Exploring African American Students’ Perceptions of Belonging at An Urban Community College in The Western United States

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

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African American students’ perceptions of belonging impact their experiences on community college campuses and in their local communities. This research study explores the impact of gentrification on a group of resilient African American college students in an urban community college located in the western region of the United States. Participants used negative experiences with onlyness and otherness as opportunities to build community for other African Americans.
EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

BY

SYLINDA NICOLE GORDON MUSAINAPO

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Z. Nicolazzo
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Thank you, Mom and Dad, for instilling the value of education in me and for surrounding me with a community of mothers and fathers. Thank you, Ancestors, for your prayers and unsung sacrifices. Thank you, nieces and nephews, for being my motivation to make higher education a safe place for you. To every participant, supporter and my wonderful dissertation committee: thank you for being the village that raised this scholar who did not know she could do it. I thank myself for being a first-generation college student who never gave up. Husband, you are loved. Jesus, you are everything!
DEDICATION
For Chicago—because you believed in me, I believe in me
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions.
- Carter G. Woodson

I am a product of my community. I am grateful to have had parents who not only gave me their best, they gave me a community of parents, aunts, uncles and cousins. When I left my community to attend a prestigious predominantly White university, my perceptions of belonging and community were challenged. The physical and sociological geography of my first undergraduate institution forced me to challenge how I perceived myself. It was the first time that I was surrounded by other students who worked as hard as I did—which impacted how I perceived my intelligence. I was suddenly aware that thousands of my peers had benefited from private tutors, college funds and access to technology. This awareness invoked intense feelings of isolation and inadequacies from my peers. Moreover, my social experiences had been very different from my peers. I had never attended a party or exercised in a gym. I did not know the difference between espresso and brewed coffee. I did not know how to connect my refurbished desktop computer to the Internet without first connecting it to a phone line for AOL dial-up. In an effort to navigate the trivial things that isolated me, I decided to grasp for things that helped me belong on campus.

Mother’s Day was highly valued on campus that year because it coincided with graduation weekend. I eagerly searched for ways to get involved with Mother’s Day. I did not
know which mother I would ask to participate, so I began researching popular events on campus to help me decide. I knew that my biological mother did not have disposable income or time to drive twenty hours to visit me. I decided that I would only invite her if it were worth her making sacrifices to be there. As I browsed the printed university newspaper, I saw that there was a “Best Mother” contest! With great excitement, I reviewed the contest details and decided to nominate both my biological mother and my stepmother. Surely winning this contest would be a great reason for them to travel to visit me on campus! After brainstorming my nomination strategy, I decided to review the prizes. That was when I read the first-place winner’s prize: one free year of mother-daughter tanning with a popular franchise. We did not tan or need to tan. I perceived that this contest was not for my family. Moreover, I perceived that White mothers were better than mine and that I did not belong on campus. That was the first Mother’s Day I spent alone.

Perception can play a crucial role in students’ motivation to persist through college (Strayhorn, 2012). Students who feel disengaged from the campus community are less likely to persist than students who are engaged (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al. 2008). For this reason, students’ perceptions of belonging are a critical issue for postsecondary institutions that aim to sustain and increase student retention and success. This is particularly important for community colleges because these institutions face unique challenges when trying to help students engage and integrate into the campus community (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). As the community college student body diversifies, researchers and practitioners are faced with new opportunities to innovatively implement activities and strategies that increase student engagement among African American students in hopes of increasing retention and persistence for this group (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Research suggests that African American students who do not perceive a sense of belonging in the institution are less likely to persist than those who do (Aiken, Cervero, &
Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012;). Much research has been done that explores African American students’ perceptions of belonging at four-year institutions; yet more research needs to be done regarding this issue and community colleges. The purpose of this study is to explore how African American students’ perceptions of belonging impacted their experiences at an urban community college.

**Background**

Community colleges have played a major role in making higher education accessible to students since the early 1900s (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In 2009, former U.S. President Barak Obama unveiled a plan increasing the number of community college graduates by 2020. In remarks to Macomb Community College (2009), President Obama stated: “The American Graduation Initiative…will reform and strengthen community colleges …from coast to coast so they get the resources that students and schools need -- and the results workers and businesses demand. Through this plan, we seek to help an additional 5 million Americans earn degrees and certificates in the next decade” (p.1). This goal brought national attention to the significant impact that community colleges have on postsecondary education in the United States. Unfortunately, community colleges have not received this level of support from the Trump administration. Trump’s statements about the U.S. community college network are demonstrative of the administration’s gross ignorance of the historical and ongoing impact of community colleges in the American higher education system. His 2018 White House remarks reflected his ignorance: “I don’t know what that means, a community college” (Trump, 2018). In this speech about his plans to improve U.S. infrastructure and employment rates, he suggested that the U.S. institute vocational schools to replace community colleges. As he reminisced about his younger years, Trump’s suggestion echoed the spirit behind his election campaign slogan: “Make America Great Again.” In reality, community colleges and vocational schools have
coexisted for decades. Many of these institutions are already greatly contributing to building local communities by making formal, nonformal and informal education accessible. Instead of exploring the impact of community colleges and seeking professional advice about how to contribute to advancing them, he suggested eradicating a major pillar in the higher education system.

The administration’s lack of basic knowledge about the U.S. higher education system is further demonstrated through Betsy DeVos, the U.S. Secretary of Education. Her agenda has not demonstrated basic intentions to promote community college success. After nearly two years, the Trump administration has failed to display competence or commitment to community colleges. Their fiscal year 2019 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of Education reflects this lack of competence. She collaborated with Trump on a financial proposal to consolidate grant-funded programs (i.e. Trio) that help underserved high school students gain access and skills for success in higher education. The duo also proposed that funding for federal work-study programs be decreased—which impacts students who need assistance paying for school. Personally, I relied on federal work-study funding throughout my undergraduate years to gain experience in the education field and to cover basic financial needs. These are just a few examples of the administration’s lack of competence regarding the complex contributions that community colleges have in the U.S. higher education system.

U.S. community colleges continue to provide access and education for students despite lacking support from the White House and declining enrollment. Public two-year colleges have experienced a steady decrease in enrollment since 2015 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). This has significant financial and social implications for institutions and the student experience. Financially, faculty and staff are impacted by low enrollment—this, in turn, impacts employee satisfaction. Practitioners who are engaged with the mission of community colleges may be
likely to leave them for professional opportunities that provide higher wages, more resources and support. Students are impacted by decreasing opportunities to find belonging and community among colleagues as enrollment decreases.

Students who do not perceive a sense of community are more likely to disengage, making them less likely to persist to graduation (Kuh et al., 2008). Disengagement may be more detrimental for African American students than White students because they often enter college with unique challenges and disadvantages in comparison to their White counterparts (Lee, 1999; Tinto, 2012; Webb, 1992). For this reason, it is important to explore how African American students perceive belonging in colleges where they are the ethnic minority.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, African American students make up about 15% of the public community college population while White students are 54% of the student body (Kena et al., 2014). African American students who attend community college are less likely to persist to graduation than other students for various reasons. One primary reason is student engagement. Students who feel engaged and connected with the campus community are more likely to complete an associate degree or certification within 150% of the time they started than White students (Kuh et al. 2008; Kena et al., 2014). Additionally, the American Association for Community Colleges identified key factors that lead to student success in community college: college readiness (particularly in math), socio-economic status (SES) (particularly in relation to student high school district), and student engagement.

Governmental policies and gentrification practices directly impact African American students’ success in college—before they even start (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). For example, students use geographic location as a factor when selecting a community college. When those students are displaced from their homes due to rising living costs, they might also feel displaced from the campus culture. In a practical sense, transportation costs and proximity to work/home
responsibilities often leads to decisions to completely drop out or stop out. Once they begin college, many African American students have already been set up for isolation and failure.

Cohen and Brawer (2009) defined the community college as “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (Kindle ebook 445). In comparison to traditional, four-year institutions, community colleges often provide unique opportunities for students, including open-access admission, vocational and community education, technical certifications and certificates, and the lack of housing (Cohen & Brawer; Strayhorn, 2012). Since access to postsecondary education is often found as a barrier for African American students, community colleges with open enrollment policies can serve as a starting place for many of these students (Strayhorn, 2012). As previously mentioned, community colleges’ unique characteristics allow students from diverse backgrounds and varying abilities to enroll in and pursue postsecondary education at lower costs than universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2009).

On the other hand, these characteristics can also present unique barriers to student engagement (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). For example, many community colleges only serve commuting students. These students are more likely to leave campus immediately after attending class, instead of participating in student activities or attending on-campus workshops. This could be especially problematic for African American students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) because, for this population, social integration is directly correlated with student satisfaction with the institution (Strayhorn, 2012).

**Research Problem**

African American students are not likely to persist to graduation if they are not engaged with the college. Racism continues to persist as a major component of American culture and society (Asante, 2005; Brown, 2018). Legal and academic policies are designed to systematically
inhibit African American students’ success in college (Asante, 2005; Brown, 2018). African American students are more likely than White students to be placed into developmental courses as a result of being underprepared for mainstream college-level academic rigor. Additionally, many African American students choose to attend community colleges because it is more affordable and easier to access than traditional, four-year universities (Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). African American students who attend PWCCs are faced with racial stereotypes that shape how they perceive themselves and their interactions with community college culture (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Negative racial stereotypes undoubtedly shape how African American students perceive and define belonging while attending PWCCs (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Unfortunately, this can impede African American students’ pathway to student engagement in the campus community (Strayhorn, 2008).

Student engagement and social integration are important components of college student success (Astin, 1975; 1984). Students who build personal relationships with faculty, staff, and their peers are more likely to persist than students who do not feel a sense of belonging (Kasworm et al., 2010). This is particularly true for African American students who are marginalized and indirectly persuaded to perceive themselves as social outsiders in postsecondary institutions (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Additionally, campus students, faculty, and staff may also perceive African American students as outsiders. In both scenarios, African American students are often marginalized (either by choice or by force) when earning an education at PWCCs. For students of color, faculty-student interaction is very important when encouraging student engagement (Chang, 2005; Guiffrida, 2005). Research shows that African American students who develop strong psychosocial relationships on campus are more likely to persist than those who do not (Guiffrida, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2007).
Community colleges must implement practices that help first-year students develop positive impressions about their status and “place” at the institution.

Self-concept can be an obstruction to the social integration process, particularly for students who have not been previously exposed to the cultural climate and academic rigor that is necessary to successfully earn a degree from a PWCC (Davonport & Lane 2006; Tinto, 1988; 1993). Institutional policies and procedures should be examined for discriminatory policies and practices as institutions seek to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations (Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Webb, 1992). These policies and practices should also be assessed on a regular basis, with student feedback as one means of assessment (Tinto, 2012).

**Significance**

African American students are primary recipients of racial micro-aggressions on American community college campuses. These students are often underserved because college administrators allocate resources that serve the majority; engagement strategies are tailored to meet the needs of the dominant student population. Additionally, because of the ongoing social, political, and economic implications of systemic anti-Black racism in the United States, African American students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than White students and often have less exposure to collegiate culture (Strayhorn, 2012). These students have more difficulty connecting with campus faculty and staff if the institution is not deliberate about raising awareness and implementing strategies that increase campus-wide cultural competence.

**Key Terms**

Some of the terms I use in this study have multiple connotations. For this reason, this portion of the report has been dedicated to defining certain terms in the context of this study. The following key terms are defined and described in the next section of this study: *African American, belonging, engagement, social integration, retention, & persistence.*
**African American**

"Say it loud! I’m Black and I’m proud" - *James Brown*

In the peak of the Civil Rights movement, performer James Brown coined a phrase that continues to echo through American history. There have been many debates throughout history concerning what term(s) is/are most appropriate for identifying African/Black Americans. Since the birth of the United States, African people in the United States have faced severe marginalization and persistent attacks on our identity. There are cultural variances between most native African people and African Americans—even though most African American students can trace ancestral lineage to the continent of Africa. For this reason, many African Americans choose to identify with the pride and regality that emerges from our culture by resisting the term “African American” and identifying more closely with the term “Black.” Additionally, some African Americans may feel that the term African American limits or excludes parts of their identity (e.g. those of Caribbean or South American descent).

Another school of thought contrasts this perspective and insists that the term “African American” is essential in the identity development and pride among African Americans.

**Belonging**

The term “belonging” can be difficult to define because it is subjective. The meaning of “belonging” changes with varying situations, personalities, and environments. The Oxford English Dictionary describes belonging as “the circumstances connected with a person or thing” (www.oed.com). The J.P. Chaplin *Dictionary of Psychology* defines belongingness as “the feeling of being accepted by another person, or by another group; the feeling of being identified with a group.” Further, bell hooks (2009) links “belonging” with “community” and physical place. Research has been conducted on student perceptions of belonging but there is a gap in regards to African American students who attend PWCCs. For example, Hausmann, Ye,
Schofield, and Woods (2009) studied belongingness and persistence in White and African American first-year students but implemented strategies that “may have been too minimal to affect sense of belonging in African American students” (p. 666). In this example, the researchers unintentionally marginalized African American students as they sought to apply strategies that would influence the student body. African American community college students are severely at risk for being the victims of covert racial discrimination. The students in Hausmann et al.’s study were not intentionally ignored, yet suffered marginalization on campus. Research needs to specifically target African American students who are attending community colleges so that higher education practitioners can strive to make engagement and intervention strategies more inclusive. This study explores how African American students describe their perceived sense on belonging as an ethnic minority group. Implications from student testimonials might be used to create and implement the best practices for helping African American students perceive a sense of belonging in community colleges.

Students who participated in this study were asked to define their definitions of “belonging” when they describe how they perceive belonging on campus. This study acknowledges that the connotation of this term may change, depending on the participants’ experiences and perceptions. One goal of this study is to gather students’ definitions of belonging and to examine common themes and trends in the students’ descriptions.

Elements of both of these definitions can be seen in Haussman et al’s (2009) study about belonging and student persistence. They define belonging as a student’s “psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community” (p. 650). In an essay about marginality and mattering, Schlossberg (1989) stated “Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises” (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, “belonging” is defined as the feeling of being accepted and embraced by a community while
overcoming discrimination and marginalization and developing as a student who is psychosocially integrated into the campus environment.

**Engagement and Social Integration**

Students can be engaged in an institution without being socially integrated into the culture and climate of that institution. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) described social integration as “the extent of congruency between the individual student and the social system of a college or university” (p. 111). Engagement focuses more on the “educationally purposeful activities [that have] desirable effects on student learning and success in college” (Pike & Kuh, 2005, pp. 185-186). African American students who report feelings of marginality might be engaged in student activities but not socially integrated into the institution (Aiken et al, 2001; Astin, 1984). A sense of belonging helps students become engaged with the campus environment during the process of social integration.

