going from the semester to the quarter system and that was a change, the information was coming much faster, things were just at a different level.
In contrast, Taylor expressed that she didn’t feel challenged at all academically. She stated that academically her experiences were “non-challenging and time consuming.”

**Social and cultural engagement.** Over 50% of the participants emphasized that academically their experiences were positive and that any encountered challenges were to be expected at the professional degree level. However, when describing their level of social and cultural engagement attending a PWRU, many of the participants were no longer as enthused or assured when detailing their experiences. Six out of ten participants expressed that socially and culturally their transitions to a PWRU have been challenging. Racial exclusivity and lack of diversity, environment, distance, academics, and lack of fostered community were identified as factors that impacted their feelings of disconnect. Zoe commented:

I’ve lived in a lot of places but never Appalachia. I’ve lived in Maryland, rural Maryland, Washington DC, and I lived in a village and a big city when I was in Nigeria. I’ve lived in a lot of different environments but never Appalachia and it’s interesting. Athens is a college town and it’s also in the boondocks. You feel lonelier, obviously the culture is different, and none of my family is here. Not only am I African American but I’m also African and the culture is doubly different for me. You feel more alone here.

Some of the participants expressed feeling that students on campus appeared to self-segregate. Reese stated that she has met friendly people in her program but noted that “the different races and cultures do tend to gravitate to each other.” Coming from an
HBCU, where many participants expressed experiencing a sense of community, some were not prepared for the lack of diversity or the soloed environment. Adrienne stated:

I had gotten used to seeing all the Black people and I kind of missed them. I felt kind of isolated, I was used to seeing a lot of Black people and then they were no longer around. Things were different, a lot harder.

In addition to the change in racial make-up of the campus environment, cultural differences were another factor that impacted social engagement.

Coming from an all-Black institution and seeing only maybe one or two I found it hard. I found it hard also coming from the south, we are welcoming. We will say hi even if we don’t know you. It’s not like that here. I see a couple of students-couple of Black students- and they don’t speak, they just look at you. Especially being in a sorority; I thought that is where I would find many but it has been difficult (Alex).

Adrienne experienced that the distance away from home compounded with the additional academic pressure impacted her ability to engage socially with others.

I was homesick; I had never been away from home. The first three or four months were rough for me. I had never lived on my own, I had never lived outside of my parents’ house, never been to the North. I was dealing with a lot of stuff- socializing, I didn’t really think about that. I would very rarely go out just because I was trying to keep my head above water...that type of thing.
Two of the participants identified a positive level of social and cultural engagement. Kirsten expressed that this is largely due to developmental growth in her social needs.

My social needs have actually changed since I’ve gotten a little older. If I had come here right out of undergrad it may have been different, but when I came here I was like twenty-six already so kind of like a grown up. The main thing I wanted to find when I came here was a church and I did.

The change in Kristen’s level of maturity and social needs gave way to the establishment of a different social group than she would have previously sought out. Kristen established a greater relationship with her newly found church and spent most of her weekend life there. She stated “I’m there Saturday and Sunday and all of my true friends- not acquaintances- would be at church.”

Two out of ten of the participants expressed limited interest in social and cultural engagement, citing a greater emphasis on academic development. Adrienne commented that she did not have a social life for some time because of the fast pace academically and a desire to keep her head above water. Similarly, Andrew reported that he is more academically driven and has less time for social interests.

Five out of ten of the participants reported that being involved in campus club and organizations have positively impacted their transition. Alex commented:

I have utilized the opportunities that are available. We have concerts, nice concerts. Coming from a school where financially we were unable to do these types of things, you have basketball games and I do that.
To Be Black in Graduate School

HBCU attendance: Help or hindrance? When reflecting on the impact of their HBCU attendance, the participants were able to identify factors that were significant in their development and preparation for graduate school as well as areas of needed improvement. Three participants expressed that their HBCU attendance had no significant impact on their preparation for their attendance at a PWRU. Adrienne and Zoe believed their HBCU education did not prepare them adequately for their graduate education. Zoe shared that her program focused more on the preparation of students obtaining a Ph.D. and less so on the development of those interested in an MD.

Like I mentioned, it wasn’t much and I do feel that hindered me from applying earlier. I do love the fact that I have a master’s in public health and things would not have been the same without it. If I had to do it again I would still get a master’s in public health anyway.

Adrienne expressed a need to be challenged more academically.

I needed more upper level course work. In physiology, we went over it for weeks and then I get to OU and we went over action potential in a matter of days. It was coming faster, maybe that’s what I meant, not necessarily pushed harder but the pace was a little bit faster. I wish I was pushed to do more on my own.

Additionally, Adrienne spoke of the distress she experienced in medical school related to her own perception of capability that was further enhanced as a star student during her undergraduate attendance.
I guess I put a lot of pressure on myself. I was thinking I’ve just gotten into medical school and I should be performing at a certain level. I was just hard on myself. I was not use to not being at the top of my class; all of a sudden I’m toward the lower end of my class and I just wasn’t use to that.

Adrienne noted that these thoughts contributed to her feeling that her “head was barely above water.” She acknowledged that is was a challenge being in an environment where “everybody else was coming from the top of his or her class from undergrad as well.

“Kirsten expressed that her “level of preparation had less to do with being an HBCU graduate than with going into a completely new field.” She added that she felt prepared, but not necessarily on the same level as other students because she switched programs.

Three participants indicated that a culmination of factors—including— their HBCU attendance—impacted their level of preparation. Although their preparation gained from HBCU attendance was deemed adequate, Lindsey and Kylie reported they were also aided by participation in a summer prep program. Lindsey stated:

I feel I was really prepared. Again, I had to cater it towards medicine because I feel it’s a different set of rules when you are talking about medicine. I did other stuff outside of the school curriculum which also helped make me feel prepared.

Lindsey reported being involved in different summer programs including the OU summer program, and SMDP. She describes SMPD as being similar to OU’s six week program inclusive of classes but adds that it is shorter and more clinically focused.

I did research at my undergrad, which helped prepare me academically as well. I came in feeling I could handle it but it was still rough, it was an adjustment. I had
to study a lot more than I was used to and to learn how to organize the information differently but I feel like I had the background to do so.

Four participants reported that their HBCU attendance positively impacted their preparation for attendance at a PWRU. Many of the participants spoke highly of the encouragement and support they received, personal growth and level of preparation for life ahead. For Reese, the support she received from faculty and staff—particularly after the death of her father—was perceived as a great source of strength for her. Taylor identified her undergraduate institution as playing a significant role in her personal growth and development as a student.

I think they played a huge role. While being at my undergrad institution, they challenged and motivated you and I think that really prepared me to be the person that I was in graduate school. I think I was beyond prepared academically and socially, but more academically than socially.

Alex shared a similar outlook on the significance of her undergraduate attendance on her social and academic development.

Very high on the list. They prepare you not just academically but I feel my undergraduate institution likes for students to be well-rounded. Yes academics, but that only gets you so far. You can be the smartest person in the world but if you don’t have any people skills, if you don’t know how to talk to people…how to sell yourself without sounding arrogant. Things such as workshops that we had at my undergraduate institution that had nothing to do with academics. We had self-esteem workshops and building your resume or about how to interact of a
different caliber, people that are already professional...how do you sell yourself
to them? Spirituality... we have a strong campus ministry. I think my undergrad
institution produces well-rounded students.

Similarly, Melanie felt her undergraduate institution prepared her for experiences in the
world and not just the classroom.

I think they prepared me to be ready to be the only person I see that look like me...in more ways than one. My professors would often speak about working in
corporate America and how they were the only Black face in the company or
whatever department they worked in.

Melanie added that a lot of her professors encouraged her to not be discouraged by her
minority status in a work environment but instead to focus on being her best and not
being afraid to step out of her comfort zone.

Having that in the back of my mind, those voices, having those experiences
reiterated in mind “don’t be afraid to be the only one.” I was prepared for that,
prepared for being the only Black face, the only one that looked like me.

However, knowing that and living that are two totally different things. I think
they also prepared me to not be afraid to step outside of what I study. I was a
journalism major and I came here for Latin American studies and they really
don’t have anything to do with one another but just have that confidence and that
willingness to do something you have never done before...I think my
undergraduate institution helped prepare me very well with that.
HBCU attendance: Perceived benefits. Eight out of the participants spoke of the benefits of their HBCU attendance. These benefits were seen as qualities that enhanced them as individuals, students, and future professionals. As a non-traditional student enrolling in college as a teenager and relocating from another country, Zoe indicated that attending an HBCU was what she needed during that time of development in her life.

I think for me then that is what I needed because I was so young. I grew up in an all-African American community, attended an all-African American church, and then went to Africa which is full of Africans. All I knew was Black and African culture and if I had departed from that at such a young age I think I wouldn’t have done, socially it would have taken a larger toll on me. It was good for me to stay in my comfort zone for that period of time.

Although HBCUs’ may often be perceived as limited in diversity due to the homogenous make-up of their student body, participants expressed great pleasure in the diversity they were exposed to.

I feel that I have been exposed to a lot of different things and a lot of different thoughts, perceptions, paradigms, and a lot of everything! I feel that has contributed greatly to my ability to think about things in medical school…especially with cases presented here. I feel I have a tremendous benefit because of my background and where I attended. Sometimes even with the lectures that I mentioned earlier that are presented here, they talk about things that
I learned already while attending my undergraduate institution or was exposed to at my undergrad (Lindsey).

Echoing a similar sentiment, Melanie added:

Again, learning more about my history that I didn’t learn in high school, meeting positive Black role models...or not just Black because I had teachers who weren’t when I was in undergrad but meeting positive influences. People who reiterated and always said “I can be whatever I want to be and that being Black should never hold me back….but these are some reasons why it might hold you back because this is how it really goes in the work place”…just having them to prepare. Here, at a school like this, a lot of the teachers just don’t understand because they are not Black. Most of the White teachers who do understand have studied the Black experience and have a deeper, critical understanding of what it means to be a Black student and some of the things we go through. If you don’t have any reason to study it then you probably don’t know or understand it.

Taylor noted that her attendance made her a “stronger individual, more outspoken, and a product of her environment.” Adding that her undergraduate institution “produced positive people into the environment and that the experience was just life changing.”

