

THE IMPACT OF LOCATION: SUPPORTING BLACK EXCELLENCE AT RURAL  
COLLEGIATE INSTITUTIONS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examines the impact PWIs in rural areas have on their African American students through the lens of professional staff with a goal of determining their level of support for Black Excellence. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand the success measures rural PWIs have in place that directly supports the African American student population.

KEY WORDS: PWI, African American students, success, Black Excellence

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*“They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”—Isiah 40:31*

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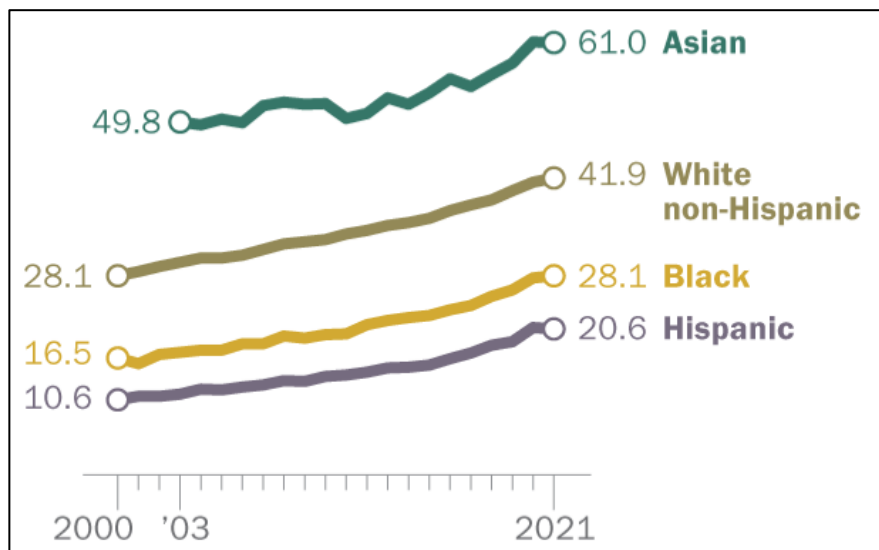
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## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

The rate of African American students enrolled in higher education institutions has been increasing over the last few decades (Factsheet, 2022) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). Specifically, from 2000-21, the African American enrollment demographics have increased by over 10% (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Enrollment Demographics 2000-21**



*Source: Pew Research Center (2022)*

Despite this, the success rates of African American students are comparatively lower than any other racial group in the United States, not including Hispanic students (Higher Ed Today, 2023). Specifically, only 40% of African American students complete their degree within six years (Marcus, 2023). Their white and Asian counterparts are more than twice as likely to complete (World Population Review, 2023). In 2022, the percentage of Asian and White adults,

aged 25 or older, with a bachelor’s degree or higher were both almost double the percentage of African Americans (see Table 1). This further demonstrates the college completion gaps in African Americans.

**Table 1. Percentage of Adults with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher as of 2022**

AFRICAN AMERICAN	ASIAN	WHITE
27.6%	59.3%	41.8%

*Source: United States Census Bureau, 2023*

### **WHY DO THESE GAPS EXIST?**

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2023), African American students have a higher rate of dropouts in comparison to White, Asian, and Hispanic students. This may be attributed to the fact that African American students suffer from the disadvantage of not having the proper resources. A large population of African American students are first-generation and low-income (Engle and Tinto, 2008). First-generation and low-income students are four times more likely to leave without a degree and 43% of these students leave college after six years without earning a 4-year degree (Engle and Tinto, 2008). Additionally, 39% of first generation African American students who began at a four-year college graduated in six years, in comparison to 53% of all students (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010).

Higher dropout rates in African American students may also be attributed to the fact that African American students are “twice as likely as other bachelor’s degree students to be caregivers or full-time workers” (Higher Education Today, 2023, para 6). Specifically, 15% are caregivers, 20 are employed full time, and 11% are parents or guardians (Marcus, 2023). Such responsibilities are factors that can make it difficult to complete college. This can also be a fraction of the reason why 56% of African American students enrolled at four-year institutions

experience periods of part-time enrollment, as opposed to 42% of White students (Marcus, 2023). This can further expand the issue of completion gaps.