**Retention and Persistence**

Retention and persistence are closely related, but it is important to distinguish between the two terms. Tinto (2012) stated, “For the students view, we use the term persistence; for the institutional view, we use the term retention” (Kindle ebook 2496). Students may persist to degree attainment without being retained at the institution in which they began. Differentiation between these terms is important for this study because a sense of belonging may not only lead to persistence; it may also lead to retention. Conversely, African-American students who have difficulty finding a sense of belonging or “place” may not be retained in that institution but choose to persist elsewhere (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) wrote, “If African American students perceive the university to be racist, then those feelings can cause them to either transfer, dropout, or continue their education with a chip on their shoulders (prohibiting academic growth)” (p. 307). This suggests that students who have been jaded by discrimination or
institutional racism may not be retained at the institution but not persist as a result of low academic performance.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The foundation for CRT is built upon two movements: critical legal studies and radical feminism. It was birthed in the 1960s because many activists, scholars, and lawyers began to recognize “that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back” (Delgado, 2006, Kindle ebook 216). CRT examines how race and race relationship impact sociological and legal structures and environments while challenging majoritarian/White ways of knowing and being.

The guiding principle of CRT is based on “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” and how racism persists as a part of American culture (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, Kindle ebook 203). Activism and legal equality are at the forefront of CRT as practitioners challenge race-related legal, social, and economic barriers that are deeply rooted in American culture. African American students who attend PWCCs stand on the front lines of marginalization in college; therefore, they are less likely to obtain access to the jobs and quality of life that are promised to White students who pursue the so-called American Dream.

Students who obtain a postsecondary degree access networks and employment opportunities that impact salary. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported that students who obtain an associate degree make over $400 more/week than students who do not. That $1600/month in salary earnings can make a big difference over a lifetime (Torpey, 2018). Education pays and all American students deserve equal rights and access to a safe and
productive educational environment. Unfortunately for many African American students, marginalization and institutionalized racism serve as barriers to their success.

African American students who attend a predominantly White community college are in an environment where their race will place them on the negative side of a power relationship. Mainstream retention and engagement theory can be applied to these students, but with an understanding that race relations inhibit the ability to use “one-size-fits-all” retention strategies. Next, I transition to discussing my own researcher positionality as it relates to this study.

**Researcher Positionality**

I am an African American woman—in that order. I have been aware of my race much longer than I have been aware of my gender. The past three years have been transformational for my identification as an African American woman. I recently took a pilgrimage with my Baba (father) and eldest brother to visit my uncle in South Africa. I experienced an internal transformation in my identity while I grasped the bars that held President Nelson Mandela in captivity. I listened to the narratives of other political prisoners and realized that my African experiences in America are not as different from those of my African brothers and sisters as I previously assumed. I previously identified as “Black” because I felt inferior to native-born Africans. My physical journey, conversations with my Zulu cousins and interactions with South Africans who migrated from various parts of the continent reshaped the way I view myself as an African woman in America. In May 2018, I purchased DNA kits for my maternal grandmother, mother and myself. Results from the DNA test triggered mixed feelings about my identity. The first relatives who made contact with me were direct descendants of an Irish family that viewed my African family members as property. At the same time, I was able to identify what regions of Africa my family called home for centuries. The results from the test solidified my connection to the southwestern regions of Africa while reminding me that I live in a country that systematically
designed policy for my detriment. This awakening has helped me to find peace with my family’s place in the world and myself. For this reason, I have chosen to personally identify as an African American woman. My first serious contemplations of my place in academia as an African American began during my first semester as an undergraduate student.

In August of 2001, I moved three hours away from my family and social support networks to pursue a bachelor’s degree at a prestigious, large, predominantly White institution. As a first-generation college student, I was filled with excitement and anxiety about what I would face. My family and friends had high expectations for me and I had to perform well because I was recruited to that institution as an education major; the terms of my scholarship weighed heavily over my head. As the first few weeks rolled by, the emotional and psychological effects that came with being an “African American girl” on this campus surprised me. I had been raised in various settings (some were more diverse than others) and was accustomed to interacting with White teachers and peers. Something was different now; I did not have my family and church family with me. I was left to endure marginalization and covert racial discrimination alone. As the semesters continued, I grew angrier at the structure of the system. I connected with other African American students who identified with the same pressures that I articulated. My family and friends from home did not understand the transformation that had begun in me. My “otherness” grew clearer when I examined the photos of exemplary alumni in the Student Union or gazed at the six-foot statues of White men across campus. For the first time in my life, I understood institutionalized racism. When a highly intelligent core member of my support network transferred to a historically African American university, the anger turned to sadness and feelings of inadequacy. Despite my strong grade point average and efforts to build a support network, I left the institution after two years. I did not belong.
I went on to be the first person in my immediate family to obtain a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree. I transferred to another large PWI, but this time I already had a support system established. I braced myself for covert discrimination and actively sought healthy ways of coping and raising awareness. During this time, I developed a passion for retention and African American students who attend PWIs. After six years of teaching, I accepted a position as the Coordinator of Retention and Student Success at a predominantly White community college.

Currently, I navigate racial micro-aggressions and racism on a daily basis at an educational technology company where I lead a team of student success coaches. The company I work with makes intentional strides towards inclusion, yet racial stereotypes are deeply embedded in the cultures of the people and universities we partner with. As an African American woman in leadership, my literal presence is interpreted as aggressive and threatening to some people. I have been encouraged to be less direct in emails, reprimanded for not smiling in meetings and retaliated against for participating in the company’s inaugural diversity committee. One might question why I choose to stay with this employer. Besides my primary reason, which is the belief that my talent and passion positively impact the student experience, I stay because I learned how to find subgroups of “belonging” in environments that don’t respect my experiences or me. I learned this survival skill set in PWIs.

My passion and day-to-day activities influenced my meaning-making processes during this study. Throughout this research study, I used journals and other reflective tools to minimize the likelihood of imposing my perceptions and experiences upon the perceptions and experiences of the research participants. It was important to me that I communicated the participants’ narratives with integrity. I was transparent with participants about the purpose of the research study and empowered them to share their narratives with the higher education community. This
research study became an extension on my life’s mission to promote advocacy and justice for all people—particularly those who live on the margins of American society.
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Retention Research in the United States

Tinto (2012) wrote, “What matters is not simply attending college but completing a degree… starting but not finishing college yields little earnings benefit in relation to those who do not” (Kindle ebook 115-116). Retention is not a new issue in higher education; higher education professionals have researched the best practices for student retention, persistence, and engagement for decades (Astin & Panos, 1967; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea 2008; Tinto, 1975). McNeely (1937) was an early researcher who studied student attrition and retention. McNeely’s report, “College Student Mortality,” identified key factors that influence college student persistence. He studied 25 colleges and universities throughout the United States to explore student persistence based on gender, institutional demographics, and the communities’ institutions. Later, Summerskill (1962) explored student emotions, feelings, and the psychosocial influences that accompany student engagement. Since then, numerous studies have been done to examine this phenomenon, but there is still a lot to learn about student persistence, particularly because the student population is becoming more diverse than ever before (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

Several research studies about college student persistence and retention emerged in the 1970s-1980s. Similar to the 2010s, there was a shift in the student population during this decade. Prior to the 1960s, many students were not admitted into institutions of higher education on the
bases of race and/or gender (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). As the student population grew more diverse and American culture shifted, research about student retention and persistence in higher education grew more necessary. Kamens (1971) researched how college size influenced occupation choice and student attrition. He later examined the formation of America’s prestigious colleges and universities. After conducting a longitudinal study from 1963-1967 with male high school seniors, Spady (1971) developed a four-part model about student aspirations and attainment. He found that academic performance was a main factor in student attrition.

Research about student retention and persistence expanded as institutions and policy-makers adjusted to the changes in American culture. Today, more research on retention is necessary as higher education culture shifts with technological and economic changes in society.

Mainstream retention researchers Astin and Tinto also emerged during this time frame. Panos and Astin (1967) found that students who drop out are likely to have the following attributes: they come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they do not plan to attend graduate school, and/or these students have lower grades in high school. More than 40 years later, these three factors are still common predictors of student dropout (Tinto, 2012). The demographics of the student population are changing, yet the predictors seem to be consistent (Braxton et al, 2004; Tinto, 2012). For example, traditionally aged, first-year African American students are overrepresented in developmental/remedial courses, and they are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their White counterparts (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). This means that many African American students begin their college careers with two out of three common predictors for student dropout (Panos & Astin, 1967). Research needs to be done about how students in community college can be more successful and persist to degree attainment.
Panos and Astin’s (1967) landmark study provided a strong foundation for research about student persistence and engagement. Astin (1975) constituted a longitudinal study called Preventing Students From Dropping Out. In this study, he identified key characteristics that maximize student success and persistence. Student involvement emerged as a major theme, and later became the foundation to support Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement. That year, Astin also contributed to Involvement in Learning (1984), a report from the National Institute of Education. This report linked student involvement with student persistence and gained national attention. That link between involvement and persistence has served as the foundation for numerous studies since then. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted, “Astin proposed one of the first, most durable, and influential college impact models” (p. 51). The theory of student involvement serves as the foundation for the nation’s most highly accepted strategies for student retention (Kuh, 2009). Unfortunately, like most student involvement theories, African American students can be marginalized if they are expected to respond in the same ways as White students. For this reason, student engagement strategies that target African American students are pertinent to their success in the community college environment.

Student involvement (also known as engagement) continues to be one of the most prominent strategies for improving student retention in higher education (Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Kuh (2009) described student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). Student engagement is a common thread among the best practices for students across varied races, ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds (Davonport & Lane, 2006; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Jones, 2001; Strayhorn, 2008). The implementation of engaging strategies and practices should vary based on the needs
of the student body and the institution. For this reason, researchers also focus on the patterns and characteristics of specific student populations.

Tinto (1975, 1988, 2012) studied patterns and student characteristics that are associated with student dropout. Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993, 2012) described student dropout as a longitudinal process with distinct stages. He emphasized students’ psychosocial development while examining the best and worst institutional practices. Tinto’s psychosocial stages of student departure (1975) expounded on Spady’s (1971) model about student aspirations and attainment while incorporating elements of Durkheim’s (1951) suicide model. Tinto (1993) wrote, “Though the presence of interaction does not by itself guarantee persistence, the absence of interaction almost always enhances the likelihood of departure” (p. 117). In essence, student engagement begins when the student is first introduced to the institution; therefore, institutional structure and culture play an important role in student development and retention.

Tinto (1993, 2012) emphasized the institution’s role in helping students successfully transition into the campus culture. He acknowledged that several factors influence student integration and retention, but institutions can create a campus climate that encourages student involvement. He acknowledged that students’ academic and social backgrounds also influence how they will integrate into the academic and social environment (Tinto, 2012). Institutions should be proactive about helping students develop social and academic connections from the beginning. Professional development and knowledge about best practices are essential for faculty and staff. Tinto (2012) wrote, “When institutions and those who work in them seem unable to enhance the success of their students, it is less for lack of good intentions than for lack of knowledge about the appropriate types of actions, practices, and policies they should adopt” (Kindle ebook 60-62). In other words, everyone in the institution should be committed to student success. Since students’ primary interactions are in the classroom, positive and productive
facult\-y-student interactions are essential (Guiffrida, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 1993, 2012). In addition to increasing the quality of faculty-student interaction, Tinto (2012) also endorsed learning communities, service learning, supplemental instruction, embedded academic support, first-year seminars, basic skills courses, and social/financial support programs. Many of these practices have been nationally embraced as “high-impact” practices for student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Mainstream researchers like Kuh and Tinto inform higher education policy and practice for the United States. Mainstream researchers have greatly contributed to identifying and solidifying research for engaging White students across the nation. On the other hand, scholars who research African American students are not given the same level of respect and recognition in regards to policy and practice.

**African Americans and Retention Research**

Harvard University (the first American institution of higher education) was established in 1636, yet African Americans were legally excluded from American institutions of higher education until the 1960s (Harvard University, 2018). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) laid the foundation for desegregating American schools. State laws that enforced racial segregation in public schools were declared unconstitutional as a result of this Supreme Court case. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stated, "To separate them [African American elementary and high school students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone" (347 U.S. 483). Nearly 60 years later, African American children still battle inequities because schools in their communities continue to be underfinanced by both federal and state policies (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Webb, 1992).
Retention strategies that target African American students at PWIs emerged in the late 1960s after the implementation of the Title VI Act (Harper et al., 2009). The Title VI Act gave African American students access to higher education by prohibiting institutions from excluding or discriminating against students on the basis of race or national origin (Harper et al., 2009). Additionally, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Executive Order 11246, which prohibited employment discrimination on the bases of race, color, religion, or national origin (Harper et al., 2009). This implementation of affirmative action required federal contractors to provide equal opportunity employment for women and African Americans. Research about retaining African Americans at PWIs emerged as a direct result of these legal policies.

**Historical Context: African American Students in U.S. Higher Education**

African American students who attend PWIs enter with specific challenges that are unique to this population. Historically, African American students have been excluded and marginalized when pursuing postsecondary education (Harper, Patton, and Wooden, 2009; Jones, 2001; Webb, 1992). Institutionalized racial policies and practices keep many African American students on the margins of higher education (Tinto, 2012; Webb, 1992). It was not until the 1960s that the Title VI Act was implemented to prohibit institutions of higher education from excluding African American students on the basis of race and/or ethnicity (Harper et al, 2009). It was also during this time frame that Executive Order 11246 systematically implemented affirmative action as a legal procedure for hiring African Americans (Harper et al, 2009; Jones, 2001). These policies gave African Americans access to PWIs and predominantly White jobs. Consequently, research about retaining African American students at PWIs emerged.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a “steady underrepresentation of African American students at Predominantly White Institutions” (Harper et al, 2009, p. 397). African American
students who attend PWIs report perceiving themselves as “others” and they have trouble integrating into campus because they encounter racism, discrimination, and face negative stereotypes (Aiken et al., 2001). Additionally, many of these students are overrepresented in developmental/remedial courses and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their White peers (Davonport & Lane, 2006). As Moore (2001) stated, “These oppressive forces constantly convey messages of intellectual incompetence, which at times have debilitating effects on the academic identity and achievement of African American students” (p. 77).

This should not come as a surprise to higher education professionals. Documentation from the famous case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stated, "To separate them [African American elementary and high school students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone" (347 U.S. 483). With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to explore African American’s perceptions of belonging as minorities in an urban college. The results of this study may provide implications for community colleges that seek to identify and address issues related to African American students’ perceptions of belonging.