Reese, Alex, and Kylie expressed the significance of the support and a sense of belonging they experienced during their attendance at their respective HBCUs and the empowerment associated with those feelings. Reese commented:

The family thing, that meant so much. They taught us a lot just as everyone else,, but the thing that stands out is the family relationship, the one-on-one. It’s all
about being a family, you are the future and they want to do everything for you, why not help you succeed.

Alex added that her HBCU’s success in supplying able medical students helped her experience confidence in this path.

Having that support at my undergrad and coming from an institution where we put a lot of people in medical school…having that reassurance…it’s not just a party school in New Orleans, we have strong academics…in that sense…just reassuring people on that.

She went on to describe the impact of her unique experience with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and how that supported her preparation.

Being a well-rounded student in undergrad just transferred over to being a well-rounded medical student. I feel with Hurricane Katina being a negative that happened, I was able to turn it into a positive. I think you see people devastated by tragedy…whatever it may be you get this sense of remorse. I think that has helped with patients. No matter what setting you are in…seeing that...regardless if you are from New Orleans or Athens, OH, you are struggling poverty wise and government wise. I think having that understanding will take anybody a long ways.

Kylie stated that it was a significant benefit “to be around people who were very supportive and empowering.” She added that it “gave her the confidence in self to know that she could pursue a medical career even though only a select few of Blacks decide to do that or are able to do that.”
Adrienne discussed the significance of her attendance as it relates to her identification of self and her capability and made her more appreciative:

A benefit is that I feel I’m proud of who I am and I don’t think I would have been so aware of the fact that I’m Black (laughter). Growing up around a lot of white people and you’re the only Black person, you don’t really think about …you just blend in. Then I went to this HBCU and its like, Black people do things differently and it’s just really refreshing to see a bunch of people that look like me and then to go back being surrounded by all Whites. I was just more aware of my Blackness. Just knowing what people had to do before me…just to allow me the opportunity. I was more aware of that going to an HBCU. Not everyone had the same opportunities; everyone’s family situation was different.

**Campus and Community Outreach**

**Institutional policies and programs.** Six participants knew only of institutional policies and/or programs within their department that directly impacted minority students. As a medical student, Zoe was familiar with programs impacting students of color within her department but not within the university as a whole.

I know that they have programs, but I have not participated in any of them. I am the only African American that has not participated in any of them; most have participated in at least one the OU-COM offers. They have the summer scholars program, a post-bac program, and a pre-matriculation program.

Lindsey, Reese, Kylie, Andrew and Adrienne, all medical students as well, provided responses mirroring Zoe’s comment. Lindsey commented:
Yeah, they have scholarships which are nice and I’m grateful for. They have the post-bac program which is basically for disadvantaged students and they also have an office. Inside of the student affairs office they have a director for minority affairs who I have a relationship with. OU does have things here…they reach out…they came to my undergraduate as I mentioned earlier. They go to different fairs that target HBCU students. I feel OU does have options for minority students, they try.

Reese expressed great fondness for the university programs impacting minority students and the effect they have on minority student connection in the medical department.

I absolutely love OU and I think OU-COM is the best. Summer scholars is amazing and this is how they get a lot of minorities in the program. This is how the Black people know each other…not all Blacks because some do get direct admissions, but these programs have been beneficial to so many others. I’m a good student but I was never one that just saw the material and got it. The MCAT is the same, if you just look at the scores it would seem that a lot don’t get it but when they perform in the summer scholars program, you see that they do. The summer scholars and post-bac is where you get those people. You have these other schools which have similar programs that you have to pay a lot of money for and you still don’t get in. I’m so thankful to our program.

In addition to summer scholars and the post-bac program, Adrienne identified the HCott program as being “beneficial with bringing in minorities” but expressed regret with the University’s decision to close the office for minority retention. “I really feel that’s a sad
thing but budgets are being trimmed down. I can’t help but wonder... how many students are being lost because that office is gone.”

Two of the participants were less familiar with programs and policies directly impacting minority students, but expressed awareness of the University Multicultural Center. Alex identified the SNMA organization (the Student National Medical Association) and the Office for Multicultural Student Access and Retentions (OMSAR) as being very good organizations that often assist individuals form underrepresented groups.

With OU holding events with OMSAR that’s been good, working with the multicultural office has been helpful to me as far as finding out what’s been going on Greek wise or just having African exhibits in Baker, or what’s going on during health month…things like that. Additionally, she added that the OhioHealth program has been helpful with establishing mentorship connections for minority students.

As a student with past experience working closely with the university’s multicultural department, Melanie was very familiar with programs pertaining to students of color on campus.

I know they have diversity scholarships for the study abroad program, I think that’s a good thing. I know they have different diversity programs. I work in the multicultural office and I know we put on a lot of programs. We reach out to students a lot but people a lot of times confuse multicultural with being Black. Predominantly, we see Black students coming to the events when in fact it’s for
everyone but again, if you are not use to something you probably won’t show your face because it can be scary. We don’t get a lot of students who aren’t Black to attend some of the programs because it says multicultural, but I do know we have policies and programs because I help (laughter).

As the only self-identified Black American graduate student in her program, Kirsten was not familiar with any programs or policies on campus that impacted students of color. “I don’t really think there is much, there probably is but I’m just not aware. I did wish there was a Black graduate student association.”

**Will the real supporters please stand up.?** Researcher Eric Goplerud (1980) noted that during periods of major life changes such as beginning graduate school, the level and quality of social support an individual receives may have a significant impact on their subsequent health and psychological status. Each of the ten participants discussed the importance of incorporating support systems and mentorship as part of transition process and detailed how differing individuals or groups encountered impact their level of support.

Zoe indicated having a support system represents having people in your life that you trust and are able to call own when you need help for whatever reason it may be. This is particularly so at the graduate level. She reflected that she did not have very many friends at either institution but felt she had more friends during her years at undergrad.

I got along with my roommates and I feel I had more of a support system at my undergrad. Here I don’t have any friends; I have acquaintances and less of a
support system. I have more responsibility here, I’m the leader in many different organizations and I facilitate a lot of different things. Sometimes it’s easier to have a helping hand if for no other reason than to help you get materials out of the car and I have about four people I can call on to do that. I have more responsibility and more opportunity for me to need help here, but I have less of a support system and that becomes a problem.

Additionally, Zoe expressed feeling that she has family and former mentors she may call on if needed. She stated, “if I need something I’ll call home but that is rare.” Lindsey added that support systems are a huge “factor in how people perceive his or her experiences and that they provide the foundation for encouragement and supporting one another.” She went on to say:

I feel support systems should be incorporated into the curriculum and I don’t see how it could hurt. Coming from where I came from with an institution focused on the community environment, I would have loved it that would have carried over to here.

Lindsey added that although she has multiple support systems, family and friends are number one because of their high level of encouragement. However, she does make a depiction in who is classified as a friend:

When I say friends I mean friends from back home and friends from undergrad that I still keep in contact with. At my undergrad, I had a support system that also included my teachers who I developed great mentorship relationships with. The
faculty, people in the financial aid office, or the lunch lady… people who I don’t think I would normally develop a relationship with here.

Lindsey has developed a support system as a medical student comprised of friends that she has developed bonds with. “I do have two mentors whom I am developing a relationship with who will probably be around throughout my career.” However, she noted a difference in the promotion of support amongst her undergraduate and current institution of study.

At my undergrad we did a lot together, especially if we were interested in the same type of career. Here it is the same when you do find your peers that you may build a bond with. We eat together, study together, and try to have a life outside together. The difference would be that my undergrad promotes that working together and here it’s “don’t be competitive,” but you don’t have to study together either.

Taylor expressed that supports systems are very important and viable.

They play a major part in the success of a student, whether at an HBCU or PWI. It allows a student to say “hey, I’m going through a situation and I know this person can help me.” They won’t solve it for me but they can give information to allow me to think critically for myself. It allows the person to seek support and not burden his or her academics.

Taylor added that because she felt faculty and staff members were more personable at her undergraduate institution she thought less of developing an identified support system.
I would have to say no during my attendance at NCCU…not directly but I could go to the Chancellor or the Vice President because they were that personable and made themselves available. At OU you had groups available but I don’t think it was for the right reason…it wasn’t out of concern but more so because of a belief that you have to have this. Having the appearance that they are supportive.

Differing from Taylor, Reese found the faculty and staff members at their current institution to be open and welcoming.

The professors here are really open for you to talk to them; they are accessible. You have some professors who are not, but that’s just people in general. I’m not the go to the office and talk to you type unless I’ve really gotten to know you and feel we have a really good relationship…being in blocks you don’t really get to know professors all that well.

Melanie recognized that support systems at the undergraduate and graduate level are important but elaborated on having to build your own if you are encountering individuals less accessible or experiencing difficulty within your program.

I do have a support system but I built my support system. Those people didn’t come and reach out to me saying “let me be your mentor”…no, I made them my support system (laughter). I said “I think you are a good person and I think you need to be in my corner” and they wouldn’t say no to me (laughter). Look at me; I’m the best person at OU! I handpicked my support system whereas at my undergrad everyone was nice.
While in attendance in graduate school her support system is comprised of select faculty and staff members from her department who are identified as being very supportive and helpful. Family and friends are recognized as significant members of her support system.

My family is extremely supportive; I talk to my parents and my brother every day. They call me every day just to make sure I’m up because I tend to sleep over my alarm clock (laughter). That’s pitiful for a 25 year old graduate student. Monetary, my family is very supportive and they pray for me. I know if I changed my major to rocket science they would say “that’s cool, we support you.” The same for my friends back home, they are doing great things. The support goes both ways.

In addition to family, friends and significant other, Kirsten identified the significance of her faith and her church family as being integral parts of her support system.

Most of my true friends are members of my church. When I first came here I was really searching hard. Where are the Black people that are also grad students that I can hang out with? I met a few people; I started building a social network within my department and also at the church.

Kirsten added that her family and friends back home and her church family here make-up her true support system. “Not so much the colleagues, I just hang with them.” Similarly, Alex and Adrienne reflect the mirrored importance of support systems and are inclusive of their faith.
I have plenty of support systems. My faith, family, significant other, and they all support in different ways. I talk to my friends and it’s not academics, just day-to-day…what’s going on in your life. When I talk to my parents, it’s not really academics either…it’s just what is going on in family life…we are really close. When I talk to my boyfriend, it is academic and social because he is a medical student as well and having that support has just been amazing. It’s hard to have a support system that doesn’t really know what you are going through. School wise…having peers, I like to study in groups so it is nice to have that.