According to Bridges (n.d.), many African American students are underprepared academically for college and are more likely to take remedial courses than other student groups. A student's success rate decreases with each remedial course they take, and many students with remedial courses drop out before completing a degree program (Bridges, n.d.). This may be attributed to African American students not receiving the proper academic preparedness in high schools, which causes them to be underprepared and forced to take remedial courses (Kolodner, Racino, and Quester, 2017). According to California Acceleration Project (2021), remedial classes widen equity gaps in completion among African American students compared to their White peers.

A study by Lumina and Gallup found that African American students identified cost, lack of extracurricular support, and "implicit and overt forms of racial discrimination" as the largest obstacles they faced while pursuing a degree in higher education (Knox, 2023, para 2). When faced with such obstacles, success in college can be difficult to achieve.

## **EFFECTS OF LOCATION AND INSTITUTION TYPE**

Geographic location and institution type can further impact the success rates of African American students in higher education institutions (Woldoff, Wiggins, and Washington, 2011). Specifically, the academic performance and cognitive behaviors of African American students are impacted at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), as African American students at PWIs experience isolation and marginalization at higher rates than their peers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Crumb and Chambers, 2022). The African American

student experience at PWIs is impacted by several factors, such as a lack of representation and a lack of diversity in their peers and staff (Powell, 2021).

African American students who attend less racially diverse institutions are “more likely to feel discriminated against, physically and psychologically unsafe, and disrespected” (Higher Education Today, 2023, para 4). Lumina Foundation-Gallup’s (2023) State of Higher Education study found that, when faced with discrimination, 34% of African American students at private for-profit institutions are more likely to report discrimination in comparison to those at public (17%) and private not-for-profit institutions (23%).

Research has suggested that the African American student experience at PWIs is different from that of White students. African American students have reported experiencing racism and microaggressions (Mills, 2015). Furthermore, African American students face disadvantages and discrimination, which can cause intimidation and provoke insecurities within them (Harper, 2008). These experiences can directly impact their sense of belonging, which ultimately may impact their academic success (Strange and Banning, 2015). Although there are diversity programs and organizations that exist on college campuses, African American students have a higher rate of reporting tense and threatening campus interactions in comparison to their White and other minority counterparts (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). This suggests that African American students struggle to find a sense of belonging on their campuses.

While it is widely known that attending college can be overwhelming and an adjustment for all students, African American students at PWIs face additional challenges, and those attending rural PWIs are especially impacted. These students cite having to transition living in predominantly White neighborhoods, adjusting to rural life, and experiencing feelings of discomfort in these environments (Woldoff, Wiggins, and Washington, 2011). Furthermore,

because of the lack of representation, African American students can feel disconnected from their institution. Feelings of disconnectedness can possibly lead to lower rates of success.

## **HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER ED**

African American students have not always had the opportunity to attend college. During the periods of slavery, African Americans were banned from learning to read or write. In fact, education for African Americans was considered illegal. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Quaker community and educated African Americans who were free worked to educate other African Americans (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Some higher education institutions began to allow African Americans to study at their institutions, for example Dartmouth College in 1824 (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). In 1865, the establishment of the Thirteenth Amendment allowed for the Freedman's Bureau to be created, which helped to manage education for freed African Americans.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established by missionaries, educators, and abolitionists (Mills, 2015). The oldest HBCU, Cheyney University, was founded by Richard Humphreys in 1837 (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). HBCUs continued to be established throughout the late 1800s as a refuge for African American students who were not able to attend PWIs. Initially, HBCUs taught their students skills to become domestic workers without an academic curriculum, but leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois helped their focus shift to liberal arts academia (Mills, 2015).

In 1872 and 1890, the Morrill Acts helped provide higher education to African Americans through federal funding to institutions that had state level public education and institutions that had separate but equal buildings for African American students (Mills, 2015). Institutions that operated under the Morrill Acts provided African American student with



cultured curriculum and safer environments. Although these separate-but-equal institutions were segregated and had separate facilities for their African American and White students, African American students should have been given equal services and opportunities as White students (Mills, 2015). Unfortunately, the services and opportunities were not equal for African American students. In the 1900s, African Americans began to fight for equals rights to education and close the disparities.