**Best Practices for African American Students**

**Mainstream Engagement Practices**

The practices that Tinto (2012) listed as helpful for increasing student engagement are also supported by other research, including Kuh’s (2008, 2009) high-impact practices. Exploring the best practices in student engagement should be an on-going activity for higher education professionals (Tinto, 2012). Although strategies should be customized to meet the needs of each institution and student population, there are some practices that commonly
increase engagement in a variety of settings. Chickering and Gamson (1987) listed seven good practices for improving higher education: student-faculty contact, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles, and cooperation among students. Tinto (2012) listed similar strategies for promoting student involvement and increasing retention. Elements of these practices can also be seen in the Association of American Colleges and University’s (AACU) list of high-impact activities that promote student engagement (Kuh, 2008). These best practices for increasing student engagement were developed to increase student retention and satisfaction for undergraduate students. Specifically, institutions implement these practices to improve the college experience for White students.

White students have historically been the majority population of students in U.S. higher education. Many of these practices promote community and belonging for students who have experience with collegiate culture. For example, the practices make the assumption that student-faculty interactions are productive and helpful for students. This does not account for how faculty perceptions of African American students often lead to isolating experiences for African American students (Brown, 2018). Moreover, value systems vary across cultures and subcultures. Traditional African American perceptions of White people in authority are shaped by a lifetime of experiences that White students do not have to face. This impacts how they perceive themselves in relation to faculty and vice versa. This is an example of how majorative high-impact/best practices for student engagement may not positively impact African American students. Discussions about cultural considerations are missing from mainstream research, which is dangerous for practitioners who solely rely on these studies to inform their interactions with students.
African American Students’ Experiences in Light of Mainstream Best Practices

In some cases, mainstream best practices have been researched and applied in diverse institutional settings. They have been beneficial for students from varied races and ethnicities in the United States. Some mainstream practices would be considered best practices for African American students; however, African American students face unique challenges and barriers to higher education. Consequentially, best practices for African American students should be considered as part of the mainstream canon of higher education research.

Some mainstream best practices for student engagement promote a sense of belonging among African American students more than others. For example, faculty-student interaction is a popular theme in research about promoting engagement among African American students (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Chang 2005; Cureton 2003; Davonport & Lane, 2006; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005; Lee, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). Faculty-student interaction plays a major role in social integration and engagement among African American students. African American students who perceive diversity as a public institutional commitment are more likely to persist than those who do not (Mayhew, Grunwalk, & Dey, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) wrote, “If African American students perceive the university to be racist, then those feelings can cause them to either transfer, dropout, or continue their education with a chip on their shoulders (prohibiting academic growth)” (p. 307). Faculty-student relationships can help students perceive the institution as being open to diversity, especially if faculty are willing to go “above and beyond” to know students on a personal level (Guiffrida, 2005). African American students who develop personal relationships with faculty also express higher levels of satisfaction than those who do not (Guiffrida, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). Institutions that are committed to retaining African
American students must create a campus climate that encourages faculty-student interaction. This requires intentionality and awareness—particularly when selecting faculty. A goal of each institution should be having physically and intellectually inclusive and diverse faculty. First-year seminars/experiences and learning communities are two other mainstream engagement strategies that promote faculty-student interaction. High-impact practices that promote positive faculty-student interactions show promising benefits to African American student engagement and retention.

First-year experience programs also show promising benefits for African American engagement and persistence. “At no time is support, especially academic support, more important than during the critical first year of college, when student success is still so much in question and still very responsive to institutional intervention. And in no place is support more needed than in the classroom where success is constructed one course at a time” (Tinto, 2012, Kindle ebook 234-236). Mainstream ideology teaches that first-year seminars and first-year experience programs are beneficial for students, regardless of race or ethnicity (Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al, 2008). The AACU noted that the “highest quality first-year experience programs place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competences” (Kuh, 2008, p. 1).

The AACU released a follow-up to Kuh’s (2008) study on high-impact practices. The study focused on the impact of these practices with underserved student populations (this included African American students). They wrote, “Little is known about whether engagement in these practices differentially affects learning outcomes for these and other traditionally underserved students” (Finley & Mcnair, 2009). This follow-up study concluded that when “African American students participated in multiple high-impact practices, their perceived
engagement in deep learning and their learning gains were between 11 and 27 percent higher (depending on the level of engagement) than that of African American students with zero participation in these practices” (Finley & Mcnair, 2009, p. 12). It is important to note that the deep learning and engagement gap between African American and White students persisted, despite the amount of engagement in high-impact practices. This persisting gap suggests that high-impact practices can be expanded to address African American students’ needs for student engagement practices.

This critique of mainstream practices is not necessarily a call to devalue the principles that guide student engagement in the United States; this critique challenges higher education practitioners to place equal values on the African American and White student experiences. Responsible researchers and practitioners must push beyond the temptation to value White students more than non-White students. Each person should challenge oneself to examine how bias and positionality impact African American students. It is also important to explore which practices support positive engagement experiences for African American students. For example, first-year experience programs should reflect the needs of each institution’s student population. First-year experience programs often include learning communities, as well. These best practices allow African American students to choose to build community with faculty and peer. A benefit of first-year experience programs is that institutions can customize the content and activities to meet the unique needs of their student bodies. Students are often exposed to campus organizations while participating in first-year seminars, which can lead to active engagement on campus for African American and White students (Harper & Quaye, 2007). When paired with learning communities, first-year experience programs often include a variety of aspects that promote interaction among peers and between faculty and students.
As Kuh (2008) stated, “The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with ‘big questions’ that matter beyond the classroom” (p. 1). First-year students who participate in learning communities have higher academic performance, show higher levels of student engagement, and express better perceptions of the campus environment than students who do not participate (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Students of color who participate in learning communities may feel more comfortable with developing relationships with faculty members because they can interact as a group or cohort (Chang, 2005). This group interaction may be less intimidating than one-on-one interactions with faculty. Learning communities that incorporate diverse curriculum can also help African American students integrate into the campus environment (Mayhew et al, 2005). Students who feel connected to the course content and curricula are more likely to engage.

Student engagement and social integration have been common threads in student retention theory (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1993, 2012). African American students who attend PWIs encounter unique barriers to success and persistence due to socioeconomic backgrounds, racial tension, and other psychosocial influences (Harper et al, 2009; Lee, 1999; Tinto, 2012). Faculty-student interaction, first-year experience programs, and learning communities serve as three of the most promising practices for African American student retention and persistence. One common thread among these three practices is social engagement or “belonging.” Social engagement in the campus community impacts how students identify and interact with the institution. African Americans navigate racial identity with each campus interaction. African American students who perceive themselves as “other” and/or “only” are less likely to have a positive experience with mainstream retention practices. Practitioners must consider how racial identity impacts African American college experiences.
**African American Racial Identity**

According to Helms (1990), “Racial identity development theory concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership, that is belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial-group membership” (p. 3). Group membership is directly related to belonging, mattering, and marginality (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Systematic racism pushes African American students into isolation and marginalization. Decisions are made to benefit White students’ experiences with inclusion and group membership while African American students are left to navigate double-consciousness and racial identity alone (DuBois, 1994). Double-consciousness explains how African Americans in the United States navigate internal conflict in regards to race. Specifically, it explores how African Americans perceive themselves versus how they are perceived by White people (DuBois, 1994). Institutionalized racism intensifies this internal conflict and impacts 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 racial group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3). Cross’s (1991) theory of psychological nigrulence describes the process of “becoming African American” in American society. This theory has been modified throughout the years as race relations in American have changed. This theory includes five stages in the process of nigrulence: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/commitment. The pre-encounter stage is where African Americans have internalized the negative stereotypes that are associated with “African Americanness” that they gather from media and their social environments (Cross, 1991). African Americans in this stage are likely to avoid acknowledging racial relations. A racial event can occur that causes the individual to acknowledge racism, which pushes them into the
encounter stage. Racism becomes a reality, and feelings of discomfort and pain may lead to immersion/emersion. Immersion/emersion happens when “everything of value in life must be African American or relevant to African Americanness” (Cross, 1991, p. 190). Anger is common during this stage as the person develops a personal sense of racial identity and moves toward internalization. Finally, the individual makes a commitment to racial identity, which may lead to a new encounter stage when confronted with racism again (Cross, 1991).

African American students who attend community college are often negotiating how to describe their personal identity. Belonging and self-perception can serve as catalysts for student success or failure in community college. Higher education practitioners can use racial identity development models to develop programming that promotes belonging among African American students who attend PWIs. Students will be in varied stages of racial identity development while enrolled in the institution. This could lead to racial tension or avoidance and reduce productive interracial relations (Tatum, 1992). This tension or discomfort with interacting with other races could be associated with the dissonance that African American students describe as “otherness” when referring to their experiences at PWIs (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Lee, 1999).

It is important to acknowledge that there are no “one-size-fits-all” approaches to helping African American students perceive a sense of belonging in PWIs. Therefore, practitioners should be cautious about developing an unhealthy reliance on racial stereotypes when serving specific student groups. Molefi Asante (2005) warned, “Thus we stereotype others and by our stereotypes create prisons that keep some in and others out” (p. 31). When used appropriately, racial identity theories can be useful when implementing practices that promote the positive psychosocial development of African Americans at PWIs.
Institutions can help students overcome this barrier by promoting engagement between races. Tatum (1992) lists four strategies for “reducing student resistance and promoting student development” among students:

1. The creation of a safe classroom atmosphere by establishing clear guidelines for discussion;
2. The creation of opportunities for self-generated knowledge;
3. The provision of an appropriate developmental model that students can use as a framework for understanding their own process;
4. The exploration of strategies to empower students as change agents.

These four strategies could easily be incorporated into best practices for increasing African American student engagement in higher education. Higher education practitioners can use these practices as vehicles for promoting diversity and infusing Tatum’s (1992) strategies into institutional policies and practices. For example, a first-year experience program might develop a learning community that offers safe intercultural dialogue, opportunities for self-generated knowledge, models for metacognition, and empowerment to be change agents on campus and in the surrounding community.

Another approach to promoting belongingness might be incorporating the principles of intersectionality into institutional policies and practices. “Intersectionality theory suggests that we must also understand how each manifestation of social oppression (i.e., racism, gender, classism) interacts with every other manifestation of social oppression and the ways that social oppression in all its manifestations sustains itself through these intersectional relationships” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012, p. 46). Institutions can do this by implementing practices that acknowledge the “whole” student and encourage dialogue about diversity and identity. These
conversations and activities can promote healthy interracial relationships while engaging students in activities that promote belonging (Guiffrida, 2005).

**“Belonging” and African American College Students**

In 1933, Carter G. Woodson wrote, “The thought of inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies” (p. 9). Although this statement was published 80 years ago, African American students continue to report perceived marginalization on many American college campuses (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Webb 1992). Underrepresentation may be a factor that influences African Americans’ sense of “belonging” on college campuses. Experiences with racism, negative stereotypes, and discrimination contribute to the reasons why African American students continue to perceive themselves as “others” on campuses where they are the racial minority (Aiken et al, 2001).

**Psychosocial Identity Development and College Students**

Higher education professionals have used elements of psychosocial identity theory to learn more about “belonging” and how it influences engagement in postsecondary institutions. Schlossberg’s transition theory (1981, 1984) described the challenges that people face when undergoing a transition. Students in this stage are likely to experience high levels of stress and marginality while integrating into the campus environment. Schlossberg et al. (1989) wrote, “Every time an individual changes roles or experiences in a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises” (p. 2). Marginality poses a threat to the social and academic success of African American students who find themselves in the identity versus identity diffusion stage while attending a PWCC (Harper, Patton, & Wooden 2009; Mayhew, Grunwalk, & Dey, 2005; Webb, 1992).
African American community college students are likely to explore their meaning-making processes in light of others as they balance external and internal value systems. For this reason, it may be challenging for students to find groups to connect with on campus; this could pose a threat to how they perceive themselves in relationship to White students in the campus environment. The meaning-making process for African American students who attend PWCCs can be strenuous as they balance their internal and external value systems and negotiate their places in a predominantly White environment (Cross, 1991; Strayhorn, 2012). Unfortunately, African American students who attend PWCCs are more likely to experience negative distantiation because they report seeing themselves as “others” (Aiken et al, 2001). Feelings of hostility or marginality can negatively impact student engagement and social integration into the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Students who are in transition will be faced with the potential to feel marginalized (Schlossberg, 1984). Students who perceive a sense of belonging (or mattering) are more likely to successfully transition (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993, 2012). This will be important in the analysis of this research study because there may be implications for how institutions can improve student retention and persistence. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) define “mattering” as “the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the objects of someone’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them” (p. 21). Mattering, like belonging, is essential to successful integration into the college environment.

For example, student-faculty relationships are especially important for African American students who attend PWIs (Chang, 2005; Guiffrida 2005; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). African American students report higher levels of institutional satisfaction, persistence, retention, and
engagement when they have personal relationships with faculty members (Strayhorn, 2012). Some students describe the best faculty members as those who go “above and beyond” to help students with personal situations that extend outside the institution (Guiffrida, 2005). Other environmental characteristics like curriculum, teaching, and institutional objectives can be examined to increase the likelihood that African American students will develop a sense of belonging within the institution. Students were asked to describe how they perceive personal connections with faculty and how that relates to their general sense of belonging at the institution.

In conclusion, “belonging” is an important topic for higher education professionals to consider when evaluating student retention and persistence. Students’ psychosocial and racial identity development can greatly influence their success in college. This is particularly true for African American students who attend PWIs, because a healthy perception of belonging can reduce feelings of isolation and marginalization. The next chapter will explain the methodology and research analysis for this population of students.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

The human experience is defined and enriched by language. Humans use narratives and counter-narratives to make meaning of life and to share a microcosm of their consciousness (Seidman 2006). This study uses critical narrative inquiry to explore African American students’ narratives and counter-narratives regarding how they perceive belonging at a community college where they are the racial minority (Clandinin, 2006). I am both a researcher and participant in this study. The students’ stories and experiences will be used to inform higher education practitioners’ decisions about how to understand and engage African American students. While this study was not designed to serve as a basis for generalizing all African American community college students, it serves as a glimpse into student lives on community college campuses. W.E.B. DuBois described this when he said, “I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning of life and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of one human life that I know best” (DuBois, 1940, xxxiii).