Adrienne added that “prayer and talking with my mother” were significant forms of support throughout her journey in her program. Kylie reflected on the significance of having multiple people form systems of support. “I have friends who are in medical school with me as well as family and other friends that support me and listen to me complain.”

Kylie added that she didn’t recognize the importance of a support system until she entered graduate school.

I didn’t realize that until the one year of grad classes at OU. That was a time for me when I was changing my study habits. I was going to professor office hours, which I had never done at my undergraduate institution. If I wasn’t completely sure about a topic, I would try to get more information on my own but I would never got to a professor so I guess that one year of grad classes taught me that if I don’t go to my professors then I won’t make it to medical school and if I don’t make it to medical school I won’t be successful and do what I’ve come here to do.
She added:

…when you see someone who has been in your shoes that encourages you, that gives you hope. They can give you tips that you will never find and so that has definitely helped me and shaped my medical school tenure.

Andrew reflected that although it is important to have a support system of family and friends, it is sometimes difficult when members in those roles do not fully comprehend the challenges you have and/or will encounter.

Yeah I do have a support system and as you talk about challenges, that just made me think of something else in terms of support systems. You don’t really have a lot of people who understand what you go through in medical school, especially when you get to your third and fourth year rotations. Medical school differs from undergrad. You have no set amount of hours you have to study. Some things you may get fast and some things may take more time. Some people just don’t understand, even family.

Andrew stated that although he has a lot of family and friends that support him, many of them do not understand his schedule or the life of a medical student. “It might be a time when they say “we don’t talk like we used to”… well I only have a certain amount of time and it may be used to study for this exam.” Andrew credits his god brother as being of a select few that understood his schedule and time constraints. He went on to add that limited understanding of the complexity of a graduate or medical students schedule can also adversely affect interactions with the opposite sex.
I think the main struggle has probably been in terms of understanding my schedule has been females that I’ve talked to. Not necessarily in relationships, but just in terms of having time to hang out. That has been the main challenge socially, having people understand my schedule and trying to find somebody that will be more likely to understand my schedule. That has been the most challenging and having some of my friends that I don’t talk to as much because we’re just all doing different things. But in terms of support, I know people support me.

Inclusion and Engagement

**Stereotypes and marginalization.** Black students may experience additional stressors because of their minority status during attendance at a predominately White institution. Such stressors may include discriminatory occurrences and varying forms of oppression. In detailing their experiences, the participants reflected on battling stereotypes and feelings of marginalization they have encountered in their pursuit of an advanced degree both in and outside the classroom. Eight participants reported that they have battled against stereotypes and/or experienced feelings of marginalization either directly or indirectly. Zoe expressed that during her HBCU attendance, she was less likely to have to combat stereotypes pertaining to her race and capability as a student. However, she reported that there is a significant difference when in a setting surrounded by all Whites.

Not so much racism at the HBCU because we were all obviously minority so that wasn’t so much of an issue. I guess that’s sort of the difference in the culture and
the camaraderie. We all understood each other because we had the same culture and we all had that unspoken bond. Here at a PWRU, people have said things such as “the only reason African Americans are here is because of affirmative action” and we are “stupid.” Here I find sort of that small town mentality and you can tell they have never been out of Ohio and they don’t understand the world outside of Ohio. When you are different and you come to them…everyone is threatened by something different and you can tell they are threatened. Some make negative comments and I guess that’s what I mean by differences of culture.

Zoe further implied that “whenever you are in a class with other people…especially an honors class…you want other people to think you are smart. No matter where you go, you don’t want to be seen as the dumb one in the class.” She added that as a Black person she feels there is an additional stressor because of her race.

Here it is that type of situation but with the added element of plus I’m Black and I need to really watch what I say and how it comes across because I don’t want people to think that because I’m Black I’m not as good as they are.

The pressure associated with a constant battle of proving your capability is described as being “exhausting.” Zoe stated, “I don’t want to have to worry about that all the time, but you do.” She added that the additional pressure is more pronounced at a PWRU, “because although not everyone who is White feels that way…you don’t know who does or who doesn’t.”
Following this line of discussion, Zoe was asked if she had ever been in a situation where she felt similar in the realm of academia outside of Ohio University. She responded:

Yeah. Anywhere you have White people; even outside of OU. For example, if you are going to OU and you are colored, you don’t want to be late because the stereotype is that colored people are always late. It’s that you know the stereotypes and you don’t want to fit them, no matter where you are or what setting you are in. You go to a restaurant and you don’t want to be loud, or you want to make sure you give a good tip. Let me clarify that when I say colored people, I use that term when I’m not only referring to African Americans. I’m talking about Hispanics; I’m talking about Asians that is when I use the term colored people. When I’m talking about African Americans, I will say Black…just to make the distinction.

Similarly, Kristen detailed her experience battling stereotypes based on others’ perception of her capability and feelings of constantly balancing two sides of self for fear of proving the stereotypes correct. She reported that although she has experienced racism in her pursuit of an advanced degree, it has not been from those who “matter such as professors, committee members, and people who would write letters of recommendations.” She stated:

I have experienced comments from my lab mates. They say stupid stuff to me all of the time. We didn’t start out with it…we actually started as friends first then
they would start making inappropriate references to slang terminology supposedly used amongst Blacks.

Kirsten noted that when she’s comfortable, she may “let out Black slang” but expressed concern that her lab mates use this against her.

I came in one day saying something about the behavior of my students and I was saying they came in acting “brand new” and they replied “oh brand new that’s another one...oh my gosh!” They use it annoyingly or they will do and say things they believe Black people will say, but know they have never heard me say these things.

Kylie detailed an incident within her program that she felt calls into question the perception of her peers.

I can think of one incident in an anatomy class during my first year of medical school. We were in groups in the class and I felt very comfortable with the material and I would point that this is this or this is that, this is this muscle or whatever. One particular student in my group that was Caucasian would never hear me. He would ignore me; he would never acknowledge what I said. However, if another Caucasian said it was this, it was always ok, it was accepting as the right answer at that point. I took that as it could be racism. It could be that he just didn’t think I knew what I was talking about, but it definitely set the tone for that group.

Kylie added that because OU recruits heavily from HBCUs and for minority students in general, some individuals may stereotype that it is only African American students that
use summer program or the post-bac program as a stepping stone to get into medical school. “That’s not true. It’s a higher percentage of African American that have done the program, but that’s not true for all, and it’s for all minorities...whether you are from Appalachia, Caucasian, or Asian.”

Melanie stated that although no one has ever said anything to her directly, she feels stereotypes are sometimes subconscious.

I’m sure someone has looked at me and has drawn a conclusion about me. I don’t necessarily know for sure, but I do think a lot of times students here…especially at OU because you don’t have that many Black students and they have only had experiences with a few and if they haven’t had any experiences then they take what they see on TV and start to think that’s how everyone is. As far as stereotypes are concerned, I’m sure people have drawn conclusions about me.

Although no one has said anything directly to Melanie, she detailed an encounter as a graduate student on campus that she felt was racially motivated:

I have a vehicle that has a specialized license plate with Martin Luther King Jr. on it. During the week of the opening of his monument; that same week maybe the day before or the day after they opened it in Washington D.C., someone spray painted across my license plate...they spray painted it completely Black.

Melanie expressed feelings of shock and displeasure with the act of vandalism and violated with the thought of someone watching her.

I was shocked! I had my HBCU plate...if they knew what an HBCU was they probably would have spray painted over that because that is a Black school. I was
surprised...I was like “damn!...really!”...especially at a university, you just assume people are more open-minded. Especially students… you start to have classes, interact with people of different races, and you start to learn that things may not be as you think they are when you interact with other people. You begin to break down those barriers and stereotypes and you realize we all put our pants on one leg at a time, we all brush our teeth in the morning. The only difference between me and you is that my skin is a little browner. At least that is how I felt when I started being exposed to other races throughout high school. I was just really surprised and it kind of made me feel like someone was stalking me, I felt as if I was being watched and I spent a lot of time by myself here on campus going to the library late at night. I studied in the lab very late at night. I just felt as if my safety had been breached; as if someone was following me, stalking me. I don’t even know where it happened…on campus or at my apartment. I just randomly saw it one day when I left Kroger. I was definitely surprised and I didn’t feel safe for a while but then I realized if someone wanted to do something to me they would have done it by now. They just wanted to be an asshole and spray paint the car.

Adrienne stated that although she has encountered stereotypes in her pursuit of an advanced degree, she questioned whether her sensitivity to comments has been heightened due to her HBCU attendance.

I feel it has been some stereotypes. I don’t know if it’s just because I’m more aware of it now that I come from an HBCU and I go back to being a minority
again. Maybe I’m just more aware of some of the differences and some of the things people say. I don’t know if I’m more sensitive, but I feel like I definitely have something to prove. Part of me is thinking that if a came from a Yale or Harvard, they would listen to me. I remember when I was trying to get into medical school and talking to someone from admissions and panel and he was telling me how they rank students if they went to a particular institution. If you went to Cornell or one of these Ivy leagues schools, they ranked you higher. If you went to some Division I school you are still ranked high, but not as high as Harvard; whereas if you went to an HBCU you are ranked last.

Andrew reflected that although he has battled against stereotypes in his pursuit of an advanced degree, it is important to know yourself and be secure in your capability. He stated, “I really don’t care about them because I’m comfortable with myself and that’s really the main thing.” Andrew added:

If you show people that you are comfortable with yourself, they will try to criticize you, try to bring you down but it doesn’t matter when you are comfortable with yourself. Once I learned that, I already knew the formula to get people off my back.

Similarly, Zoe stated that the best way to address such a stereotypical mentality is by continuing to excel academically.