African Americans fought and went as far as taking legal action against segregation and education inequalities. *Brown v. Board of Education* is a historic case where the United States Supreme Court ruled against segregation in educational facilities, and higher educational institutions were federally required to admit African American students in 1954 (Haynes, 2006). Unfortunately, many PWIs were not open to willingly admitting African American students into their institutions. Some institutions faced violence and needed army intervention when attempting to integrate (Haynes, 2006). This continued until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed to end segregation within higher educational institutions (Haynes, 2006).

Although desegregation was being accepted at institutions throughout the nation, African American students expressed that their White counterparts had poor attitudes towards them and that their campuses lacked racial sensitivity. This caused African American students to communicate feelings of frustration, resentment, and worthlessness. African American students sought refuge in campus cultural centers and student organizations that were created for African American students as a response to the campus climates (Haynes, 2006). According to Haynes (2006), the centers and organizations provided African American students with the support and social interaction with like-minded individuals. Studies show that universities and colleges must have programs with orientation, financial aid, African American faculty and staff, program goals,

developmental academic instruction, and resources in other student affairs programs for African American students to feel connected to their institutions (Haynes, 2006).

In 1980 the number of African American students enrolled in higher education institutions declined, reflecting the largest decrease for any racial group in post-secondary education in the United States. The enrollment decreases corresponded with a decrease of federal funds for affirmative action programs, such as federal financial aid (Haynes, 2006). According to Haynes (2006), the ruling in the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke upheld affirmative action, ruling that race can be used in the admission process in a way to diversify and integrate campuses, but invalidating the use of quota systems.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the ruling from the Bakke case helped establish affirmative action programs and improve college admissions and scholarships for minority students. During this time, there was a 48% increase in African Americans enrolled in higher education (Haynes, 2006). In the 2000s, African American students were studying at all institution types, and in 2007, 56% of African Americans who complete high school were enrolled in college (IHEP, 2010).

In the 2010s, the African American student enrollment continued to rise and increased by 73% (Factsheet, 2022). In 2019, of the 16.6 million undergraduate students, African American students made up 2.1 million (Factsheet, 2022). As enrollment continues to increase, so does the number of African Americans who hold collegiate degrees. In 2019, 29% of the African American population, from ages 25-29, have earned a bachelor's degree or higher (Factsheet, 2022). However, this was in comparison to 45% of White students. These disparities show that there is more work to be done in helping African American students be successful in their higher educational journey.

Because White Americans were the dominant race in America, they have had the most impact on the curriculum development (Mills, 2015). As a result, they have controlled what is being taught, and groups of color, such as African Americans, have limited to no influence on education in America, including which histories are taught and which assessment standards are applied. African American students are expected to understand and master what is taught and excel in their assessments or their opportunity for academic success may be limited.

## **WHY THIS STUDY?**

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As noted, African American students are graduating at lower rates than their White counterparts (Thompson, 2020). According to Thompson (2020), one in five African American students complete college, while White students are more than twice as likely to complete. These completion statistics are especially true at PWIs located in rural environments. While African American students enrolled in PWIs already face issues of belonging and discrimination, they also face issues of adjusting to new areas that lack diversity while attending rural institutions. Students who do not feel that they belong in an institution are less likely to be retained and complete their degree (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). In addition, students who feel isolated and rejected within the college are also less likely to persist. Gray, Hope, and Bryd (2020) state that students who experience ostracism “have higher rates of absenteeism, are less engaged in class activities, and earn lower grades than their peers whose belongingness needs are fulfilled” (para 4).

This study aims to identify and understand the support measures rural institutions have in place to contribute to the success of their African American students. Through interviews with administrators at rural institutions, the study identified what support, as it relates to retention and

feelings of belonging, these institutions have in place to contribute to the success of their African American students.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There is knowledge that exists in relation to African American students' experiences in higher education. Historical, social, and economic factors have played a huge role in African American students' higher education journey, including racism and segregation (Taylor, 2021).