For this research, I engaged a critical narrative inquiry methodology. As stated by Clandinin (2016), “Narrative inquiry begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experience” (Kindle ebook 282). Clandinin (2016) described narrative inquiry as being comprised of four main components: living, telling, retelling, and reliving experiences. This methodology is a means of gathering and analyzing the stories and experiences of people and
allowing those narratives to shape the practitioner’s ideology of a particular subject or topic. This methodology has proven to be useful in higher education when exploring institutional stories—not just individual narratives. Consequently, the narratives of marginalized people and institutions have been excluded from mainstream dialogues about best practices for engaging African American students and other underrepresented populations. As Patton (2016) argued, “U.S. higher education institutions serve as venues through which formal knowledge production rooted in racism/White supremacy is generated” (p.327). In contrast, critical narrative inquiry challenges the perceptions and ideas that were developed for the benefit of the White majority. Like CRT, critical narrative inquiry provides an avenue for counter-narratives to be considered in the overall experience of African Americans and other marginalized populations. As such, my use of critical narrative inquiry seeks to disrupt this sort of formal knowledge production by seeking, highlighting, and centering the counter-stories of African American students’ experiences regarding belonging at community colleges.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore African American community college students’ perceptions of belonging. For the purposes of this study, “belonging” is defined as the feeling of being accepted and embraced by a community while overcoming discrimination and marginalization and developing as a student who is psychosocially integrated into the campus environment. Due to the unique relationship that community colleges have with the surrounding neighborhoods, this study will explore how students describe their experiences in various community environments. Two research questions drive this study:

1. How do African American community college students describe their perceptions of
belonging: in class, on campus/with campus, among peers and within the campus community?

2. How do African American community college students describe their perceptions of “otherness”: in class, on campus/with campus, among peers and within the campus community?

**Data Collection and Sampling**

The Colorado community college system is comprised of 13 colleges and serves about 144,000 students throughout the state of Colorado. According to the Colorado Department of Education, about 75% of Colorado community college students are White and less than 6% of these students are African American. I worked with Western Community College (WCD) students to explore African American narratives and experiences. WCC shares a 40-acre campus with Western State University and Colorado University (Urban). The entire campus is known as the Urban Higher Education Campus (https://www.UHEC.edu/).

The numbers of participants were flexible in efforts to achieve both sufficiency and saturation of the topic (Seidman, 2005). The criterion for selecting a sufficient number of participants is multifaceted. First, the participant pool included currently enrolled and experienced undergraduate African American students. Participants’ reflections on their first-year student perspectives provide insights regarding recent perceptions of belonging on campus. First-year African American community college students had a unique opportunity to share their counter-narratives regarding their experiences and perceptions of matriculating through post-secondary education in the current tense racial climate.
The other students in the participant pool were students who had completed an undergraduate degree in the past five years. This includes students who have stopped out and returned to the community college. These students’ counter-narratives are important because they may provide more in-depth reflection and insight. Reflection is arguably the most important aspect of in-depth interviewing because this is when participants express meaning making from their narratives/counter-narratives (Seidman, 2005). The purpose of including students at varying levels of experiences with the community college is to sample a sufficient number of students who can provide their experiences. As the researcher, I achieved saturation when common themes emerged and persisted across participants. Participants shared their narratives through 60-minute, semi-structured interviews where they were asked to share their experiences and perceptions of belonging (Seidman, 2005). These interviews were divided into three topics (Seidman, 2005): focused life history, details on the experience, and reflections of the meaning.

As previously stated, I am a researcher and participant in this study. As the researcher, I acknowledge that I have strong opinions about community college life from both my professional and academic experiences. I served as the first Coordinator for Retention and Student Success at a rural community college that served an average of 5,000 students. African American students (mostly urban students who relocated to the rural area in hopes of transferring to a large, local university) often expressed their ideas and opinions about their experiences inside the classroom, outside the classroom, and in the local community. I also helped a group of African American women start a campus support group for navigating racism and discrimination on campus. My objective as researcher is to be aware of my experiences and not to impose these experiences on participants through leading questions, body language, or sharing too much of my history.
As a participant, I continued to journal and collect artifacts that shape this study. I was open to allowing the study to help me make meaning of my experiences as an African American woman in higher education. I understood that my age, geographic history, academic experience, and professional background could have led the students to perceive me as an “other.” Additionally, I used painting, music, and media as various means of helping me reflect and make meaning of the relationships I built with participants.

**Data Analysis**

I developed a data management plan to assist with the collection and analysis of data. “Data collection includes a number of processes that must be managed, including negotiating issues of power” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 128). Interview recordings were transcribed and coded as themes emerge during the data collection process. Transcriptions were done no more than 48 hours after each interview to help me notice themes that emerged.

Critical race theory (CRT) is based on “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” and how racism persists as a part of American culture (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, Kindle ebook 203). Participant responses were analyzed through the lens of CRT as critical narratives to mainstream retention practices. Participants were asked open-ended questions in an effort to gain a vignette of African American student experiences with the Western Community College. Critical narrative inquiry was used as the primary methodology for this study.

Data analysis was guided by the core research question that drives this study: How do African American community college students perceive belonging within the classroom, campus, and surrounding community? After the transcriptions, there were three rounds of coding in efforts to identify emerging themes from the research. An initial round of coding occurred
immediately after transcription. I reviewed the transcriptions and recordings and coded demographic details and overarching individual narratives. The second round of coding involved identifying major themes that emerged across participants. This was done throughout the interview process and concluded with a final overview after all interviews had been transcribed. After key themes were identified, a third round of coding was used to explore participant narratives and counter-narratives in light of each theme. Finally, emerging themes were used to analyze the data’s connection to previous trends in literature through a critical lens. For example, Molefe Asante discusses how media and metaphors are used to shape American perceptions of African people in America and abroad (Asante, 2005). As participants shared their experiences and made references to media, leisure, and art to describe their perceptions of belonging, they were analyzed through a CRT framework. Some evidence of this exists in photographs throughout the analysis portion of this document.

One pivotal concept that was used to analyze the participant narratives is W.E.B. DuBois’s discussion about double-consciousness (1994): the awareness that African Americans have historically described as a consistent, often simultaneous perception of being African and American. DuBois (1994) describes it this way:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Participant narratives echoed the premises of double-consciousness. Those narratives were used as anchors for identifying persistent themes among participants.
Goodness Criteria and Trustworthiness

As participants shared their life stories with me, I maintained awareness of my positionality and how that might impact the participants. For example, participants were aware that I am not a native to this region of the United States. This was important because many people who were born in this region lament the ever-changing geographic and sociological changes that Urban, CO is experiencing. In May of 2016, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that Denver joined the list of the nation’s 20 most populous cities. It is not uncommon to see bumper stickers that read “native” or “transplant” with a Colorado landscape in the background. Most of my conversations in rideshare vehicles and grocery aisles begin with a discussion about where each person grew up, using some variation “native or transplant?” Every participant in this study was born and raised in Urban, CO and the surrounding suburbs. I was intentional about asking them to select interview locations that were convenient and comfortable for them.

It was also important that I understood how perceptions of power may have impacted my interactions with participants. My identification as an African American woman may have helped with trustworthiness because I shared racial and ethnic backgrounds with the participants. On the other hand, this could have also impacted trustworthiness because I am a graduate student. No participants had begun graduate school at the time of the interviews. Two of the participants worked as admissions counselors for graduate-level students. My educational experience makes me an outsider within the African American community—which could impact participants’ perceptions of the study and me. To build trustworthiness, I worked to make the process convenient and comfortable for participants. Interviews were conducted in locations that the participants chose (often near to their homes or employer location). As the researcher I acknowledged my status as an outsider and asked participants to tell me what they want the
academic community to know about their experiences. After the interviews, I asked each participant if we had discussed topics or details that they would like me to omit from the dissertation. I also served alongside participants in community events and activities outside of data collection, which built trust and rapport between us.

Each participant’s experiences were unique and not meant to be representative of any entire group or population. It should be noted, however, that overarching themes were common among participant narratives and counter-narratives. These themes should be used as insight and implications for further research involving how African American students perceive belonging in U.S. community colleges.

This research study was designed to capture a glimpse of how African American students at community colleges perceive belonging. I served as a guide and observer of student experiences and perceptions. Interview structure and questions were developed with the assistance of my dissertation chair for accountability and reliability. The information gathered from this study was used to tell a story/vignette of some African American students’ experiences. This study will serve as a foundation for future qualitative and quantitative studies about African Americans and belonging in higher education.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

The data collection process was conducted over the course of five months in Urban, CO. All participants attended the Western Community College over the course of the past 10 years. This included a combination of currently enrolled undergraduate students and participants who had already earned their undergraduate degrees. The research questions that guided the heart of this study were:

1. How do African American community college students describe their perceptions of belonging: in class, on campus/with campus, among peers and within the campus community?

2. How do African American community college students describe their perceptions of “otherness”: in class, on campus/with campus, among peers and within the campus community?

This research explored a problem in the American community college system: African American students persist at a lower rate than their Caucasian counterparts. This is evident in the Colorado community college system and local to the Western Community College (WCC).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 52% of full-time (41% of part-time) students who began their time at WCC during the Fall of 2015 returned for the Fall of 2016 (https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=community+college+of+Urban&s=all&id=126942#retg
rad). Only 4% of these graduates were identified as African American or Black. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education reports: “The gap between educational attainment of the white majority and Hispanic minority is the second largest in the nation” (https://www.colorado.gov/higher-education p. 1). For this reason, it is both imperative and urgent that WCC evaluates student satisfaction and best practices for promoting belonging (and ultimately retaining) African American students. This low number of African Americans completing at WCC impacts the larger community, as well. The population in Urban is rapidly increasing. U.S. Census Data estimates a 17.5% increase in the population of Urban between April 1, 2010, and July 1, 2017. This population increase has led to sharp increases in the cost of living. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the relationship between median incomes in Colorado by race (Bell Policy Center, 2018).

![Median Income By Race](chart.png)

**Figure 1: Median Income by Race**

Chart retrieved from the Bell Policy Center’s “Guide to Economic Mobility in Colorado” (2018).
Gentrification has drastically impacted the housing communities surrounding WCC—which emerged as a theme in the research participants’ reflections about their experiences at the college. Physical and cultural geography emerged as major themes that impacted students’ perceptions of belonging and otherness on campus and in the community.

**Gentrification and the Campus Community**

The Urban Higher Education Campus is positioned in the heart of Urban, CO. Like many cities across the United States, Urban has been impacted by gentrification. Critical human geography was used to explore how the geographic location of WCC impacted participant perspectives of belonging and their overall experiences with the college. Critical human geography is defined as (Painter, 2000):

> diverse and rapidly changing set of ideas and practices within human geography linked by a shared commitment to emancipatory politics within and beyond the discipline, to the promotion of progressive social change and the development of a broad range of critical theories and their application in geographical research and political practice. (p. 126)

The historical neighborhoods of Urban are being aggressively gentrified. This situation is a reflection of how gentrification is impacting major cities across the U.S. Research has been done in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, NY to examine the impact of gentrification on African American college students (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). There is much more research to be done to examine the impact of gentrification on urban community colleges that serve diverse student populations in the United States. As such, this study examines the impact of gentrification in a rapidly changing community. Western Community College (WCC) is a physical and cultural pillar of the Urban, CO, community. For this reason, research must be done to understand how the changes in the community impact the economic and educational culture. African American students who attend
WCC have been negatively impacted by aggressive gentrification and a lack of planning in regards to preserving the rich African American history of the neighborhood. African Americans in the region have been fighting mainstream and emigrating populations to preserve some of Urban’s rich African American history. For example, a historical African Methodist Episcopal church in the neighborhood was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan and rebuilt less than a year later due to the contributions of wealthy local African American leaders. After completing and transcribing my interviews for this study, a few participants invited me to take an African dance class and to receive a historical tour of this A.M.E. building that now houses the most renowned dance company in the Urban, CO, area. This dance company is a pillar in the community. The company’s most popular annual holiday show entitled, “Granny,” casts dancers from ages 5-80 years old and celebrates Kwanza, Christmas, Hanukah, and the Chinese New Year while teaching the community about the rich African American history of the local neighborhood. Another example of this neighborhood’s dedication to the history of the region is a branch of the Urban library system that is dedicated to African American research. Every year, the neighborhood hosts a Juneteenth parade and concert in an effort to teach new emigrants and children about African American impact on this booming metropolis. Unfortunately, WCC has not taken an active stance is preserving or educating the culture of the neighborhood. Little has been done to research (or merely acknowledge) how gentrification has forced African Americans in the community to relocate due to increasing living costs and an influx of White emigrants to the area. Figure 2 shows which races resided in Urban neighborhoods in 2010.
2010 US Census data shows the areas near City Park and UHEC where African Americans built and resided less than ten years ago before aggressive gentrification. The green areas will be blue on the 2020 US Census.

On November 26, 2017, the New York Times published an article about a coffee shop in Urban, CO (Tukewitz, 2017). This coffee shop is situated in the most historic African American neighborhood of Urban, CO. This historically African American neighborhood has been subject to aggressive gentrification in recent years. Located less than 2 miles from UHEC, each participant described this neighborhood as a place of importance in respect to African Americans in Urban. Each participant lived or had close family and friends who lived in this neighborhood prior to gentrification; his neighborhood was an influencer in participants’ decisions to attend WCC. On that fall day, the New York Times reported, “Ink Coffee is the kind of business that is often a marker of gentrification — one that caters to a clientele with money to spend on fancy coffee.” The coffee shop was in the news because of sidewalk sign outside of the establishment.
that read: “Ink Coffee: Happily gentrifying the neighborhood since 2014” (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Ink Coffee (New York Times, 2017).

The company’s owner released an apology stating that the sign was intended to be humorous, but community members did not appreciate being used as a marketing punch line. Community members gathered to protest outside of the coffee shop and rallies were held to bring awareness to the impact of gentrification in this historic neighborhood. Protesters, primarily African American, called for Urban’s African American mayor to resign from his position because he failed to protect the community that raised him from gentrification. This coffee shop has become a metaphor for systematic racism in Urban, CO. Participants’ perceptions of belonging while attending WCC were impacted by gentrification in this neighborhood.
Participant Vignettes

The research from this study provides vignettes of African American’s experiences Western Community College over the past decade. The participants’ brave and honest voices and perspectives and experiences will be used to inform higher education practitioners’ decisions about how to understand and engage African American students. Additionally, the summary of findings were used to make recommendations for further research regarding how African American community college students perceive belonging.

Maya

Maya’s pseudonym was chosen in honor of Dr. Maya Angelou. Like Dr. Angelou, Maya carries insight and wisdom beyond her years. Maya takes herself and her place in this world seriously. She is intentional with her words and privately expresses herself through written poetry. It is with great respect to the gracefulness, determination and intentionality that this pseudonym was selected.