By proving the stereotype wrong. When they say “African Americans are stupid and couldn’t get in without affirmative action,” I happen to know that I have a scholarship and I’ve never told anyone that and I know it’s not true. When I
interviewed, they loved me and the admissions office said to do anything they can to get me to come here. They just kept throwing money at me until I said yes because at first I wasn’t going to come. I just try and prove that I’m not stupid and that’s extra work. Everyone when in a classroom with other people can be a little self-conscious about what you know in relation to what other people know. I had that at the University of Maryland but for different reasons, not for the reason that he thinks I’m inferior because I’m Black.

Two of the ten participants reported awareness of the many challenges and stereotypes faced by many students of color in pursuit of an advanced degree, but have not encountered any during their present attendance at a PWRU. Alex noted that she experienced battling with stereotypes and racism more so during her undergraduate attendance within the town of her school.

Actually, New Orleans is the worse I have ever seen. You wouldn’t think that because now they are 65% or 70% Black, but you had some strong racism events that occurred in New Orleans. It’s kind of like they were stuck, some of the people that lived in New Orleans were still stuck in times and it was apparent. I never had anyone face-to-face…make face-to-face racial comments and I had that in New Orleans.

Alex added that while she did not experience racism at her school, she did encounter professors who were less supportive of Black students.

I did come across some of the professors. It’s interesting at an HBCU when you have mainly 90% Black students but maybe 5% Black professors…and that was
interesting because you think…I have come across some professors making comments that…not directed at me but the university as a whole and being bitter in a sense that it was kind of weird. More of the racism that I was a victim to was more in the city of New Orleans.

Alex asserted that while she has encountered classmates making inappropriate comments, she felt that they were not meant to be hurtful, but are ignorant. “I’ve come across a lot of ignorance at OU-COM (Ohio University’s College of Osteopathic Medicine).” Alex further elaborated on the importance of recognizing how to appropriately address such ignorance.

I think it was different at my HBCU because you are younger; you’re an undergraduate and respond differently. Mine was ok as far as approaching it sometimes in a positive way and sometimes in a negative way. Being at a professional school, I have felt that sometimes I have had to hold my tongue a lot more because what you realize is that you are going to come across it no matter what stage you are in in life and the older you get and the more degrees. You have to learn to deal with it because this is a professional setting and they stress that here, always be professional. It’s hard because sometimes you don’t want to be professional because it’s so much ignorance, but I have found here…going to the right people if necessary…if not, letting it go.

Reese noted that although she is aware that she is a “Black woman,” she has not had to address any forms of stereotypes or marginalization in her pursuit of an advanced degree. She did however, elaborate on an experience in high school while living in
Mississippi where she felt her capability as a student was called into question because of her race. She stated, “I was in ninth grade when I realized I was Black and that I would have to work ten times harder in order to excel.”

Reese expressed that this mindset was not present during her undergrad attendance because she was “surrounded by Black people.” She stated, “Alcorn was like a family and you feel safe, as if you are home. When you go out to conferences and do programs, then the guard comes back up and it’s all about hustling.” The mentality of having to “hustle” or to work twice as hard when in the presence of others outside of your race in an effort to limit cause for questioning of your capability mirrors the outlook previously mentioned by Zoe.

**Two worlds.** Each of the ten participants’ reflections of their experiences with peers in attendance at a PWRU emphasized developed skill in straddling two cultures: their ethnic culture and the professional culture of higher education. Four of the participants placed specific emphasis on the importance of professionalism at the advanced degree level and not wanting to prove stereotypes or preconceived notions of African American students correct to faculty or staff members.

Taylor discussed that her interaction with her peers while attending a PWRU were primarily confined to the classroom. She stated that is was more so “hi and bye outside the classroom and let’s focus on class work in the classroom.” Her level of comfort and the unease associated with being herself was recognized as an attributing factor to her limited interaction with her peers.
At OU it was more uptight, I was never really able to let anyone know the real me. It was not like I was representing me, but I was representing African American women who would attend OU and I didn’t want to encourage negative stereotypes. At my undergrad, during social times I was able to converse with anyone whereas at OU, I stayed to myself. It was not because I had a problem, but it was that I could tell the difference in treatment among myself and those who identified as Caucasian.

Similarly, Reese acknowledged an inability to be her true self within the PWRU environment.

Here it’s the professionalism, it’s always about being a professional, you have to keep that level of professional that you can’t be yourself. I can’t wait to go back home where I can just be me, or now that I have a boyfriend up here, I can be me with him and not think if I’m saying the right or wrong thing. I think that’s just the big thing; professionalism and thinking is someone going to report me…whereas you can just be yourself at home.

Melanie added that when she’s home, she’s “more relaxed and her guard is down” as opposed to when she is at OU. Kirsten commented:

I think...like I said...it’s just me wanting to put on a good face for White people... not falling into... in my mind... this may not be true but in my mind…the stereotypes of Black people. I just don’t want to fulfill that stereotype. Also, you know, I don’t know...isn’t there something called double consciousness? I guess it exists and... yeah... and with professors it’s more about being respectful.
Kirsten concluded that the duality she experiences is attributed more to her interaction with peers and less so with faculty and staff members. “With the peers, it’s just me not wanting to fulfill their stereotypes.” Alex noted that her interaction with peers in her program has been overall positive.

You learn who has a positive personality too. I feel I kind of cling to those few people. I would say as far as introducing me to a different setting people wise and community wise. I’ve always done community service… this is a different kind of community service when you go to rural poverty from urban poverty. It’s different but still poverty…so that has been a positive.

However, similar to other participants, she acknowledged a line of separation amongst her and fellow classmates.

Here at OU most of my interactions are strictly academic with peers. Every now and then we may go to the movies and things like that…it’s pretty much academic. Whereas back home it’s more of a balance, I have the academics during the day but I have a social life as well and with the same people. That’s probably the biggest difference…a balance.

Adrienne noted a difference in her level of comfort within a PWRU environment as well.

I feel like I am a little different here. At home, that is where I go to relax; up here, this is business. Most of my dealings with people up here is business. When I go home, I just want to relax and mellow out. When I say home, I mean Alabama.

Adrienne noted a similar existence during her undergraduate attendance as well.
I guess it’s still kind of the professional relationships. I was trying to get the most out of my education and was really in the books during undergrad. I would do work here…most of my relationships were work…we may go out to get something to eat and talk about what’s happening in the lab or in class, but when I went home that is when I would relax.

Similarly, Kylie noted that her peer interaction overall as a medical student has been good.

The peer interaction has been pretty good. I can only speak for within the medical school and the culture at OU-COM is very diverse, so for the most part, people are open and accepting and they want to learn more about you. Also, within OUs classes, you have a smaller curriculum…I did that and it’s even more diverse. It was more family oriented and culturally interested in each other.

Kylie added that there is a noticeable change related to her level of comfort and less concern on others critique of her.

At home, there is no pressure…no one is judging you. You can let loose and not worry about how you are perceived by another individual. Whereas at OU, in the medical school someone is always judging your performance, whether it’s just a casual conversation that they over hear, and that’s just the professional environment….the culture of the professional world. I feel more pressure in the setting when I’m at school as opposed to when I’m at home.

In dealing with the pressure, Kylie stated that “I suck it up! Try to fight through it…I do what I need to do in order to succeed!” Mirroring Kylie, Andrew acknowledged
his positive peer interaction within his program, but recognizes that there is a difference. He reflected on previous experiences and their impact on the person he is today.

For the most part, my peer interaction has been pretty good. I have friends of all races and I think that had a lot to do with before I came to an HBCU, it wasn’t a shock.

Andrew expressed that his ability to adapt has a lot to do with attending high school with military families and being involved in various summer programs. He stated that because he already had to interact with people of different races and different backgrounds before coming to college that the change wasn’t really a big challenge. He added that because many students attending OU are from small towns in OH, it does impacts how they view him.

A lot are from very small towns in OH and I think that when I came to OH that was something that surprised me…Some of them have a small town mentality but that is not the case with all of them. A lot of them are actually good people that I’m actually good friends with. What was a challenge was how they saw me because a lot of them hadn’t had experiences with other races and ethnicities. I wanted to make sure that, not like I had a lot of pressure on myself but I wanted to change any negative perceptions that they had of other races especially Black people.

Andrew went on to detail a specific experience that stood out to him and highlighted his desire to eradicate some of the impressions that other races have of Black people.
The biggest experience I had was with the people that I stayed with at the Summit. When I first got there, I stayed with two people that I didn’t know. One was a fifth year senior and one was a senior and they both came from small towns. One of my roommates, I was actually about to fight him because he said some racially insensitive things. One occurred where he expressed thoughts about the school giving scholarships to every minority that they know of and I’m looking at this dude like “really!” I worked my butt off for the opportunities that I have received and wouldn’t have gotten them if I didn’t work hard in school and he had a couple of scholarships himself. How could he get mad about someone else’s opportunity?

Andrew noted that he and the roommate later became friends and stated the roommate later informed him that he had never interacted with Black people. The only thing he knew was what he saw off of TV. He said at his high school, it was only a few Blacks and Black teachers never really stayed long, so all he knew of Black people was what he saw on the news, which most of the time wasn’t good. He never had any experiences, so I was glad that I could come around and show that a lot of us are not like what you see on TV.

**Builders of the Pathway**

**Responsibility to HBCUs.** Each of the 10 participants acknowledged a sense of responsibility to his or her undergraduate institution. They reflected on their perception of responsibility to their HBCU and what this meant to them. Taylor recognized a sense
of responsibility and interpreted it as a right and not a burden as others may perceive of their undergraduate institution.

    I think I will forever be indebted to the institution because that is where I first learned about higher education and student affairs. Not only academic information, but other information that allows you to be successful in life such as identity development. I don’t feel quite the same about Ohio University, but I will endeavor to give back in some type of way to OU.

Taylor further elaborated on how she feels this sense of responsibility has impacted her as a graduate student.

    I studied twice as hard because I wanted OU to see a great product of my undergraduate institution. I wanted to do that by excelling academically in my program, I wanted faculty and staff members to see that students who come from HBCUs are intelligent, they are bright, they are professional, and all those good things often associated with other races.

    Reese noted that her mentors from undergrad were always encouraging that she not forget about them. She recalled them often saying “don’t forget about us…you made it and don’t forget about us.” Reese added that she received a full scholarship to attend and this also impacted her sense of responsibility.