While there is data that shows there is a lack of support for African American student success, as well as data that demonstrates the support PWIs in urban areas give to their students of color, there is a lack of data detailing the specific support services that are offered to African American students at rural PWIs. While some institutions may offer general support services such as tutoring, these services are not always inclusive to African American students. Research has indicated that many African American students are resistant to use such services because they make them have feelings of weakness and being unintelligent (Thompson, 2020). In addition, there is a gap in literature from the perspective of the institution and administrators about the support programs that are being offered to African American students at rural PWIs.

Harper (2015) suggests that current literature focuses on the barriers and underachievement of African American students, with there being a lack of information on how these students are successful despite the challenges they face in higher education. Gray, Hope, and Bryd (2020) state that African American student success is promoted when students feel that they belong. Gray, Hope, and Bryd (2020) contend that "discussions about belonging can set the stage for determining how schools can best honor and affirm all students while supporting their achievement motivation, career aspirations, and life trajectories" (para 5).

This study seeks to bring awareness to the needs of African American students at PWIs in rural communities, and the importance of these students feeling as if they belong at their institution. Tinto (2012) describes sense of belonging as “a generalized sense of membership that stems from students’ perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them” (pp. 66). When a student feels as if they belong, they are more likely to be successful and complete college. Furthermore, the study will contribute to the growing research surrounding African American student success and the support services in place that contribute to their success. Support services typically include the following: academic, financial, mental health, student organizations, and Greek Life.

#### POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

As an African American woman employed at a rural PWI, I have a connection to the purpose of the study. Over the past three years, I have been employed at two PWIs in rural Michigan. In my current role, I am involved in African American student success initiatives daily. While serving at both rural institutions, I have witnessed African American students express feelings of not belonging, of being stereotyped, and experiencing a lack of care by non-persons of color staff and faculty. I have advocated for the need for additional support services, retention, and increased efforts for making our African American students feel that they belong on campus.

### **OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY**

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research question:

- How are rural institutions contributing to the success of their African American student population?

## METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative, phenomenological design where the researcher utilized multiple perspectives from the study participants. Participants were selected through maximum variation sampling. The primary data collection was 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Data was analyzed through coding, categorization, and synthesis.

## STUDY PARTICIPANTS

In this study, participants were recruited through maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling technique that reflects someone who represents every aspect of the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for participants included: (1) serves in a professional role in higher education, (2) implements or creates the support services for African American students at their institution, and (3) supports African American students in their day-to-day work. There were 3 participants in the study.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process was also described in Chapter Three. To begin the process, data was coded using priori and open, then categorized and synthesized. From here, the data was analyzed through thematic analysis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was shaped by Tinto's Integration Framework, which argues that students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they experience social and academic integration and connections (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). This framework displays the importance of supporting students throughout their college journey so that they can feel a part of the campus. Integrating students into campus is integral to their success. This is especially true for African

American students who often face issues of isolation and otherness. When African American students face issues of isolation, their academic abilities are affected. This can lead to them not completing college. So, through my study, I utilized this framework to analyze what steps rural public institutions are taking to ensure Black students are integrated into their institutions.

#### IMPORTANCE OF BLACK EXCELLENCE

The concept of Black Excellence stems from the idea that Black people can accomplish and reach invaluable levels of success. Created to negate the negative biases black surrounding black people by the world. The term rose to popularity through social media trends – expanding into a widely used catch phrase. Yet, Black Excellence is more than just modern-day jargon or t-shirt idea. For me and many other educated Blacks, Black Excellence is a mindset that celebrates the success and achievements of descendants of the African and Black diaspora, while highlighting perseverance.

By highlighting Black Excellence within my study, it is my hope to uplift those of Black and Afro-native roots by acknowledging their work and tenacity regardless of their background or skin color. In addition, it is my hope to advocate for Black students, pushing for a focus to be placed on supporting their academic and overall growth. I take pride in being a model of Black Excellence, especially as it relates to academia. My achievements include graduating with Honors from all three higher education degrees that I hold and finishing my doctoral studies at the age of 29 while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. My goal is to be a lifelong scholar and learner to continue achieving Black Excellence, while inspiring as many of those who share the same Black identity as me that it is possible. As a professional, I am committed to increasing Black Excellence in the United States education system and eventually, throughout the world.