“So, I grew up in the 90s and Urban (and the surrounding area) was mostly Black… there was the White flight, so back in the Civil Rights, all that, White people didn’t want to be associated with this area because it was so Black.” - Maya

Maya was a 23-year-old admissions counselor for a top educational technology company. She was raised in the heart of Urban, CO—just outside the center of downtown. She was the first participant in this study. Maya responded to a research recruitment announcement through a secondary professional reference. Maya was a recent graduate of a local university and attended the Western Community College during her undergraduate work. During the data collection process, she left her job as an admissions counselor at an educational technology company to pursue her master’s degree in another state. Her self-professed, primary motivator was a desire to experience a sense of belonging in her post-undergraduate professional life. Ultimately, she
informed me of a local conference for professional African American women of color. It was at this conference that I met Ruby, the leader of a student organization at the Elite State University, and recruited future participants through voluntary participant referrals.

She describes her childhood home as “projects” that have now been replaced with multi-million dollar real estate. She grew up in the neighborhood where Ink Coffee is located. When asked to describe herself, Maya described her childhood neighborhood with detail and passion. She reflected on the year her “father left” (2001) as a chronological marker for when she started to notice the impact of neighborhood gentrification. This was when she moved to the central part of Urban to attend elementary school:

I’ve always gone to schools that were international until middle school. So, my elementary school was predominantly Hispanic but had a heavy Russian [and] Muslim population and it had a very high African population…South African… I noticed more Ethiopian Habesha later towards the end of high school. Maya says, “I was a really white child.” Her natural reddish hair, hazel eyes and fair skin tone influenced Maya’s racial identity as a child. She described a time when a White woman tried to help her find her mother in a local Laundromat. Maya was standing next to her dark-skinned mother; the stranger had assumed Maya was White.

I conceptualized race very early. My mom, my grandma, everyone was big on being Black…I was never confused. More, my confusion came because my families have different ethnic make-ups…how they function. My mom’s Christian; my dad’s Muslim. You know that makes things a little bit different as far as what I understood about myself. Like, going to Masjid and going to church…I did both…they didn’t entertain holidays and stuff.

Maya felt that her perceptions of belonging were strongly shaped by familial relationships as a young child. She simultaneously experienced “onlyness” and “otherness” during the early phases of her identity development. May was an “only” within her immediate family because of her milky skin. She also belonged to many sub-African American communities and felt like an “other” within those communities because she did not fully latch on to a specific sub-community. Maya’s father eventually married a woman from Ethiopia, which further-increased
the complexities of her self-identity. She described her mother as being strong and her father as being strict. Both families instilled values in Maya that motivated her to pursue post secondary education from an early age. Maya’s high value for education and expansive knowledge of local African American subcultures shaped her experiences at Western Community College.

**Lorde**

*Lorde’s pseudonym was selected in honor of Audre Lorde with thoughtfulness and respect. Like Lorde, he displays confidence and mastery of emotions with passion. They both grew up with parents who immigrated to the United States. Lorde embraces intersectionality and does not embrace the idea of confining himself to a single category or “label” when expressing his identity. It is with respect to Lorde’s impact on how American people perceive identity development and intersectionality that this pseudonym was selected.*

Lorde was born in the United States to parents who emigrated from Eritrea in northeastern Africa. Eritrea is a coastal country that shares its physical and ethnic borders with Sudan and Ethiopia. When asked to describe himself, Lorde stated, “I identify as African American…first and foremost, as Eritrean.” Lorde seeks to embrace belonging in his adult relationships while honoring his ethnicity. Within the first 60 seconds of our interview, Lorde said:

> There’s a big stigma within the like, within the African community, that they don’t identify as Black. They identify specifically as where they are from and not African American. Um, and so, they feel…they don’t have the same disparities as being an African American…I mean, there’s a difference between being a minority here versus not being a minority back in Africa.

As a child, Lorde’s identity development was shaped around his disposition as an “Americanized African.” Lorde’s ethnicity and culture are displayed through his description of belonging as a child. He was aware of the dissonance between African American culture and
African cultures. For example, Lorde says that he embraced American hip-hop culture because it was “pretty indicative of being Black in America.” He felt intra-cultural pressure because his parents did not want their family to be associated or represented by American hip-hop culture. He learned to appreciate and place value in the crossroads where African and African American culture intersect. He was highly successful in elementary and high school and his parents maintained high academic expectations for his brother and him. Lorde felt that he missed opportunities to explore identity development as a child or adolescent because of his family’s value system.

After completing his third year of high school, Lorde’s parents sent his brother and him to attend a British boarding school in Sudan for almost two years. He and his brother were outperforming their classmates in the United States and his parents saw this as an opportunity to immerse their sons in east African culture while giving them both an opportunity to complete high school early. In Sudan, he completed high school with the students he described as the “wealthiest people and African diplomats.” Although his high school was a boarding school, he was able to commute from his nearby relatives’ home to save money. After passing his international exams and earning some college credit through the boarding school, Lorde returned to the U.S. to live with his parents while he attended Western Community College for the first time. His first few years in college shaped his identity development because he describes that era as the first time he had freedom from his parents.

One of the first conflicts that Lorde faced in college was sexuality. “I knew I was gay when I was six years old…that impacted my usage of alcohol and partying [in college]…I wasn’t even out to my friends then.” Lorde never discussed sexuality with his parents: “It’s not something we discussed…it’s safe to say they don’t know.” Lorde’s sexuality shaped his
personal identity and perception of “onlyness.” For seventeen years, Lorde did not feel comfortable expressing his sexuality—so, he never discussed it. Lorde expressed that when he became comfortable with expressing his sexuality, his feelings of belonging increased among his colleagues and classmates.

After attending WCC, Lord transferred to a local university where he was academically dismissed. He says that he did not take the experience seriously, despite his engagement with an academic fraternity, because he wanted to party and enjoy freedom from his parents. His washed his goal to be a lawyer away with alcohol while he struggled to numb the sting of identity development. He eventually felt left-behind as his friends continued to matriculate through higher education while he “wasted the opportunity.”

Lorde took a break from higher education and worked as a manager in retail for a few years. At age twenty-three, he returned to higher education and enrolled in Western State University located on the Urban Higher Education Campus. He participated in an internship program for the summer in another state. He viewed this summer away from friends, family and familiarity as an opportunity to explore his identity while searching for community.

That’s when I decided I would be gay, like openly. On the plane I decided I was just gonna be openly gay to test it out…‘I can be myself and see what it looks like instead of wondering or hiding…if it’s not good, it’s okay [Lorde laughs] I don’t know these people’…it turned out to be my first gay experience, the first time I went out on a date and I kissed somebody.

Lorde frequented the local gay-friendly nightclub three times a week with his new friends. He described that summer as the first time he felt he fully belonged in a community. He decided to discuss his sexuality with local friends and cousins when he returned to WSU (and concurrently enrolled in WCC) for the next semester. They embraced him and he says, “I decided to live my life the way I want to.” Lorde’s summer internship helped him to explore his
identity through community; he says this ultimately helped him persist to graduation because he experience belonging with his classmates and friends.

Ruby

Ruby’s pseudonym was chosen in honor of Ruby Bridges-- the first African American student to attend an all-White school in the South. Ruby Bridges was six years old when she passed a state exam that was supposed to be impossible for African American children to pass. She went to school for the entire school year, working with a single teacher and not being allowed to interact with other students. This participant describes many of her childhood school experiences as “dehumanizing” and isolating. She continues to persevere despite her past experiences with “onlyness” in the public school system.

Ruby’s earliest memories of identity development were shaped around “otherness” and “onlyness” more than belonging. She reflects on her childhood and emphasizes:

With any culture, you have to have a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging or a sense of identity is through the culture…not so much about bloodline…I believe that the core sense of identity does start in the educational system for any child. If you are being taught that you were a slave and your ancestors were slaves and depreciated [your sense of belonging is negatively impacted].

Ruby grew up in a suburb about 40 miles outside of Urban, CO. She describes her childhood through the lens of educational experiences. Much of Ruby’s perceptions about belonging and identity are related to experiences in formal education. Ruby does not have a close relationship with her parents. As a child, she carried personal responsibility for her mother’s mental illness and addiction. “I just don’t understand how people could choose drugs over their own child.” Ruby lives alone in her suburban townhome while her partner is serving in Afghanistan. Her aspirations are to complete her undergraduate degree and to impact high school and undergraduate African American women across the nation.
Ruby went on to explain that since she was in second grade, the school system’s narrative of African and African American history created and reinforced a consistent feeling of “otherness” and that this feeling persists with her today. Ruby struggled with her family during childhood. Her strained relationship with her mother drove Ruby to seek community and belonging at school during her elementary years. Most of the time, Ruby describes herself as an engaged student who participated in class discussions and performed well. There were times when Ruby was the victim of micro-aggressions in elementary school. She was required to read racially triggering passages despite requesting to opt-out. She felt social pressure from peers to embody the recent fads from African American culture. Despite the onlyness she dealt with, Ruby found a sense of belonging at school and succeeded well enough to attend a high-ranking, college-preparatory high school.

Ruby became the first person in her family to attend college. Her high school counselor suggested that she attend a local suburban community college. Ruby aspired to attend film school, but her high school grades and 21 ACT score did not qualify for her admission into her desired institution. The suburban community college would accept Ruby’s high school film credits and prepare her to reapply for film school. Ruby and her mother followed her counselor’s advice and started the enrollment process at the suburban community college.

Unfortunately, Ruby says that the college lost her transcripts and made other mistakes that caused her to mistrust the institution. Even though Ruby perceived WCC as “dilapidated and depressing,” she and her mother decided to enroll her in the community college. Ruby was embarrassed about attending WCC because she would see her high school colleagues attending the universities on campus. Meanwhile, she struggled to attend class on time and, in addition to being required to take developmental courses, she struggled to meet the minimum requirements
for class participation. After taking courses for years, Ruby successfully transferred to Elite State University. She no longer wishes to pursue film but hopes to return to it one day. For now, her focus is creating an experience for local African American high school students to have a smooth transition into postsecondary education. She does presentations in the local high schools and engages with African American leaders in the Urban community.

Ruby is currently a student at Elite State University (ESU). Her partner is currently serving overseas as an active-duty officer in the U.S. military. She lives outside of the city and takes online courses to reduce commuting expenses. In addition to her local activism, Ruby is employed with an agency that helps first-time homebuyers. As a nontraditional student, 25-year-old Ruby serves as the leader of a women’s group for African American students across the UHEC campus. She and Mary (profile below) work alongside each other to lead this organization that reaches students from all three institutions on campus. I attended an event that this women’s group hosted at Elite State University. Attendees described their biweekly meetings as a “place of refuge” on campus. That day they met to discuss African American women and business. They invited a local guest speaker and entrepreneur to share her story with the undergraduate women. The overall environment was welcoming and the women encouraged each other throughout the 90-minute meeting. Ruby and Mary led this event together. About 6 months after completing their interviews, Ruby and May informed me that they are biological sisters, but they don’t often share this with people for personal reasons.

Mary

Mary’s name was selected in honor of the esteemed Mary McLeod Bethune. Mary McLeod Bethune was a key activist and educator in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her legacy continues through her foundations and Bethune-Cookman College. This participant
exhibits strength and dedication to education as an agent for social change and racial justice. It is with respect and honor that this pseudonym was selected.

Mary grew up in the Urban, CO, area and local suburbs. She has lived in this area throughout her life. Mary prefers to keep her earliest experiences about belonging and otherness private. She says that she faced many “problems at home” while she was growing up. Mary attended what she describes as a “highly accredited” high school in the suburbs of Urban. She and Ruby attended the same high school. She recounts a few teenagers who were African immigrants also being friends with them during high school by saying, “We were all each other had.”

Mary did not perform well in high school. She emphasizes that she was not the “worst student” but says she could have done better if her home life had been more stable. Mary’s high school counselor discouraged her from applying to universities because of her low high school scores. Mary consistently reinforced throughout her interview that she is academically competent. Her demeanor during her first interview modeled her self-proclaimed distrust in other people. She began to feel comfortable halfway through the interview and loosened the discomfort by exclaiming, “I ain’t no dummy!” After the laughter settled, Mary went on to describe how she felt labeled as unintelligent in many scenarios in life. She shared stories of her classroom experiences throughout life. Her responses to open-ended questions led her from story to story about her experiences. She began to punctuate the ending of each story with, “What was the question?” and a laugh.

Like Ruby, Mary was also required to enroll in developmental course when she enrolled at WCC. With great determination, she was persistent with the college’s learning center and convinced them to let her retest for entrance exams. She was placed in the same classes. She was
embarrassed and felt that she should be esteemed differently. For Mary, developmental coursework felt like an offense to her social status. She lamented taking courses with students whose first language was not English and said that she did not belong there. In addition to the social discomfort that Mary felt, she also struggled with the coursework and spent over a year retaking developmental classes before stopping out altogether. She later returned to WCC and attempted developmental math. She did not succeed in her math courses at WCC but transferred into Elite State University (ESU) where she “did not struggle with math.” Ruby says that the curriculum was more rigorous at ESU than it was at WCC. Mary’s admission into ESU changed her perception of her social status, feelings about belonging, and led to better focus and academic performance in class.

Social status is important to Mary. She describes her closest acquaintances as “elite African American women.” Before our first interview, she took me on a clumsy tour of the multi-million dollar apartment complex where she shares a unit with her partner. That night, she was preparing to entertain her in-laws with a small, formal dinner. We wandered past swimming pools and communal meeting areas through mazelike corridors and elevators until we reached a small, private meeting room. “This room overlooks the mountains. Isn’t it spectacular?”—She said this as we settled into the room for our interview. After our interview concluded, she said she felt like a “weight was lifted off” her chest. She says that it helped her to tell her story to someone who wanted to hear it. Mary continues to search for community and belonging through her academics and community engagement. She is preparing for her upcoming wedding and looking forward to completing her bachelor’s degree in the next two semesters.
As participants shared their experiences and perceptions, certain themes emerged surrounding their perceptions of belongingness and otherness during their time at the Western Community College (WCC). Gentrification impacted the participants’ experiences with the campus. Geographic culture, academic rigor and cultural identity rose to the surface as common themes that impacted participants’ perceptions of belonging. Although none of the participants completed a certificate or associate degree at WCC, most transferred to one of the other two institutions of higher education that share a campus with WCC: Western State University or the Elite State University, Urban. This triad of institutions shares a 40-acre campus known as the Urban Higher Education Campus (https://www.UHEC.edu/). The Urban Higher Education Campus is centrally located in the heart of downtown Urban, Colorado. Although all three campuses are commuter campuses (there are no traditional housing options available), the bustle of the city attracts foot traffic through this campus 24 hours a day. Upon a recent afternoon visit to the campus during my daily commute, I observed 15 Urban Police vehicles parked near the main entrances of each institution. During this ten-minute walk, I contemplated how my personal perceptions of belonging were impacted during this study.