    That was during my first semester and my advisor came in informing me of this scholarship that I should apply for and it was full everything plus a stipend. It came with money for conferences as well. Alcorn flew me to Florida, Dallas, Houston, New York, Boston, just all of these amazing places and they covered all
the costs. I know I definitely would like to give back...maybe build a chemistry building and have my name on it (laughter). I know I would like to build something because it was just so much that they gave me, how much they believed in me, and how much they invested in me because they just knew I was going to be somebody. We have no DO school at any HBCUs but I would love to do something like that. The HBCU changed my mind about everything and it was just so great...encouraged my little sister to go to one. It got me where I am now and I don’t know if I went to another school if I would be here, but I do know that I’m here now because of an HBCU. The support was amazing and I am definitely giving back.

Similarly, Melanie stated that she would strongly encourage others to attend HBCUs.

Definitely, I attend my Homecoming, I give back, and I encourage other students to attend my undergraduate institution because I had a great experience. If I didn’t have a great experience, I wouldn’t tell anybody to attend...I wouldn’t promote it.

Kirsten added that she does recognize a sense of responsibility to her undergraduate institution but is presently less able to do anything about it as a graduate student.

Well when I’m making money... real money... I definitely will be an active member of the alumni association. If I ever had lots of money I don’t know how that would happen (laughter), but I would give to not just FAMU but to the college of engineering, science, and agriculture, which is the college I graduated from. It’s the smallest college on campus, they don’t get a lot of respect, they
don’t get a lot of funding, and they need to do more recruiting of Black students into those programs. If I had lots of money, I would give some specifically to them for building their program, the facility, and also recruitment and retention of Black students.

Alex and Adrienne both acknowledged a sense of responsibility as well. Alex commented:

Yes, in a sense that colleagues that went before me at OU-COM pass down this information, that is why I keep in contact with my pre-med advisors. Telling them about things, telling them about coming to OU, telling them what they need to know. I think I have that responsibility telling them what I know, telling them about other places besides Meharry and LSU and other places you can go. You don’t have to feel I guess, that sense of fear coming from an all-Black institution and going somewhere where you are just one of hundreds.

Adrienne acknowledged that while she may not feel as if her program was as challenging as it could have been, she did have mentors there who really did what they could for her.

People who pulled me to the side and offered words of encouragement because they saw...I guess they saw something in me that I wasn’t seeing myself because I didn’t always want to be a physician. That didn’t come until later in undergrad. People there would tell me I could do anything that I wanted to do, they would tell me about research opportunities, people just had projects going on that if you
didn’t know them then you wouldn’t know about them. They would see and tell me about these things. They would send me to these conferences.

Adrienne added that she remains in contact with many of these individuals and often sends information to them about the summer scholars program.

It’s a gentleman now that...he is a first year medical student now...I told my mentor back home about the summer scholars program and now we are coming.

We are coming from my HBCU! I’m really excited; feel as if I’m burning a trial. Sounds kind of eerie.

Simply put, Adrienne stated that she wants to reach back because someone helped her out. Adding that having professors see the potential in her pushes her to succeed.

It makes me want to work harder…I feel like...again I’m always harder on myself than I need to be but others are back home who would love to be in medical school. On days when I feel like why am I doing this...I could be married and have a family…when I start complaining or feeling bad for myself I just think of people back home...taking the MCAT and going through everything to get in. I do this for them…I do this for them…just to show them it can be done.

Mirroring the other participants, Kylie recognized a sense of responsibility to her HBCU that is not perceived as a burden but a desire to give back.

I feel I have a financial responsibility based on what I would have wanted to have while I was there. To further improve on what was their when I was attending so financially I can help improve the facilities and help someone get an education that might not be able to get one otherwise. In addition, I feel like I have a
responsibility to mentor as well...if I can...others who are in same situation as me. Others who may have been the first in the family to graduate college and want to pursue a professional degree.

She added:

At this point, it doesn’t impact me very heavily in that I’m still focused on my career. I feel that once I am done with my medical training and residency as well, I could be more involved and more readily available to fulfill that commitment.

Zoe and Andrew both recognized the significance of their undergraduate institutions. In regards to a sense of responsibility, Andrew commented:

Well one I have a degree from them, which means that anything I do...now I represent them. I guess that’s one of the pressure points I described. Now I’m at a PWI professional school and I’m not just a Black man who went to a PWI for undergrad. I’m a Black man who went to an HBCU for undergrad and the way that I perform is a reflection on South Carolina State and how they prepared me to come here. If I didn’t perform well, they will be like “well he goes to an HBCU.” It wouldn’t just be South Carolina State isn’t a good school if I didn’t did perform well; it would be “oh well it’s an HBCU...no wonder.” I feel I do have that responsibility to represent them well and if I do perform well I boost the university’s name and HBCUs because they are not going to see South Carolina State....they will just see HBCU... that’s how it is.

For those to come. Each of the participants shared their thoughts on what they felt students following a similar HBCU to PWRU transition should know. A multitude of
varied suggestions and thoughts believed to help prepare and strengthen future students were shared. Participants encouraged HBCU graduates to have an open mind when transitioning to a PWRU, conduct research to make informed decisions, build off personal experiences, study hard, don’t fall into stereotypes, and not allowing oneself to be constrained to what you think being “Black” is. Five out of ten participants each stressed the importance of having a support system, finding a mentor, and/or building a sense of community throughout your academic tenure.

Zoe commented:

Don’t fit the stereotype, and have a good support system of your own that is made-up outside of the institution of family and friends that you can go to when things get hard. You need that in life in general and you may or may not find a sufficient support system at the institution that you are going to.

Lindsey stated she would:

Let them know that it’s not going to be the same from how it was, it’s different. I would tell them that his/her experiences would do nothing but help them in the long run. They should know they may have to learn how to develop differently socially because at HBCUs, it’s automatic to have that sense of community or easier to have that sense of community.

Lindsey added

They might have to try different things or go outside of what they are used to in order to have that same level of interaction that they are used to, but it can happen. Most of my advice would be focused on the social aspect because
academically, I don’t feel that it is much of an issue. I feel I struggled academically just as much as my counterparts who didn’t go to HBCUs. My advice would focus more on social aspects and that they may have more trouble adjusting to it, but it happens. You do get adjusted to it; you just may have to go outside of what you are accustomed to.

Kylie stated that she would encourage them to find someone who is doing what you want to do that you can identify with.

Whether it is on a race level, specialty, financial, or background, find someone that is doing something that you want to do and talk to them. Allow them to be your mentor through the process because it helps when you have someone doing what you want to do, tell you his or her process, how his or her path to medical school, or how graduate school went.

She added that she “didn’t have that and I didn’t know to have that.” She identified this as something she has learned over the year stating, “you need help...don’t try to do it alone.”

Reese commented that she would let them know:

Definitely get ready to work hard and definitely make sure you have a good backbone for support. Cultural differences can be a big aspect...for me I understand that all of the Blacks shouldn’t always be together but it’s just cultural differences. I went to Puerto Rico on a group trip and I was the only Black, it was an experience. When I was with them, I couldn’t be how I am with you. When you are in a predominantly White environment, you’re automatically going to go
where you feel comfortable. When I was with them I wasn’t myself, I couldn’t just me as I am when I’m with my own race. I think that’s the same for all races. Definitely have a support system already in place and if you do find a support system while you are at the institution then it’s even better because now you have two.

Reese stated that coming from an HBCU, students should know that:

Culturally…you are going to be different, you will see differences. I have a friend who is in Japan and she met a guy and they broke up because of the differences. The basic things such as music and everyday life.

Similarly, Kirsten also encourages students to be mindful of cultural differences but asks that students view them as new opportunities and not barriers.

I would tell them you are coming from an HBCU. I know this is what we like to do this, that, and the other. You might run into some differences at a PWI but I would say embrace the differences and use it as an opportunity to learn something new because the more new people you meet, the more new experiences you can have.

Kirsten stated that her younger sister is graduating from an HBCU and is interested in attending the University of Georgia, a predominately White university, and she has tried to prepare her for the differences.

I told her “They are going to talk about beer so don’t act crazy when they mention beer all of the time because they are going to be telling you about where you can go to drink. Don’t act…this is what you can expect… it’s going to be different.”
would tell them you are coming from an HBCU. I know this is what we like to do this, that, and the other.

Kirsten added that she would encourage HBCU graduates not to shy away from making new friends but to be open to different things such as going to a “micro-brewery or enjoying the people playing the cello and laying on blankets in the grass”.

We don’t have that at HBCUs…Make new friends, be prepared, have an open mind, get all you can from this experience. It will be a different experience but it can be a good one in a different way from how an HBCU is. One more thing, don’t be to constrained with what you think Black is and let it prevent you from trying new things. Ok, that’s all.

The pursuit of an advanced degree can be challenging for many students regardless of background or undergraduate education. For Black graduate students transitioning from an HBCU, some of those challenges may be inclusive of feelings of inferiority or uncertainty in one’s capability. Such threats to a student’s capability and esteem may be attributed to the onslaught of literature questioning the value of an education received at a Black college or an over saturation in today’s media of the disreputable minority. Five of the ten participants encouraged students interested in following a similar path to not fall prey to feelings of inferiority, be mindful of what is best for them, and know that you are capable of excellence. Melanie commented:

I say go for it! I say go for it at any institution. If the institution has the best program for you then you should do it. I don’t think attending an HBCU will hold you back or a White institution will push you further, but you have to be
realistic about the networks and the connections that some institutions have.

Sometimes the big corporate connections are at the White institutions a lot of times…not that you don’t have those connections at a Black school because you do, especially with businesses and banks. Banks put a lot of money into HBCUs depending on your major. You should do research and find out what is best for you. If a White institution has the best of the best for you, then that is where you should be applying.

Alex echoed a similar sentiment:

I would say go for it! I would say keep you mind open and your options open, and don’t be ignorant to the fact that you can’t do it or you are not…because I know one of my biggest concerns was that I would not be as good as some of my classmates that come from a different school. You have that, HBCUs have that stigma of not being as challenging and you have to know that if you have the opportunity to go somewhere where you could be uncomfortable…it could be beneficial.