## HYPOTHESES

It is my belief that rural institutions are not doing enough to support the success of their African American students as it relates to their sense of belonging on campus.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

This study relies on many terms and concepts from both education and sociology; thus, the following definitions are offered to increase understanding and reduce possible confusion.

*African American*: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

*Black Excellence*: a mindset that celebrates the success and achievements of descendants of the African and Black diaspora, while highlighting perseverance (McGee, 2023).

*Completion*: The credentials students earn within six years after they first enroll in a college or university (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023).

*Predominately White Institution*: Predominantly white institution (PWI) is the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment” (Lomotey, 2010).

*Retention*: Continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

*Rural*: All territory, persons, and housing units not defined as urban (Ratcliffe et al, 2016).

*Sense of Belonging*: a generalized sense of membership that stems from students’ perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them (Tinto, 2012).

*Student Success*: How well students are prepared to accomplish their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals through the development of knowledge, a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and a connection to the college and wider community (Nazareth College, 2014). This definition is also guided by the following outcomes:

***Student Retention (Persistence)***: entering college students remain, re-enroll, and continue their undergraduate education. For example, first-year students return for their sophomore year.



**Educational Attainment:** entering students persist to completion and attainment of their degree, program, or educational goal. For example, 4-year college students persist to completion of the baccalaureate degree.

**Academic Achievement:** students achieve satisfactory or superior levels of academic performance as they progress through and complete their college experience. For example, students avoid academic probation or qualify for academic honors.

**Student Advancement:** students proceed to and succeed at subsequent educational and occupational endeavors for which their college degree or program was designed to prepare them. For example, 4-year college students are accepted at graduate schools or enter gainful careers after completing their baccalaureate degree.

*Holistic Development:*

**Intellectual Development:** developing skills for acquiring and communicating knowledge, learning how to learn, and how to think deeply.

- Emotional Development: developing skills for understanding, controlling, and expressing emotions.

**Social Development:** enhancing the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships, leadership skills, and civic engagement.

**Ethical Development:** formulating a clear value system that guides life choices and demonstrates personal character.

**Physical Development:** acquiring and applying knowledge about the human body to prevent disease, maintain wellness, and promote peak performance.

**Spiritual Development:** appreciating the search for personal meaning, the purpose of human existence, and questions that transcend the material or physical world. (Nazareth College, 2014).

*Student Support Services:* A comprehensive program designed to provide students with services that are academic and supportive in nature to promote academic success and retention of students in higher education (Luckett, 2020).

*Urban:* dense, large population that is built close together (Ratcliffe et al, 2016).

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter One served as an introduction into the topic of African American student success in higher education and the impact that studying at an institution located in a rural institution can have on their success. This chapter also took readers on a journey through the history of African American students in higher education, including the current state of their struggles in higher

education. The chapter then provided readers with insight on the study, highlighting the purpose and significance of the study. Lastly, in this chapter, important terms that will be used throughout the following chapters were defined.

Chapter Two will take a deep dive into the supporting literature, providing an analysis of existing research regarding African American student success in higher education. The chapter will examine studies related to African American student preparedness, their experiences and sense of belonging on campus, and what some institutions are doing to African American success and completion of college.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an analysis of existing research regarding African American student success in higher education. First, the chapter examines studies related to student preparedness to create an understanding of the barriers African American students face prior to beginning college as it relates to academics, finances, and their support systems. Second, the chapter examines studies related to the experiences of African American students in higher education and their sense of belonging on campus. Lastly, the chapter highlights the various approaches to supporting African American students as they relate to their overall success and completion of college.

The success of African American students in higher education has been an ongoing issue, specifically how African Americans are adjusting to college and the support they may or may not receive. In addition, African American students at PWIs in rural communities are graduating at lower rates than African American students in urban areas (Thompson, 2020).