As a researcher, I was faced with my own perceptions of “otherness” and belonging as I circulated recruitment announcements and discussed this research study with colleagues. Unfortunately, the Colorado community college system placed a universal ban on external graduate researchers. No exceptions were considered for this study, despite the system’s strategic goal to increase engagement for African American students in the Peak Community College System (Water, CO). Despite full advocacy from the chief diversity officers from two of the state’s larges districts, I was not allowed to formally interact with any Colorado community colleges regarding this research study—and not given the opportunity to present my proposal to Insistence Surpasses Otherness and Onlyness
the institutional review boards. As the researcher, I experienced feelings of “otherness” because my local professional work in higher education is outside of the Urban community college system. I met with several directors of diversity and inclusion on various campuses in the system. They advocated for this study by appealing to their individual institutional review boards-- to no avail. Consequently, participants were recruited via professional references from circulating the research announcement through higher education professionals and students in the region.

One result of this research study was an increase in my participation as a volunteer with African American women at the Urban Higher Education Campus. I met the Ruby at a local event for women of color that was sponsored by the local chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. She approached the me after a session at the conference about professional community resources for local African American professionals. She wanted to ask me about a statement I made in the conference’s session about professional resources for women of color in the local community. During the Q&A portion of the presentation, I openly lamented my feelings of “otherness” as I had searched for and reached-out to several of the women and made no connections over the course of two years. I asked what non-sorority members could do to join this subcommunity of leaders. Mary expressed similar feelings of “otherness” and asked to be a participant in the study.

The remaining participants continued to volunteer for the research study as a result of hearing their friends’ personal experiences as participants. This participant pool developed organically-- despite the state community college system’s policy to ban external graduate research. I was asked by Elite State University students to serve as the keynote speaker for a campus organization’s first annual Women of Excellence award. This invitation and the organic
sampling process serve as evidence that people are interested in sharing their experiences about belonging as related to their experiences with Western Community College. Participants’ experiences emerged as counter-narratives to institutional practices, policies and subcultures. Additionally, their narratives challenged mainstream theories and best practices for community college student retention. Their perceptions of belonging were shaped by the geographic location of the college and changes in the Urban community.

**Defining and Perceiving Belonging**

This section examines the different ways that participants describe their perceptions of belonging before combining their definitions as a lens through which emerging themes are explored. The core definition of belonging that drives this study is: *the feeling of being accepted and embraced by a community while overcoming discrimination and marginalization, and developing as a student who is psychosocially integrated into the campus environment.*

Participants often described their perceptions of “otherness” and “onlyness” to contrast their experiences with belonging. Harper et al. (2009) describe onlyness as “the psycho-emotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (p. 190). This definition resonates with participants’ descriptions of belonging, as well. Participants described their perceptions of belonging regarding experiences outside the classroom on campus and in the community and experiences inside the classroom.

Ruby described belonging as an expression of one’s personal identity. She referenced the anthropological relationship between the human species and community: “As humans, we have to feel a sense of belonging to the tribe, to the group. There are other species who can pop out a baby and just leave the species to survive on its own.” She compared feelings of “otherness” to a
baby being born and left alone in the forest to die. She went on to state the core of a person’s identity development begins as a child participating in the educational system. In a different portion of the interview, Ruby also mentioned that she often felt like an “outsider” at home. She relied on her experiences at school to help her navigate her personal identity as a young child. Ruby’s familial background—particularly her maternal relationship—drove her to seek inclusion and belonging through formal education.

Similarly, Mary defined belonging as “inclusivity and identity…having an arena where we are all part of this.” She described rooms in this metaphorical “arena” where people from different backgrounds separated from the larger community to unify around their feelings of “otherness” for a deeper sense of belonging. Mary is also a part-time student at the Elite State University. From her perspective, the contrasts between how European and African history were taught in her educational experiences are harmful and alarming. She also described images of African American history that evoked feelings of otherness as a child. She contrasted the famous medical examination photo of Gordon (also known as Whipped Peter) to the images of European men from various historical eras (e.g. Renaissance, Edwardian and Victorian eras; Figure 4). She described this contrast as traumatic for her and says that it shaped the way she perceives belonging in educational settings. For Mary, separation within inclusive environments serves as a place of safety and belonging. She views “otherness” as an opportunity to unite around common experiences—developing a communal sense of belonging.
Maya and Lorde related their perceptions and definitions of belonging to geographical place. Both of these participants earned their bachelor’s degrees from local Colorado universities after taking classes at WCC. Unlike Mary and Ruby, Maya and Lorde did not attend WCC with the intentions of graduating. They intentionally took courses at WCC because their parents wanted them to enroll in college immediately after high school and recommended WCC as the best choice. They related their definitions of belonging to the local community and strong familial influences. It should also be noted that both of these participants worked in higher education admissions in Urban, CO, and relocated within a few miles of WCC after completing their bachelor’s degrees and living independently from their parents. Living in the downtown area of Urban is a symbol of upward mobility and status for both participants.

Despite the differences in how they defined belonging, common themes emerged as they described their definitions and perceptions of belonging, “onlyness,” and “otherness.” These participants described their perceptions of belonging on campus, in class, among other students and in the overall community.
Belonging in the Community: Gentrification and Displacement

The geographic location of Western Community College (WCC) emerged as the primary theme among research participants’ experiences with belonging on campus, in class, with their peers and with the campus community. The impact of gentrification and displacement on participants emerged as a primary factor in their perceptions of belonging. For example, Maya described her immediate family’s ties to the neighborhood surrounding WEC as areas that were primarily African American after the Civil Rights Movement.” She recounts:

I grew up in [Urban] and it was very Black. Actually, all of the outskirts of where we are [right now] are historically Black areas…it was all Black people… seeing how everything has kind of shifted as reconfigured the area so all the Black schools were over here.

She went on to a variety of public and private schools in the area that served African American students from preschool through high school. Many of these schools are still “feeder schools” for WCC because of their close proximity to the campus. Maya went on to describe her familial relationship with the local education system:

My mom graduated from [Eastern local high school]. My dad graduated from [Eastern local high school]…that used to be projects over there. That was all like Section 8 housing. That and across the street where that school is was projects… I used to stay over there. My grandma used to stay over there. My dad stayed over there by [a private Catholic school].

Maya punctuated her descriptions of the neighborhood with locations of schools that still exist in the area. According to Maya, White students with high incomes now occupy these schools.

Today, cranes fill the city skyline as high-rise condominiums are erected where housing projects were previously located. Maya’s community has dispersed as a result of aggressive
gentrification in the areas surrounding UHEC. Like many African Americans from Urban, her family and friends were forced to relocate because they could no longer afford to live in the area. Today, remnants of the previous community can be found through the public library branch that is dedicated to African American research and a world-renown African American dance company that occupies a building that used to be owned by the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. Recently, the last nightclub for African American patrons closed as a White owner refused to renew its lease in the area that now houses thousands of White millennial professionals.

Students from all three institutions at UHEC interact in shared library and fitness spaces. Participants commuted on the local light-rail transit system, shared conversations in communal areas and, in some cases, pretended to be enrolled at one of the universities instead of the community college. This physical dynamic impacted the students’ perceptions of belonging as they attended WCC. When Lorde was asked to describe the campus community during his time at WCC, he discussed how the campus location impacted his experience with student life on campus:

That campus is a commuter campus… there’s a student life there but you have to seek it out. It doesn’t reflect a traditional campus. It shares a campus with three schools and the train is right there.

Lorde did not get involved with formal campus organizations during his time at WCC like he did at both universities that he attended. One thing that connected him to the physical campus was exercise:

My biggest outlet was exercise so I used to go workout on campus. All three schools share one gym…you don’t know [who attends which school] unless you ask for somebody’s student ID. What’s funny is they’re all [campus recreational facilities] branded, though. Every school has their own brand and, like, you can
still see it in the gym.

Lorde felt comfortable exercising on campus because he was not easily identifiable as a student of WCC. He said that UHEC made the decision to share some facilities and classrooms in an effort to increase community among students:

There [are] three basketball courts… they’re still attempting to protect their brand, I guess. WCC didn’t even have a team though! I think they did that for inclusion purposes because the other two schools had teams and they practiced and played games there. This is the really weird thing, too… you could be a student at WCC and still have classes in a [university] building.

Lorde’s interactions with the physical campus outside of class were limited to the recreational facilities while he attended WCC. This was the only place where he met friends and felt connected to the campus community.

**There Goes the Neighborhood: The Impact of Gentrification on Participants**

The participants’ relationships with the neighborhoods surrounding the UHEC neighborhood directly impacted their interactions on the WCC campus. Consequences of gentrification in the local community threaded itself as a theme throughout the participants’ narratives. African Americans in the surrounding community have been pushed out of the neighborhood that they built and have lived in for decades. Participants were directly impacted by aggressive gentrification on the local residents, businesses, and community gathering places. In addition to having to navigate double-consciousness in the classroom, participants learned to persist through the negative impact of gentrification. Participants originally selected WCC because of proximity to family/parents and geographic location. In fact, Ruby and Mary are currently enrolled as sisters in Elite State University (ESU), which is also located on UHEC.

Advocacy on campus serves as a way for the sisters to remain connected despite the 30-
mile distance they live apart. It’s important to note that they both take online courses, so the only time they unite on campus is for participation in student advocacy initiatives. UHEC benefits because the sisters are using their counter-narratives to establish a place of belonging on campus for African American women across all three institutions. As previously stated in Chapter 2, student engagement is a key factor is student retention across both African Americans and White students in higher education. These sisters have taken their painful experiences with “onlyness” and “otherness” as an opportunity to build community among African American women for themselves and the campus community. Their perseverance is reminiscent of Austin Channing Brown’s *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*:

I love being a Black woman because we are demanding. We demand the right to live as fully human. We demand access—the right to vote, to education, to employment, to housing, to equal treatment under the law. And we do it creatively: Sit-ins and die-ins, signs and songs, writing and filmmaking. We demand because our ancestors did. We demand because we believe in our own dignity. (p. 102)

Ruby and Mary created community in a place where African American people are being displaced.

Gentrification and the geography of UHEC impacted Maya and Lorde differently than Ruby and Mary. Maya and Lorde both selected WCC because of its geographic proximity to the neighborhoods that they associate with African American community. When they were children, WCC was located in the midst of what they perceived as an African American community. Their childhoods were filled with memories about an economically and ethnically diverse African American community. They both lost a place for community and belonging because of increasingly high living costs and a significant wage gap between African American and White residents in Urban. This loss of place reinforced perceived “otherness” and “onlyness” during their time on UHEC. They felt increasingly disconnected from the community as gentrification
became visible during their times at WCC. Lorde used his negative experiences at WCC as an “other” as fuel to overcome obstacles with his identity development. His early college experiences with WCC were shaped by a negative perception of the institution’s reputation. He had no desire to remain in WCC beyond the semester that his parents required because he wanted to escape the rapidly changing community. WCC professionals might consider expanding opportunities to build rapport and awareness about the community college mission. This would also impact the college’s reputation with the local residents.

Geography is a key factor in students’ decisions to attend WCC. “For many students and parents who are in the process of deciding whether and where to go to college, the ability to attend a college close to home is often among the most important factors under consideration” (Turley 2009, p. 127). Participants in this study described their experiences with belonging at WCC through the lens of their relationships with the local community. Access to affordable housing and exponential population growth shaped the participants’ experiences. Location was also identified as a motivator for persistence and engagement through advocacy.

Maya selected WCC for two primary reasons: location/convenience and cost. The centralized location and evening class times were essential for Maya because she worked full-time at the local mall and she was dual enrolled in Colorado State University. She relied on the light rail three nights a week to commute to her statistics course. She found herself on the train with her classmates; but they did not interact very often. She emphasized that she went to class and left because she did not feel safe being on campus alone at night. Cost was also an incentive because her statistics course was available at a low price and she could concentrate on taking it alone—since she found it too academically challenging for her to take alongside other courses at
Western State University. The low cost and evening classes were the primary incentives that attracted Maya to enroll at WCC.

Unfortunately, geography and convenience and cost were also barriers for Maya. She enrolled the statistics course for three consecutive summers before successfully starting the course. The first summer, she had difficulty navigating the required documentation for dual-enrollment. She attributes this to her status as a first-generation college student with minimal guidance. She took several days off work during the enrollment process because campus support services were only available during standard business hours. Despite these efforts, it was not until the start of classes that she realized she had not accurately completed the enrollment process and she withdrew. The following summer, cost was a barrier to enrollment. She had been awarded a scholarship from a local education foundation. She was not able to use this scholarship to enroll in classes because she had unknowingly been required to have an updated FAFSA on-file before the funds could be disbursed at WCC (this was a different process than she followed to retrieve scholarship funds at the state university she attended). The third summer, she understood the enrollment process and conditions of her scholarship enough to successfully enroll in the course and complete it.

Geography played an even larger role for the other participants because they selected WCC to transfer to other universities on the Urban Higher Education Campus. WCC’s centralized location in the city reassured the young students’ parents that they could access their children, who in most cases lived with their parents during their time at WCC. Ruby and Mary continued to take classes at the Elite State University after transferring general education credits from WCC. For most participants, sharing campus resources with the universities on campus gave them opportunities to experience shared faculty and campus facilities—including
classrooms. These cross-university experiences motivated participants to engage with students and organizations beyond WCC while they navigated developmental coursework and prepared for traditional university admission standards. In fact, Mary and Ruby both currently participate in inter-campus student organizations and serve as leaders among African American students in the community.

**There Goes the Neighborhood: The Impact of Gentrification on the Community College**

Historically, successful community colleges are intentional about reflecting the local community population (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). Additionally, community colleges are more affordable than universities and often cater to nontraditional students (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). WCC was founded on the UHEC campus with a mission to increase access to higher education for local residents. About 44,000 are currently enrolled on this campus. The 150-acre campus serves as a major landmark in downtown Urban, CO. Until recently, the surrounding neighborhood was historically African American—but WCC student demographics are not reflective of this. Participants in this study remarked on the impact that location had on their experience with WCC.