Taylor encouraged students to:

Study hard, don’t do work just because you want a good grade but actually obtain the knowledge, think about what you want to do in life and the reasons why you would like to attend a PWRU, make sure you have a support system, and know that you can do whatever you set your mind to. It can be a great experience no matter how it may look. You may have a lot of opportunities. Never give up because of stereotypes, uncertainty, or lack of resources.
Adrienne stated she would tell them:

> You can do it. Don’t let anyone tell you that your education is inferior. There may be differences and you may become aware of that, but if you have been accepted in the program they saw something in you; you can make it through it. Don’t ever question where you come from...use it. Just...you are not inferior no matter where you come from...you can do this. If you can get to this point...I’m rambling... (laughter)...just do it!

Lastly, Andrew encourages students to know that they are being watched.

> Luckily I had life experiences and people in my life to share what you need to learn but I can say this...*know that you are going to be watched at all times*. You are going to be watched all the time, watch how much information you share with people...kind of feel them out first. If you know that you get a better idea of how they perceive you without them actually having to tell you.

Andrew added:

> Don’t just do what’s required, but do something that’s not required, which can help yourself. It doesn’t have to be extra credit for a grade but something that can boost your reputation, do it. One of my good friends said this and I still believe it, “in order for us to beat struggle we have to want it.” So if you are always on your p’s and q’s knowing everybody is watching, going above and beyond, you have no choice but to be congratulated. But at the same time, don’t think that all White people are against you.
**Do over.** As an ending question to the interview, each of the participants were asked: Knowing what you know now concerning the transition into an advanced degree program, would you still make the same decision to start at an HBCU? All 10 of the participants responded with an unequivocal yes!

Zoe:

“Yes!”

Lindsey:

“Absolutely!”

Taylor:

“Absolutely. I think my decision making was great even if I didn’t enjoy every day of my undergraduate and graduate experience. I’ve grown a lot and each has allowed me to grow into the person that I am today.”

Reese:

Yes!

Melanie:

Definitely! When I started attending Clark I wanted to attend North Carolina A&T, North Carolina Central, Xavier, skip over to Spelman, I wanted to go to all of them. My brother attended Tennessee State and I went to visit and thought “damn I want to go here too!” (laughter).

Kirsten:

“Yes!”

Alex:
“Yes! No change in that... (laughter)... Best four years of my life!”

Adrienne:

I think my path may have been easier if I went to a more challenging school but I feel that going to an HBCU shaped me. I feel it has given me a stronger sense of purpose. Not only do I have to be the best physician I can for my patients, but I have to do it for the ones following me coming from HBCUs. I don’t think I would have felt this way if I came from a majority school, an established pathway from majority schools to professional schools is already laid. I’m part of the builders of the pathway for us.

Kylie:

“I would still choose an HBCU”

Andrew:

“Yes!”
Chapter 6: Discussion

The intent of this research was to examine the experiences of Black graduate students who have transitioned from completed undergraduate study at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) to attend a Predominately White Research University (PWRU) in pursuit of an advanced degree. The information presented in the previous chapter provided an analysis of each participant’s transitional experience. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the guiding research questions introduced at the beginning of this dissertation, offer a discussion of the analysis relative to the review of literature, and to present recommendations as it pertains to future research.

Restatement of the Problem

Researchers have alluded to HBCU attendance as a contributing factor to Black students’ success in graduate education (Allen, 1992). Black students attending HBCUs are identified as being significantly more engaged in college experiences and develop considerably more cognitively and personally; others argue that there is no significant effect on Black students’ engagement or cognitive/personal development according to institutional type (Kim, 2002). Student interaction with both White and Black faculty has been found to be more prevalent at HBCUs, while other research suggests there is no difference (Pascarella et al., 2006). Other arguable factors that are perceived to impact the academic success of HBCU graduates pursuing post-baccalaureate education include a greater sense of cultural awareness, level of engagement, perceptions of self, and established support systems. Despite the importance of this issue, minimal research has been conducted investigating the experiences of Black HBCU graduates pursuing
graduate and professional degrees at a PWI, the cultural similarities and differences of these institutions, and how these factors have shaped their meaning of these experiences.

**Background and Purpose**

Research findings from this study were consistent with other scholarship related to Black students’ experiences at predominately White universities. Past research indicates the importance of understanding concerns surrounding student academic, social, and cultural experience applicable to student development. For example, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) emphasized this point as being essential to the improvement of college experiences and retention rates amongst Black students. This study adds to the body of literature by providing a context for understanding Black graduate student experiences on a PWRU campus who have transitioned from an HBCU.

Catalyzed by my personal experience as a student who has transitioned from undergraduate study at an HBCU to pursue an advanced degree from a PWRU, my objective was to explore similar students’ transitional experiences and examine how they make meaning of these experiences. In accordance to Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, and Russell (1996), Black graduate students attempting to complete advanced degrees experience a number of difficulties that affect their adjustment and well-being.

This study was designed to contribute pertinent information to higher education administrators and policy makers regarding student transitions and how Black graduate students’ adjustment to a PWRU are impacted. Ladson- Billings (1994) asserts that Black students attending PWIs who are culturally connected or engaged within the African American community tend to perform better in their work environments and achieve
greater distinction as a student. Previous studies have focused on issues such as retention and academic attainment of Black students primarily at the undergraduate level; I wanted to investigate the transition experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a PWRU. To that end, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University?
2. How does this population make meaning of these experiences?

Summary of Methods

The aim of phenomenological research centers on the essence of participants’ experiences as they share a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology, employing Bronfenbrenner’s ecology model as a framework, served as the appropriate research approach because it allowed me to explore how meaning is derived from the lived transitional experiences of HBCU post-baccalaureate graduates during their attendance at a PWRU. The challenge of phenomenology was to successfully and appropriately collect, analyze, and interpret data appropriately illustrating the realities of the participants’ transitional experience.

I employed criterion sampling in this study. The participants were all enrolled in at least his/or her second year of graduate study or had recently completed advanced degrees from the institution of study within the last three years. All participants self-identified as Black and/or African American, completed three or more years of undergraduate education at an HBCU and received their baccalaureate degrees from the
same institution. Additionally, each participant consented to participate in one 45-90-minute audio-taped interview. At the completion of transcription, participants were emailed copies allowing an opportunity to check for accuracy and provide any additional follow-up statements. Categories and themes were then constructed from the first interview. Three participants were randomly selected for an additional follow-up interview to confirm themes gathered from the first interview.

Finding appropriate time slots within the participants’ schedules to conduct interviews was challenging. As advanced degree seeking students, all of the participants conduct fast paced and time sensitive lives. In addition, analyzing and interpreting the data took far longer than anticipated and with greater difficulty. Many of the participants had never been presented with an opportunity to tell their story and openly reveled in the opportunity to share their knowledge in what they viewed as something that may be potentially beneficial to others.

Discussion

For purposes of organization and in accordance with the research questions, this section contains the following categories: (a) academic experiences; (b) social and cultural engagement; and (b) meaning making. Each category presents the major research findings of the study and an analysis of how these findings fit into the relevant literature base. Although the findings of this study are specific to the Black students in attendance at this PWRU, their implications may be considered for other comparable institutions.
Academic Experiences

By construct, a PWI model of education presumably caters to individuals who meet “white-created” standards such as high grade point averages and standardized test scores (Benton, 2001; Delgado, 1998; Easley, 1993; Sedlacek, 1999). Arguably, Black students are perceived as being incompatible with such a model (Hunt, Schmidt, Hunt, Boyd & Magoon, 1994) and thus experience greater difficulty assimilating to a predominately White campus environment. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia echoed a similar belief in recent comments suggesting “African American students may fare better in a slower-tack school rather than more competitive colleges” (Abdullah, 2015). Additionally, the lack of African American faculty and staff members is seen as a contributing factor of distress that Black students face at PWI’s (Allen, 1992).

The life of a graduate student is often less structured than that of an undergraduate student and increasingly more complex. Gone are the days of routine residence hall lifestyle, Greek rushes, scantron exams, and Midnight Madness in the Café. In its place, a student may find themselves grappling with the demanding pace and intensity of a postgraduate degree program in conjunction with strenuous GA or TA positions and possible increased familial obligation through marriage or parenthood. In addition to the awarded freedom and flexibility of one’s academic pursuits comes immense accountability and greater expectations.

At the graduate level, a professor demands more of one’s academic performance. It is this concept that greatly impacted many of the participants’ transitions into their selected programs of study. Academically, the experiences of the participants in
attendance at their respective HBCU’s were diverse. Many of the participants found that their classes were challenging but became more manageable as time progressed. Furthermore, these classes provided significant preparation for the next level. They were introduced to new concepts and a multitude of internship opportunities. Through their undergraduate experiences, some participants faced depreciating classroom morale demonstrated amongst peers, less academic rigor, small faculty sizes, limited resources, and insufficient test preparation. However, each of the participants indicated a strong academic performance at the undergraduate level and were accustomed to excelling academically.

The familiarity with excelling was further enhanced by recognition received in attending an HBCU. Adrienne, Kylie, and Reese each spoke of the esteemed regard many of their undergraduate faculty and/or staff members held for them due to their academic ability and interests. At the HBCU, many of the participants mentioned how their professors served as significant mentors who helped to cultivate and encourage their academic interests within a familial environment. If a student showed interest in his or her education, then a faculty or staff member was there to nurture that interest. It is with this mindset in addition to the personal acknowledgement of their academic ability that many of the participants brought with them into their advanced degree programs.

Upon reflection, many of the participants noted that their transition into graduate and/or professional degree programs were greatly impacted by personal expectations based off of previous academic performances. For some, it was the demanding pace and rigor of the programs that provided a significant challenge. Accustomed to excelling
academically, the struggle came as an unpleasant or even alarming surprise. However, for other participants the rigor of their academic program was surprisingly less than that of their undergraduate institution. Instead, the individualized nature and disconnected experience amongst peers within the program and campus environment served as a greater distressing factor. As students leaving institutions where their academic excellence came with greater ease as did a familial environment centered on open encouragement, the changing role of no longer being at the top of one’s class and the seemingly detached and singular campus environment represented a significant challenge. In light of the changing roles, the participants recognized that many of their academic challenges encountered had less to do with the shift of coming from an HBCU to a PWRU and more so their evolving from an undergraduate to a graduate student.