Recent studies suggest that “urban areas consisting of high concentrations of people of color [have] less college accessibility although more need than suburban areas” (Dache-Gerbino 2016, p. 1). Physical location plays a key role in students’ college selection process. WCC is centrally located with multiple access points to public transit and designated parking garages in the heart of the city. I ride the crowded light rail with UHEC students every weekday morning. I have multiple, convenient options for using public transit for my commute to work, and they all stop at UHEC. Some mornings, we have a friendly conductor who encourages everyone to “wish the students a good day in class” at this train stop. The campus and community are integrated
with the culture of the city.

The Urban Higher Education Campus (UHEC) is situated in the midst of aggressive gentrification in downtown Urban. For example, Five Dots is a historically African American neighborhood located a few miles from UHEC. This neighborhood was known as one of the most successful hubs for Black business in the early and mid-1900s (Hansen, 2001). Migration to Urban over the past 20 years has led to the displacement of many Black-owned businesses and homes in the area. Every participant mentioned displacement of cultural meeting places (i.e., churches, shops, physician offices) impacted their experiences with WCC. Exponential increases in cost of living impacted each participant’s family—as they each had personal stories about feeling “forced out” of the local community due to their economic status. Ruby recounts the first time she interacted with the WCC bookstore:

You’re faced with, ya know, getting off the train or you park your car and there’s a homeless man… you couldn’t be over there at a certain hour. They did have a program where they gave away free books. Usually, there was a first-come-first-serve, and so I remember my freshman year, my first semester [as a first-generation student]. I didn’t believe that I had enough money to cover the books. I had a job…the books were so astronomically high. Why is the book $300? If so, why is it not offered at the school library?...I was 17 and I remember having to wait outside at the bookstore on campus from 8 p.m. all night. I brought a blanket and a chair and the lines were already starting for the free books. They opened up at 8 a.m. I was the fourth person in line and I prided myself for that. I saw a student get robbed. I slept with cockroaches outside to get books! Ruby’s experience describes the conflict that WCC faces with being an urban, centrally-located commuter campus. Despite her history with the local region, rapid gentrification led to her first negative experiences with navigating personal safety as a young woman in an urban environment.

As previously mentioned, Lorde selected WCC because of the location and parental guidance. Ruby felt unsafe on campus, but Lorde did not describe his experience this way. Lorde took courses concurrently at Western State University and Western Community College. The
decade before, he had been academically dismissed from the University North of the Capital (UNC).

**Belonging in the Physical Classroom**

Classroom experience emerged as a key identifier for how participants described their perceptions of belonging and their interactions with WCC faculty. Participants had varied expectations about WCC’s academic rigor, yet all of them referenced it in relationship to their experiences with belonging and otherness at WCC. As previously discussed, Maya enrolled in WCC because she believed that she would have better success with passing statistics than she had at the university she attended. When asked about her perceptions of belonging inside the classroom, she described her professor:

> My professor was Asian…Filipino. He had a very thick accent. He was like, (laughs) a funny dude…that was the first time I knew there were like different dynamics in the classroom than what I’m used to…He was a very visible and personable professor. Also, coming from a different background—all these factors, I had never been exposed to…The vast majority of the students were people of color.

Maya attributed success in statistics to her passionate statistics professor who often stood on a desk during his lessons. She was pleased with this aspect of her experience since she had not had positive experiences with her State University statistics professor. With sociology as her degree interest, Maya could choose between general statistics or a statistics course for sociology majors; the same professor taught both courses. She described the professor as “old” and “tenured.” She feared taking the course because she knew people who had unsuccessfully repeated the course two or three times. She positioned herself as an “other” in relationship to the students who passed the course each term without having attempted the course. Ultimately, she was happy to have taken the course at WCC because her professor made her feel included and she was able to focus on the content instead of fearing she would not belong.
Lorde’s perception of belonging in the classroom was shaped by WCC’s sociological dynamics. He describes the professors as equally qualified to teach at all three institutions at the UHEC campus. He felt that the community college professors were at a disadvantage because they were paid less than other campus professors and had to navigate a more difficult student population. “They get annoyed, you know, when you’re working in the class with all these different people and ‘you don’t understand me because of your English…’; they feel that their student population is less professional.” He empathized with his professors at WCC and did not describe strong feelings of “otherness” in relationship to the classroom or academic rigor.

Developmental Coursework at WCC: Another Barrier to Belonging

Like most community colleges in the United States, WCC requires that students take a placement assessment before starting coursework. Ruby remembers taking the ACCUPLACER diagnostic assessment. Ruby’s results from this exam required her to complete a sequence of developmental education courses before beginning credit-bearing coursework. This came as a shock to Ruby: “The community college was a little—um—it wasn’t up to my academic standards… the environment was very oppressive, the lighting and even the students… didn’t seem to be happy that they were obtaining their degree there.” Ruby had been informed by her high school counselor that she was not ready for university-level coursework. Per her high school counselor’s recommendation, Ruby and her parents decided that she should enroll in WCC with hopes of attending Colorado Film School in the future. Ruby was disappointed when results from her placement diagnostic required developmental English and math. She felt that her comprehensive ACT score of 21 and high school pre-trigonometry course should have been considered during the placement process. She says she earned an A in Math 001 and still had to retake the course because she was required to take a second ACCUPLACER assessment before
advancing to the next level. She then stated that both her math and English professors said, “I
don’t know why you’re here. I don’t know why you have to take this class.” They recommended
that she retake the placement assessment, but she did not have access to the $80 she needed to
retake the test.

Ruby found this experience to be frustrating because she did not perceive herself a
student who belonged in developmental math courses. She described her classmates as
“foreigners” who had learned English as a second language. She felt a sense of superiority to her
classmates—which positioned both herself and her classmates as “others.” She says that she
wasted money, time and credits participating in developmental coursework. Ruby earned a C in
her first developmental English course because, although she earned A’s on all of her essays, she
had been late to class three times. Ruby had not familiarized herself with the attendance/late
policy outlined in the syllabus. All in all, Ruby’s experiences in developmental coursework
continued for two semesters until she connected with another African American student on
campus who informed her that she could have the $80 fee waved for retaking the
ACCUPPLACER assessment if her counselors and professors advocated for her. She began
college-level coursework during her third semester at WCC.

Ruby’s favorite professor at WCC taught developmental algebra. She describes him as
being from “an ethnic background…I believe he was middle-eastern.” She says that his culture
positioned him to connect with the students because he understood that they were nontraditional
students. Ruby says that she was one of many students who worked full time while taking classes
at WCC. She lists the following as best practices that this professor followed:

• He developed his coursework and due dates with an understanding that students
  had full lives outside of class.
- He shared specific times that he would be available throughout the week to connect via phone. She says, “He understood that we were not email competent.”
- He was often found in the college’s tutoring center for open office hours between classes in the evenings.
- He held class at the local grocery store to give students pragmatic approach to understanding mathematical principles.

Like Maya, Ruby attributes her success in this math class to her professor’s inclusive teaching style. This was the only time during her interview that she referenced her classmates with “we and us” instead of “they and them.” She felt like she belonged because of the educational environment her professor established.

Mary attended what she described as “one of the best high schools in the nation.” She says that her academic performance in high school had been negatively impacted by her personal circumstances at home. She says, “My grades were at the bare minimum to get into a university. I wasn’t no dummy!” Mary had been encouraged to attend the community college by her assistant principal, who had attended a community college. “Once I had transferred into a community college, that’s when I immediately realized I was in the wrong place.” Mary felt out of place before she selected her first classes because she describes her experiences as “failing” the ACCUPLACER diagnostic assessment. It’s important to note that the ACCUPLACER is a diagnostic assessment that takes into account multiple weighted measures for student placement (https://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/educator/multiple-weighted-measures):

- High school GPA
- The number of years since a student took a particular course or was in school
• Other test scores, such as the SAT or high school end-of-course exams
• Other non-cognitive information, such as motivation, time management skills, or family support

Mary’s description of “failing” the assessment is related her perception of herself as an academic “other.” She did not want to be associated with the students who needed developmental coursework; she wanted to belong with students who placed into college-level coursework. Mary paid extra money to retake her placement assessment and still placed into developmental courses. Unlike Ruby, Mary had to retake some developmental courses because she failed them the first time. “I kept retaking the same class because it was, literally, my teachers would not pass me with a 68% or 69%. And I would beg to these professors, ‘What could I do to get this 70%?’ and they’re like ‘Nothing.’”

Not all of Mary’s experiences in the classroom led to feelings of “otherness.” Her favorite instructor at WCC was a White woman who taught ethnic literature and writing.

I got an A in her class because she was one of those teachers that I knew was just like particular and cold. ‘You better be here on time!’ so I attended every single class and I was there on time…you mean to tell me I can have a C in this class and potentially walk out of this class with an A just because I’m here?

This professor’s high standards motivated Mary to be successful in the course and she ultimately earned an A in the course.

Developmental coursework increased Mary’s completion timeline for a combination of reasons. She avoided her math courses until she was near the end of her degree program. Avoiding these courses also extended her time at WCC because she needed two levels of developmental math before she would be able to take credit-bearing courses. After two years,
Mary met with an advisor at the Elite State University Urban and learned that she would not need developmental math or placement testing to take credit-bearing math. She immediately stopped taking courses at WCC. Ironically, she did not struggle with math when she transferred to a university.

**Cultural Identity, Onliness and Otherness**

Classroom experiences blended with another theme that emerged during this research study: cultural identity. Cultural identity impacted participants’ perceptions of belonging in the classroom, on campus, and in the local community. Participants gave more examples of intracultural dissonance than intercultural dissonance impacting their perceptions of belonging. Curriculum and faculty interactions were important to the participants and how they perceived belonging and otherness. Participants gave more examples of African/African American disrupters to belonging than examples of African American/Whites. This section will explore participants’ perceptions of belonging and otherness in the classroom during their times at WCC.

As discussed earlier, Mary and Ruby connected curriculum to identity development and belonging in elementary school. Maya and Lorde described how their diverse family experiences shaped their perceptions of belonging in the WCC classroom. When Maya recounts her childhood she says that she “conceptualized race early.” Growing up, she remembers times when White strangers assumed she did not belong with her brown-eyed, dark-skinned mother. Maya’s light skin and hazel eyes still play a role in the way that she perceives herself and belonging:

More of my confusion came because my family has different ethnic make-ups with how they function. So, like my mom’s Christian and my dad is Muslim. So, you know that makes it different as far as my understanding of myself and what I understood…like going to masjid and like going to church…my mom was never into, like, trying to make me choose…My dad was definitely like ‘everything’s wrong’ and ‘everything’s bad...’ They [both parents] didn’t entertain holidays or anything like that.
As a child, Maya contemplated her identity through the lenses of race and culture because of her diverse African American family. Her family’s diverse make-up continues to play a role in her identity and how she perceives belonging. She says, “That’s the first thing I noticed [at WCC] was like, ‘Oh, damn. All my counselors up in here and students are people of color.’”

**Africans and African Americans**

As an adolescent, Maya’s father remarried an Ethiopian woman who exposed her to the racial dynamics between Africans and African Americans. This distinction emerged as a major theme in the study. Each participant shared unique stories about the relationship between Africans (referencing first and second generation immigrants from African) and African Americans (referencing descendants of slavery in the United States). Maya is an advocate for African-born and African American families sharing cultural practices. Her family structure includes a myriad of cultural identities and they all shape the way she perceives herself. Maya felt connected with the African and African American students because she was raised in an environment that emphasized appreciation for both subcultures.

Lorde’s parents emigrated from Eritrea (northeastern Africa). His ethnic background served as the foundation for his identity and how he perceives himself as belonging or as an “other.” During his early months at WCC, Lorde contemplated his place as an “other” or “outsider” as a result of his cultural experiences. He attended WCC because his parents required it as the next step in his educational advancement. Despite his academic excellence, Lorde’s parents did not believe he was culturally ready to handle the university social structure at 17 years old. Lorde attended WCC for one term before transferring to Western State University and then to the Elite State University-Greely (UNC- a rural area outside of Urban county). In retrospect, Lorde agrees with his parents that he was not culturally mature enough to handle
UNC. As previously discussed, he was academically dismissed from UNC because he did not attend class, partied and drank a lot. He later transferred back to WSU and WCC at the Urban Higher Education Campus so that he could live under his parents’ supervision. He completed his undergraduate education at WSU.

Lorde’s experiences with belonging at WCC differed from the other participants in this research study. He did not struggle with the academic content or experience major feelings of “otherness” in the campus community. He says, “Unfortunately, there’s a stigma through all of academia with community college that the least serious students go there…it’s less expensive for a reason: the resources are less. It’s not really true!” For Lorde, a student’s level of seriousness about academic practice shapes their experiences at WCC. This value was instilled from his parents and cultural background.

African and African American subcultures negatively impacted Mary and Ruby’s perceptions of belonging at WCC. Ruby described a time when she felt uncomfortable reading a James Baldwin excerpt in class. In addition to losing participation points, Ruby says the African students distanced themselves from her because they did not want to be perceived as bad students like her. Ruby attributes this dissonance between the subcultures to elementary education curricula because students who completed elementary school in Africa have not been taught to view themselves as descendants as slaves. She perceives African students as having more confidence in the classroom because they were taught that they descended from royal ancestry. In this situation, she felt like an outsider among her colleagues and professors—despite the fact that the assignment passage was written by James Baldwin, who is viewed as a hero among African American writers.
Mary’s experience with the two subcultures was more overt. She was required to take U.S. History. During this course, they discussed the African slave trade and she felt the most discomfort from the first-and second-generation African students. She says:

I remember students saying, ‘We’re the ones that didn’t even get on the boat. We’re the ones that were strong enough to not get on the boat.’ So, even in their African culture, they teach that rhetoric that ‘those were the weak that went over,’ as opposed to the strong. Here in America, we’re like, ‘Only the strongest survived. The ones that made it here were the strongest of the strongest.’ They’re still saying that even the strongest of the strongest, the fact that they were on that boat makes them weak.

Mary said she has had several conversations like this with African students throughout her post-secondary educational experiences. She felt like an outsider in this class because her perspectives as an African American differed from African student perspectives.

Cultural identity shaped the participants’ perceptions of belonging and otherness on campus, in the campus community, and in the classrooms of WCC. It is important for higher education practitioners to consider varied student perceptions of belonging when developing activities, policies, and curriculum for students at WCC.

**Resilience and Fortitude**

Participants used (and continue to use) their experiences with being displaced from their neighborhood as fuel to build community, complete college, and combat institutionalized racism in the workplace post-graduation. After earning her bachelor’s degree, Maya decided to use her newly acquired research skills and experiences with onlyness and otherness to help other African American students build community. Recently, she presented her research about community building and resilience at a Black Male Initiative conference in Canada. In addition to working in higher education and helping African Americans gain access to elite graduate degree programs,
Maya is now enrolled in one of the top Africana Studies graduate programs in the nation. Her resilience and drive inspire others as she continues to make personal sacrifices and serves as a battering ram against institutionalize racism—all before turning 30 years old.