**Social & Cultural Experiences**

Persistence to degree completion has been reportedly impacted by students’ level of integration into academic as well as social communities of graduate school (Tinto, 1993). If students do not feel as if their values and morals match with those of the institution, they are less likely to positively adjust or remain at that institution (Tinto, 1993).

In attendance at an HBCU, institutions where Black students are perceived as being capable (Willie, 2003), many of the participants became engrossed in their reflection of their past experiences. Their body language became visibly animated as we explored their social and cultural integration within the institutions. Each participants’ decision to attend an HBCU was as varied and diverse as their prior knowledge of the
institutions. Many of them had limited prior knowledge of their existence or the historical significance of the institutions; others made the strategic decisions to attend in search of the “Black experience” or reasons related to family history. Whatever the reason for attending the highly proclaimed family environment (often referenced in literature pertaining to HBCUs as a key factor of the institutions) was repeated throughout the many interviews with pride.

No institution however is without its imperfections as this was evident in some participants’ characterization of the institutions’ culture being highly selective amongst peer groups, comparable to a “Who’s Who” on campus. It is also referenced that attending a predominantly Black institution does not mean it is all about culture of Blacks all the time for every student. In addition, many of the participants acknowledged the importance of recognizing that simply because an institution is predominately Black does not mean it lacks in diversity. Melanie noted that there were significant differences amongst her HBCU peers:

The participants’ sense of belonging differed greatly at the PWI. Isolating, disconnected, and lonely were terms often utilized in the participants’ description of their integration within the University. With the exception of some of the participants currently enrolled in the medical program, many of the interviewees felt the University does little to help foster their adjustment to the institution and that the students in attendance often culturally segregated themselves. Although the University boasts a significant number of clubs and organizations for the student body, many of the participants felt limited in the selection of clubs pertaining to their academic level and
personal interests. There was an increased perception of racial exclusivity that heighted their sense of not belonging. In addition, many of the participants, with the exception of some of the medical students, were not aware of any departmental or campus-wide policies and/or programs which pertained to them as graduate students of color.

Meaning Making

Baxter Magolda (2002) pointed out, in her often cited work on self-authorship and meaning making, that on the road to development, students are often faced with crossroads. Crossroads represent forms of conflict between formulas for making meaning of life received through one’s growing up process and realities in which those formulas are not sufficient to provide guidance into a present or future decision. These crossroads often provide enough tension that students are driven to recalibrate their own values and priorities (i.e., meaning making), and to develop an internal foundation that is self-chosen. In other words, the student is sometimes at a crossroad where their developing internal voice is in conflict with external influences. An ability to analyze and utilize life experiences in developing one’s own path regardless of societal view entails the attainment of self-authorship. In essence, self-authored students are “moving to the beat of their own drum.”

Researchers have often presented the shaping influence the environment has on student development outcomes (Strange & Banning, 2001). Incongruence between the student and their environment adversely affects both student growth and adjustment, and recruitment and retention efforts. In addition to student institutional congruence, factors such as challenge, support, marginality, and mattering have significant impacts on student
development and transitioning. Mirroring Sanford’s (1960) challenge and support approach to student development, Brofenbrenner (1977) asserts that a balance of forces (challenges) and resources (support) is essential to the developmental process. The participants encountered varying forces and resources centering on their transitional experience that impacted how they made meaning of their experiences. Forces experienced include feelings of racial exclusivity and disconnection, perceptions of inadequacy and need to excel. Resources include the development of partnerships and collaborations, and perceptions of permanence. Participants used these resources to adapt mentally and catalyze change of their meaning making.

An example of this would be the often difficulty associated with stereotypes and feelings of marginalization many of the participants reported encountering. Specifically, for Kirsten she expressed displeasure surrounding her inability to fully display her cultural identity for fear of being seen as too black or urban and possibly losing the respect of her peers and a level of authority in the classroom. Her behavior and mannerisms in the academic setting were more confined and guarded as a result. Her church family served to provide solace, comfort, and reassurance. Additionally, her interest in Black Student Organizations were driven by her personal need to find a nook with the academic setting that seemingly permitted her intersectionality of identity without fear of judgment or repercussions.

For Taylor, it was the reported lack of rigor of her program and perception of her ethnic identity being on display for her peers to examine that was exigent. Differing from Kristen’s ability to find support within or in proximity to the institution, her feelings of
disconnect deepened as did her isolation. However, her perceptual change as seeing her attendance as a temporary construct served as a motivating factor for completion.

**Environmental Ecology**

Brofenbrenner’s model places the individual at the center of developmental influences assorted around him or her in a series of 4 nested contexts or system levels (Renn, 2003). These contexts include Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems, and Macrosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1977) defined microsystems as:

A pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate feature (e.g. family, school, peer group, workplace, etc.) (p. 514).

Renn (2003) elaborates that in the case of a student (of any description), he or she will have multiple microsystems, but notes that the same microsystem (e.g. an English class) will provoke and provide different developmental responses to each student depending on those students’ background and characteristics.

The development of microsystems on a university campus contributes to student experiences and building a foundation of how students make meaning of their experiences. As a student, Taylor felt very challenged in the classroom during her attendance at an HBCU. The rigor and personal responsibility were characterized as factors that pushed her to be a better student. These same factors were perceived to be lacking in the classroom at the graduate level at this PWRU, according to Taylor. This,
in conjunction with feeling socially and culturally disconnected, contributed to feelings of discomfort during her PWRU attendance. However, Adrienne presented a differing perception at the same level that culminated a different experience. Although some classes were more challenging than others, she described classes at her HBCU to be less challenging and lacking rigor. She became quickly humbled when she began medical school, stating that course work was at a faster pace and more challenging. As a result, she placed a great deal of pressure on herself to excel and do more than just keep her head above water. She relied heavily on her support system during this time. Despite feeling her HBCU attendance did less to prepare her academically, she emphasized the importance of what she did gain, self-realization.

Mesosystems are the interaction of Microsystems and the process of these occurrences in which the developing person is part of (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Micro and meso environments, particularly at the college level, may conflict or converge in their developmental influences and experiences (Renn, 2003). Many of the participants struggled with a bicultural existence between (e.g. home and school) - straddling themselves between two differing environments. Participants expressed a heightened sense of racial awareness within their respective advanced degree programs and an inability to be themselves. An advanced degree is comparative to advanced level of significance within the hierarchy of academia and accordingly there is an expectation of those in pursuit or receipt of such high esteem. For many of the participants, their associated discomfort goes beyond following in the line of professionalism. Similarly, many of the participants experienced discomfort pertaining to the perception of family
and friends outside the academy and not always seeming to fit in amongst them as well. However, the distress of a bicultural existence seemed more heightened for many of the participants within the academy than outside amongst family and friends.

Exosystems as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1977) are:

An extension of the Mesosystem, embracing other specific social structures both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there (p. 515).

Within the higher education setting, Renn (2004) identifies faculty decisions about curricula, financial aid policies, and work place policies as examples of exosystems. Each system has a direct impact on the experience and development of the person without his or her direct involvement. For Zoe, the degree program she completed during her HBCU attendance was significant and beneficial, but only for those pursuing Ph.D. programs. Zoe perceived little benefit from her HBCU attendance in preparation for medical school because the program (inclusive of faculty curricula and staff assistance) invested little for student interest in MD or DO programs. Research opportunities, test prep, and school programs were all designed to better prepare students for non-medical terminal degrees. As a result, Zoe obtained a master’s degree in Public Health before proceeding to medical school.

Exosystems can be perceived as challenging and limiting in the development of an individual’s experience or enlightening and substantial dependent upon context. For Alex, there was no bigger contributing factor to her experience beyond her control than
Hurricane Katrina. Classified as a Category 5 and one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina significantly impacted the lives and the American view of natural disasters for years to come. Its devastating impact on Louisiana and the sense of hopelessness was felt around the country. Many surrounding institutions were directly impacted, as were institutional policies. I myself can remember the influx of college students in attendance at universities throughout the southern states in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Families were displaced, loved ones were gone, and records were lost. Many educational institutions closed and uncertainty surrounded politicians, school officials, and students alike. For Alex, a non-Louisiana native who stood in the midst of it all, there was a strong pull from family to return and begin at a different institution. She detailed declining those powerful voices and persuasion to return home, and made the decision to stay with her University family in the midst of tragedy. Staying allowed her to build camaraderie with not only students, but other university affiliates as well. She expressed a sense of wonder and thankfulness for her beloved HBCU, its impact on her life and education, and happiness with her decision to stand with her institution at a time when many things were uncertain.

Macrosystems are described as entailing the:

Overarching patterns of micro, meso, exosystem characteristics of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515)
Historically, HBCUs have provided an educational platform for African Americans to advance their lives when other doors of opportunity were not always open. In the realm of academia, obtaining an advanced degree in one’s chosen field is perceived as scholarly, applauded by those in and outside the academy, and an overall job well done by those fortunate to do so. However, in the literature, there has too often been a disconnect between the HBCU graduate and the scholar identity. Historical trends and events have illustrated the benefits of each, but often as separate entities. It is essential that we promote educational advancement at all levels from varying institutional types to promote us as a society in a globally competitive market.

**Inadequacy & Excellence**

Predominately White institutions are arguably better funded and have superior resources to those available at HBCUs. In addition, the capability of Blacks in the realm of academia have historically been scrutinized, challenged, and politicized. For members in society holding fast to an outdated system of hierarchy fused with facets of oppression based on the “good ol boy” philosophy of advancement, a Black individual attending an institution with limited resources has presumably placed themselves at a disadvantage. Adding to this is the questioning of gender capability and its “3 strikes you are out” philosophy for Black female HBCU graduates.

A culture of valuing advancement through means of education, questions of capability were reflected at micro, meso, and/or exosystmeic levels for each of the participants. For some participants, this was transmitted through societal pressures and/or expectations regarding generalized data (i.e. graduation rates, test scores, retention
rates, academic preparation, GPA, gender, race, and SES). For others, it came through social interaction and engagement (i.e. perceived scrutiny experienced in and outside of the classroom amongst peers, faculty, and/or acquaintances). Additionally, participants’ revealed distress reflective of stereotype threat identified when describing an incessant desire to not prove stereotypes correct questioning their academic capability due to race. Despite objective evidence of competence, participants expressed a perception of continued battle against unforeseen attacks on their capability due to race. Distress of this nature was less evident when participants were in attendance at an HBCU.