Like Maya, Lorde transferred from WCC and earned his bachelor’s degree. He also works to give African American students access to elite graduate programs across the world. Lorde is using displacement and injustice as motivation to exert his voice and presence in gentrifying neighborhoods. Lorde earned his real estate license and he serves as a community leader for helping to educate young African American professionals about the effects of gentrification and the importance of earning property in historically African American neighborhoods. Lorde’s resilience and assertiveness reflect his leadership and desire to create space for community that was stolen from him.

Ruby and Mary lead an organization that empowers African American women across the UHEC campus. Their organization hosts study circles and intercultural dialogues between African immigrants and African American students. The guiding principles of the organization are: Enlighten, Education, Emerge and Enterprise. They host monthly collaborations with local African American business owners, educators, and entrepreneurs. They use their pain from gentrification and displacement to help African American undergraduates purchase property and build new communities outside of the city. Additionally, their organization gave scholarships to elite African American women on campus and hosted a Mother’s Day session to celebrate the community “mothers” who support undergraduate African American women at UHEC. Each participant has paved a new path for other African Americans and they are all committed to using their negative experiences as motivation to developing fortitude and community for African Americans.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Research suggests that African American students who attend urban colleges are more likely to have limited access to the best colleges (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). Physical location and gentrification emerged as factors that impacted students’ perceptions of belonging in relationship to WCC. Participants identified location as a major factor in college choice when selecting WCC. The community used to belong to them. Now, the rapidly changing community has influenced the overall student experience on the UHEC campus. Participants persisted beyond barriers they faced in the surrounding community and on campus—even in the midst of marginalization due to gentrification. Urban practitioners should consider critical geography as a framework for analyzing best practices for supporting belonging among African American students.

Critical Geography and Proximity Analysis

Critical geography is a framework through which power and geographic location are examined from a sociological lens. This framework is underutilized in higher education research. The mission and origin of community colleges emphasize postsecondary education’s relationship to the local community. Resources and curricula have historically mirrored the local community to provide advancement for residents (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). Additionally, local government and taxes often directly influence community college funding. It is for this reason
that many community colleges offer non-credit courses, certification, and community resources. It is the community college’s responsibility to understand its role and impact on its geographic community.

Practitioners should consider the sociological impact of the Urban, CO, community when evaluating the African American student experience. Specifically, proximity analysis research should be done to examine the impact of urbanization and gentrification on college choice in Urban. This would help identify best practices for African American students in the local community who select WCC because of its geographic location. Additionally, this might inform student support services, class times and faculty relationships with students.

Proximity analysis evaluates how students’ decisions to attend a college are impacted by proximity to the campus (Turley, 2009). Participants in this study identified proximity to campus as a factor that impacted their decisions to attend and persist at WCC. Turley’s (2009) analysis suggests that “researchers should stop treating the college-choice process as though it were independent of location and start situating this process within the geographic context in which it occurs” (p. 126). Turley’s (2009) proximity analysis evaluated college choice through analysis of zip codes and college applications. Findings concluded that proximity increased student likelihood to apply for college because it made the transition to college logistically, financially and emotionally easier (Turley, 2009).

Proximity analysis at WCC could inform practitioners about African American students’ reasons for selecting the college and what motivates them to persist or leave the college. Dache-Gerbino (2016) conducted a college proximity analysis of Rochester’s colleges and found that “living in an urban area that is depopulating inhibits the type and amount of local higher education opportunities within proximity to Black and Latina/o residential areas” (p. 15). W CC
might explore how the adverse, aggressive gentrification of the historically African American neighborhood has impacted the African American student experience. WCC’s location is conveniently located in the heart of the city with access to public transit. While the college cannot necessarily control how gentrification has forced African Americans into suburban areas, practitioners can be intentional about providing class times and support services for African American students who have to commute from surrounding areas to attend the college.

UHEC (and other urban institutions undergoing gentrification) has an opportunity to reinforce benefits of attending classes on a physical campus. Administrative and student support services should be re-evaluated through a critical geographical lens. Based on participant experiences, articulation agreements should be better communicated to the students who attend WCC—particularly for students who aspire to transfer to another UHEC institution. Admissions processes and access to college support services should be evaluated to maximize physical access to support. Within one mile of the WCC campus there are headquarters for several international for-profit online education companies/institutions. Students have many options and incentives from local employers to obtain their degrees online and avoid the bustle of physical access to a campus. Urban postsecondary institutions might evaluate the quality of their online programs and increase support service hours and availability. Additionally, WCC has opportunities to provide a unique, affordable, and impactful experience for students who prefer to attend live classes. Student support practitioners might implement strategies for proactively engaging students—giving them a personalized experience with the institution and providing a variety of opportunities for physical engagement with students and faculty.

Proximity analysis should also be utilized at community colleges in other regions where gentrification could impact community college students. Major cities across the United States are
in transition due to gentrification. Counter-narratives from this study suggest that African American community college students’ perceptions of belonging in a community college are influenced by changes in the local community. Proximity analysis can be used as a tool to understand the impact of gentrification on students’ lives in communities that are being reshaped by gentrification.

Reflections and Recommendations for Practitioners at WCC

As I reflect on this research study, one thing is clearly apparent to me: I have changed. My perception of myself changed as I listened to the counter-narratives of the participants. They provoked me into self-reflection and community activism over the past several months. As I reflect on the themes that emerged, I offer suggestions for how practitioners can implement strategies for fostering an environment that promotes belonging among African American students. Based on the participants, these areas should be explored: African American first-year student experiences and culturally competent faculty and staff who are experienced with diverse student populations.

Community college faculty and staff should consider how they interact with the community outside of time on campus. Practitioners should understand the history of the geographic areas that their institutions support. Moreover, immersion in the local geographic area can help with recruiting, engagement, and understanding the relationship between each community college and its geographic neighborhoods. It is important that we listen and participate in local activities that reflect the student experiences outside of campus. These are suggestions for practitioners who wish to engage with their students’ communities:

- Listen. We expect students to learn and respond to our epistemologies and values as part of the educational experience. Listening to student motivations, values, and
epistemologies can deepen our understanding of students and provide opportunities for us to model learning. Simply listening to student experiences, exploring their favorite song lyrics and reinforcing the importance of their voices will make education more effective and engaging for students, faculty, and staff.

- Volunteer to advise a student organization or club. This gives practitioners a platform for understanding how students invest their time and resources outside of class. Provide mentorship and guidance for students while empowering them to educate each other and develop leadership and activism in their communities.

- Incorporate things that matter to students. One goal of liberal arts education and community college is to provide opportunities for critical thinking and experiential learning. Instructors should be the best learners. Learn what matters to students and incorporate those materials into classroom content, marketing, and student resources. This can strengthen rapport and increase engagement and belonging.

- Support nontraditional ways that students build community. The participants in this study were resilient because they found ways to build community despite institutionalized racism and displacement from their communities. Practitioners can support organic student engagement by supporting nontraditional ways of building community. Support nontraditional means of building community like online networking. Be intentional about allowing African American students to congregate and build community while challenging colleagues’ racist perceptions and unreasonable fears of African Americans gathering in large groups.

- Choose to live in geographic locations that support your institution. This increases financial support for the college through local taxes. This also provides practitioners with
opportunities to support businesses, community centers, and other resources that preserve the history of neighborhoods that are being gentrified.

**First Impressions: African American Students’ First-Year Experience**

Neighborhood populations directly impact U.S. community colleges. In fact, part of the community college mission and culture involves being a centralized place for credit and noncredit postsecondary education. WCC is being impacted by the rapidly changing neighborhood that surrounds the institution. My afternoon strolls through campus involve noticing campus security vehicles and officers on every block. Local professionals cut through campus on their commutes to and from work each day. WCC’s response to the changing demographics should include intentionally evaluating how African American students perceive their experiences and belonging on campus. Participants in this study identified organizational things that could be changed to improve their first-year experiences.

**Shifting from “Hours of Operation” to “Hours of Availability”**

Participants referenced campus hours of operation when describing their first experiences with enrollment at WCC. Practitioners should consider shifting from a mindset that offers students “hours of operation” to thoughtfully supporting students with “hours of availability” that are based on student needs. This small change could contribute to changing a hostile environment for African American students to an environment that is welcoming and supportive. Ruby discussed camping outside the bookstore overnight to qualify for assistance with purchasing her textbooks. This experience caused a student to experience trauma and danger before stepping foot inside her first classroom. It is important that initiatives (like this bookstore assistance program) one are evaluated from the student perspective. An adjustment of bookstore
hours or program execution could have prevented damage to students’ mental and physical safety.

Most participants mentioned hours of operation when discussing interactions with important campus offices. Key offices were not open during times when working students were available. WCC’s website lists the following hours for the Fall 2018 term:

**Offices:** Accessibility Center, Academic Advising and Student Success Center, Office of Registration & Records, Career and Transfer Center, Cashier's Office, Admissions, Recruitment and Outreach, Educational Opportunity Center, Financial Aid and Scholarships, Testing Center and TRIO Student Support Services.

**Regular Hours of Availability:** Monday-Friday: 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Weekends: Closed

During the Fall 2018 term, these offices extended hours on six days in August. On those days, they close at 6 p.m. and opened 30-60 minutes earlier. Students who work daytime hours cannot access these offices without taking time away from work—even on days with extended hours. Additionally, busy students are accustomed to 24/7 resources when making a financial investment. The college might consider offering 24/7 supports for major offices to students via online chat or phone. This could also create a pipeline for offering federal work-study funded employment for students. Instead of employing a standard “hours of operation,” allow students to share feedback about when they can access their resources on campus.

**Interactions with Faculty and Staff**

In most cases, students will have multiple interactions with staff before meeting a faculty member. Consider that students’ first impressions of the college shape their lasting impressions. African American students are particularly at-risk for having negative experiences with key offices during their first interactions with the college. African American students are aware of how they are perceived as Africans and how they are perceived as Americans (Du Bois, 1994).
Embracing postsecondary education as a new experience comes with anxieties and uncertainties. This is doubled for African American students. In addition to offering hours of availability that reflect student needs, practitioners should hire culturally competent and diverse staff members who understand the needs of African American students. Provide ongoing opportunities for students to share feedback and for staff to evaluate and learn from this feedback.

Feedback from this study includes having competent staff in Financial Aid and Academic Advising. Maya struggled to use a scholarship for multiple terms at WCC. This barrier prevented her from enrolling and shaped her negative perception of the college. She wanted to be a proud member of the collegiate community, yet she was embarrassed to affiliate with a school that was unwelcoming to her. Ruby and Mary expressed frustration about their advising experiences while being placed into developmental coursework during their first interactions with the college. Their academic perceptions were bruised by the placement and advising processes. Their first academic experience involved a computer-based exam that led to them being assigned several terms of non-credit coursework. Once again, this happened before they met their first faculty member.

Staff must be explicitly aware of how their early interactions with African Americans shape African American students’ perceptions of belonging. They should be intentionally treated with fairness and kindness. The simplicity of offering African American students a welcoming environment can improve their perceptions of the college and themselves. Assess student satisfaction and empower students to build community by offering a safe and welcoming campus culture.

Along these lines, faculty should consider how the students’ experiences were before reaching the classroom. Faculty and staff should intentionally collaborate to represent the
mission of the community college while addressing African American students’ needs. Practitioners must listen and respond to African American students’ needs. This also means building respectful relationships and trust with African American students. Offer varied ways for students to safely share feedback and empower them to join you when implementing solutions. African American students who have been displaced in the surrounding communities can find solace and belonging on campus while obtaining and creating meaningful educational experiences.

Curriculum and classroom activities are essential aspects of community college education. Participants shared stories about classroom activities that made them feel isolated and reinforced perceptions of “onlyness” and “otherness.” On the other hand, participants who experienced culturally competence and diverse faculty thrived in those classes and described them as their best experiences with WCC. Faculty have the power to shape the African American student experiences because the classroom is the only place students are required to congregate on campus. For hours each week, faculty have an opportunity to foster safe and meaningful educational experiences for African American students. Practitioners should create opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with African American students. Participants described their best professors as those who were available outside of traditional daytime hours. They also praised professors who helped them develop meaningful connections and understanding of the curriculum. Be explicit about your epistemology and study ways to share it with students who are from varied backgrounds. Make cultural competence an ongoing part of personal and professional development. Finally, listen to students who, like the participants in this study, offer valuable feedback about how to support African American students.
Final Conclusions

Participants in this study persist through the barriers they faced when attending WCC. This generation’s stories took a sharp turn from previous generational experiences with the local neighborhood. These students persisted through the barriers they faced as African Americans by clinging to positive experiences with faculty, curriculum, and colleagues. Meaningful interactions with the physical campus and sociological environment can reshape African American students’ experiences, help them to engage with the community, and promote belonging. Throughout the history of the United States, African Americans have persisted beyond covert and overt racism that laid the foundation for this nation.

A Message to African American College Students

The participants in this study shared their stories because they want experiences for future African American students to be better than what they experienced. Each participant expressed a desire to improve African American college students’ experiences. Mary and Ruby lead an intercampus organization that aims to support African American students while empowering African American high school students. Lorde continues to support African American students through postsecondary enrollment. Maya relocated thousands of miles away from Urban to pursue a graduate degree that focuses on African American student experiences. African American college students should understand that, even if their campuses offer environments that are hostile to belonging, communities of resilient African Americans are cheering them on.

This is my message to African American college students: You are never alone and you deserve to be in college. We are joined by a great cloud of witnesses and ambassadors who have gone before us to give us access to education in the United States. Their stories and voices
resonate in our hearts and minds when we listen to and acknowledge them. Deconstructing centuries of mental oppression and systematic racism is often difficult and slow. Each time you complete an assignment, you are closer to completing that course. Each course you complete, brings you one step closer to earning a degree that no one can take from you. Those who are coming after you need your knowledge. We have the ability to build community anywhere. We build community in bathrooms and hallways, sidewalks and train stations, churches and clubs. When you see your sister or brother, take a moment to let them know that they aren’t invisible. Our smiles, daps and head nods speak when we can’t open our mouths. Finally, please take advantage of your resources. If you do not know what they are, find them. If you cannot find what you need, develop it! You are creative, resourceful, and innovative. Use your experiences with onliness and otherness as weapons to train your fingers for war against the sociological constructs you will tear down throughout life. As my father says, “Finish well! No one can argue with your success.” I am proud of you.
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