**Implications**

Researchers have often associated the correlation between the environment and its impact on students (Strange & Banning, 2001). Questions of student developmental capabilities (i.e. level of maturity to be in a campus environment), responsibilities of the institution (i.e. how accountable should the college/ or university be for ensuring significant adjustment for students to the college environment), etc., are inclusive factors utilized in the consideration of student well-being and positive adjustment when transitioning to the campus environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Colleges and/or universities attempt to develop campus communities that will attract, retain, and satisfy student needs, but also challenge students to further develop their level of learning (Strange & Banning, 2001). As student affairs professionals become more knowledgeable and understanding of the powerful impact the campus environment has, he or she will be better able to address the needs of the student. By establishing environments that are designed to be supportive and nurturing of student learning,
growth, and development, administrators are less likely to formulate design structures that will negatively impact student potential.

**Implications for Practice**

1. **Mentorship** - At an HBCU, many of the participants reflected on a sense of belonging; ease of building mentoring relationships with faculty and staff. This is less apparent at a graduate institution where the focus is more heavily placed on the development of them as a professional strictly in the classroom. A more individualized nature at the advanced degree level inclusive of mentorship is needed to assist student matriculation, degree advancement and academic success.

2. **Cultural and Social Engagement** – PWRU’s should work toward eliminating feelings of marginalization. Researchers have often associated the correlation between the environment and its impact on students (Strange & Banning, 2001). Questions of student development capabilities (i.e. level of maturity to be in a campus environment), responsibilities of the institution (i.e. how accountable should the college/ or university be for ensuring significant adjustment to the college environment), etc., are inclusive factors utilized in the consideration of student well-being and positive adjustment when transitioning to the campus environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). As student affairs professionals become more knowledgeable and understanding of the powerful impact the campus environment has, he or she will be better able to address the needs of the student.

3. **Building collaborative pipeline partnerships among HBCUs and PWRUs** – Development of summer readiness programs (and liaison officers) for both
HBCUs and PWRUs to promote collaborative partnerships and seamless student transitions. The development of partnerships amongst HBCUs and PWI’s may contribute to lessening the effects of racially hostile campus environments (Reddick, 2006), generate growth and advancement opportunities for the institution and students, and provide students with access to greater resources.

4. Test prep - Standardized test prep focus for HBCUs and minorities specifically. Many of the participants were not obtaining the standardized test scores they needed for graduate school despite having the GPA; this had an impact on college selection. HBCUs need to be inclusive of offering diverse test prep opportunities.

5. Better alignment with advising (graduate school track) - Similar in high schools, college preps, and technical tracks; understanding that select majors are tracks for graduate school and rigor of course work needs to be designed accordingly.

**Implications for Research**

The results of this study suggest that future research could explore a comparative study of the transitional experiences of African American male and female HBCU graduates in pursuit of advanced degrees. In this study only one male student communicated a willingness to participate in the study. Presently, research indicates that percentages of both master and doctoral level degrees earned by females increased for 1999- 2000 to 2009- 2010. Specifically, Black females earned 71% of master’s degrees and 65% of all doctoral degrees awarded to Black students (NCES, 2016). Future research could explore the lived experiences and perceived motivational factors attributed to each group as it relates to their male/ female of color identity within the academy.
Additionally, further research may factor in a larger sample size through use of quantitative methods. Conducting a qualitative study permitted me as the researcher a more in-depth look at the lived experiences of each participant. However, more quantitative inquiry permits a greater sample size that would likely give greater room for variance and perhaps different results. The new or additional data may then be used to improve administrative policy and departmental programs impacting the transition and matriculation of students of color within advanced degree programs.

Summary

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education”

--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a graduate of both an HBCU and a PWRU, I had a vested interest in this study beginning with the literature of researchers before me. I enjoyed delving into the richness of data presented by my participants and the anticipation of wondering what my findings could contribute to this genre. I found that experiences, aspirations/resiliency, and support were salient factors in each of the participant’s transition and matriculation. Each of the participants had very different stories beginning with their start at an HBCU and decisions to attend a PWRU. The forces and resources each of them encountered was greatly varied but each articulated that is was their experiences, aspirations and personal resilience, and support systems that accelerated them to the advanced degree level and served an integral role in their future outlook. I thank each of them for their agreement to participate in this study and feel honored to give voice to each of their stories.
References


Renn, K.A. (2003). Understanding the identities of mixed-race college students through a developmental ecology lens. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*, 383-
397.


Appendix A: Interview Solicitation Letter

ShaRonda Cooper, M.Ed., PC
Doctoral Candidate
Ohio University

Dear Student,

I am a graduate student in the College of Education at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. This letter is an invitation for you to participate in a doctoral research study I am conducting about the experiences of Black Historically Black College/ or University graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a predominately White research university. This note provides information about the study and what your involvement would require if you decided to take part.

The topic of my dissertation is, “From There to Here: The Experiences of HBCU Graduates in Pursuit of an Advanced Degree from a PWRU”. Through one-on-one student interviews, the study will examine the transitional experiences of this population and how they make meaning of these experiences. As a graduate student, your input could provide meaningful and valued insight.

Your participation in this study would be completely voluntary involving a one-on-one interview of approximately 45-90 minutes at a mutually agreed upon location. All information you provide is completely confidential.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please contact me as soon as possible at (706) 461-1142 or by email at sc205807@ohio.edu. Thanks in advance for your consideration and potential assistance.

Sincerely,

ShaRonda Cooper, M.Ed., PC
Principal Investigator
Appendix B: Statement of Informed Consent for Dissertation Research Project

Title of the Study: From There to Here: The Experiences of HBCU Graduates in Pursuit of an Advanced Degree from a PWRU.

Principal Investigator: ShaRonda Cooper

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

I. Purpose:
The primary purpose of this research study is to fulfill the requirements for completing a doctorate degree in higher education at Ohio University. The intent of the study is two-fold: (a) to examine the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in pursuit of an advanced degree from a Predominately White Research University; and (b) examine how this sample of population makes meaning of these experiences.

II. Procedure:
Prospective Black graduate students will be identified and contacted by email through [Name], [University].

One-on-One Interviews: The researcher will meet with a minimum of ten different students on an individual basis regarding their transitional experiences. Interviews will be conducted over the phone for individuals who are unable to meet face-to-face due to varying circumstances.

With participant signed permission, sessions will be recorded and the researcher will take notes.

III. Possible Risks:
Due to the subject matter and confidential identities, there are no foreseeable physical, psychological, economic, social, or legal risks to the participants enrolled in the study that might cause anxiety, discomfort, or distress when answering interview questions about student experiences. Pseudonyms will be used during the data collection process and in the completed dissertation. In addition, at the conclusion of the interviews and subsequent transcriptions,
participants will be allowed to review their personal transcripts for accuracy and/or potential clarification.

IV. **Possible Benefits:**
Identifying your experiences might provide a basis for facilitating new dialogue and designing institutional initiatives, policies, programs, and services that will assist Black or African American graduate students, if not all students, in gaining the tools needed for academic, social, and cultural success leading to graduation. Your collective voices could potentially serve as a guide in creating more effective diversity initiatives and practices.

V. **Confidentiality:**
Every attempt will be made to ensure that results of the study remain confidential. Participant privacy and confidentiality will be reinforced through use of pseudonyms. All tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office. Audiotapes will be retained for two years; after the duration of two years from date of original collection, all tapes will be destroyed. Each participant will receive a copy of the consent form and the originals will remain on file with the researcher.
Results of the study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the university and personnel particular to this research who are member of my doctoral research committee have access to study the records. Your records will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

VI. **Freedom to Withdraw:**
Participation in this research experiment is voluntary and individuals may refuse to participate.
Participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time without consequence.

VII. **Contact Information:**
If you have any research-related questions or concerns at any time, you may call me, ShaRonda Cooper at 706-461-1142 or my doctoral research chairman, Dr. Pete Mather, at 740-593-4454.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
• you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary
• you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature_________________________________________ Date______________

Printed Name__________________________________________

Version Date: [12/08/11]
Appendix C: Interview Guide

Participant ___________________       Location ____________________
Date__________

Demographic:
1. Where are you from?
2. What is your academic classification (year)?
3. How do you self-identify your race and/or ethnicity?
4. What is your major?
5. Name and location of undergraduate institution you attended?
6. Year of graduation from HBCU?
7. When do you intend to graduate?

Academic/ Social/ Cultural Expectations and Experiences:
1. What led to your decision to attend a HBCU?
2. What led to your decision to attend a PWRU?

Probes-
   a. How do your family and friends perceive your attendance at PWRU?
   b. What type of feedback do you received when returning home?
3. Describe for me your experience of attending (name of undergrad institution) from an academic standpoint? Attending OU?
4. Describe for me your experience of attending (name of undergrad institution) from a social standpoint? Attending OU?
Probes-

a. Do you feel you have a responsibility to your HBCU & how does that impact your actions in day-to-day settings?

b. What does it mean to be Black or African American at OU vs. at your HBCU?

c. Race consciousness?/ cultural changes/ racial identity

5. How would you describe your level of preparation for graduate school?

Probe-

a. Who aided your preparation?

6. How would you describe your transition from undergraduate to graduate school?

7. How are the two institutions different? Similar?

Probes-

a. As an attendant of this University, what thoughts do you have about your daily interactions with your peers?

b. How do your interactions here at OU with your peers compare to your interactions at home with your peers and/or family?

8. What did you get out of your undergraduate institution that you did not get out of your graduate institution? Out of your graduate institution that you didn’t get out of your undergraduate institution?

9. What challenges (if any) do you feel you encountered as a graduate student because of your decision to attend a HBCU? What benefits (if any) do you feel you encountered from this decision?

Probes-
a. What has been used or found to be most helpful in addressing these challenges?

b. Support system?

10. How do these challenges and benefits relate to your overall graduate school experience?

11. Describe the institutional practices or lack thereof (i.e. policies, programs, and/or services) which have impacted your experience as a graduate student at a PWRU?

a. Are you aware of any policies at the OU level that have impacted you as a minority graduate student?

12. What advice would you give to an undergraduate student who is considering making the transition from HBCU to PWRU for graduate school?