#### Student Preparedness

Being prepared for college is a key factor to success for college students. Moore et al. (2010) examined the college readiness of Texas high school graduates through analyzing reading and math scores for the 2006-07 school year among Hispanic, African American, and White students. The research found that one-third of students were college ready in both subjects. The study found a lack of preparedness in African American and Hispanic students (Moore et al,

2010). Moore et al. (2010) suggests that schools should take actions to improve college readiness in their students through teacher development and implementing relevant college preparedness programs. Teacher development includes training teachers on strategies to help them develop college readiness skills in their students such as “critical and analytical thinking and their ability to draw inferences and conclusions, conduct research, and effectively communicate orally and in writing. Instructional strategies and interventions are essential to students at-risk of not being prepared for college-level work” (Moore et al, 2010, p. 832-833).

Moore et al. (2010) suggested that at-risk students must have access to program and support services that contribute to their success such as “orientation, transition courses and first-year seminars, learning communities, intrusive advising, tutoring, supplemental instruction, peer tutoring, study groups and summer bridge programs, study skills workshops, mentoring and student support groups, student-faculty research, and senior capstone projects” (p. 833).

In their book, Ford (2013) discussed the lack of representation of Black and Hispanic students in gifted education and citing recruitment and retention with a focus on academic, cultural, and social support, as the main avenues to address and correct this. Ford (2013) argued that African American students in rural areas lack access to advanced educational programs that is made accessible to White and Asian students at the primary and secondary levels. This book further illustrates the lack of preparedness African American students face.

Atherton (2014) suggested resources such as tutors and study labs, summer bridge programs, precollegiate programs such as TRiO, Upward Bound, Gear Up, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), and student involvement opportunities as solutions to increasing academic preparedness in students and ultimately increase retention and completion.

Pre collegiate programs not only prepare students academically, but many, such as TRiO, give students from less advantaged backgrounds the opportunity to attend college (Atherton, 2014). Such students are typically African American, and or low-income and first-generation. These pre-collegiate programs are essential to many African American students' and other disadvantaged students' opportunity to attend college.

Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) found that low-income African American students face challenges that can affect their academics such as a lack of academic preparedness and financial preparedness. Financial preparedness for students has been viewed as providing funding for college. A study by George-Jackson and Gast (2015) addressed the issue of financial awareness and preparedness for students in higher education through a review of articles published between 2000-13 on the topic. The study highlighted the disparities in financial awareness and preparedness by race and socioeconomic background and examined the challenges students and parents face when preparing for the costs of college. The study revealed a link between pre-college financial awareness and preparedness. One major theme emerged from the study is there is a lack of information among African American students, who are historically underprivileged in higher education. The study found that low-income African American students come from high schools that do not properly prepare and counsel them financially for college (George-Jackson & Gast, 2015). George-Jackson and Gast (2015) concluded that a lack of college affordability is the main barrier for information gaps in financial awareness and preparedness for college students.

George-Jackson and Gast (2015) stressed the need for collegiate institutions to fix the issue of college affordability and expanding financial awareness and preparedness for families such as African Americans. George-Jackson and Gast (2015) urged “higher education

institutions, middle schools, high schools, local organizations, and investment companies to work together to improve pre-college FAP for underserved communities” (p. 226). In contrast, other researchers have identified additional means to financial preparedness and support. In their book, McNair et al. (2016) argued that preparing students financially is more than worrying about how to pay for tuition, but should include food and health services, transportation costs, and childcare costs.

The qualitative case study by Means et al. (2016) gives a different perspective to college preparedness as it explored educational aspirations of African American high school students, the support systems they rely on, and the obstacles they face when accessing higher education. There were seven interviewers, diverse in gender and race, who conducted one on one interviews that were semi-structured. Male interviewers were paired with participants that identified as male and female were partnered with those who identified as female. Interviews took place at Central High School, which is a pseudonym (Means et al, 2016). The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data was processed by a team of five researchers that were diverse in race, gender, and experiences. Five people on the research team helped boost the morale for the study as they often had to re-examine their own assumptions. Central High School is “rural, low-resourced, and predominantly Students of Color” (Means et al., 2016, p. 553).

In Means et al. (2016) participants identified financial and academic barriers as the two main obstacles they may face when enrolling in college. When asked what may prevent them from pursuing a college degree, many participants mentioned financial and academic causes. African American participants specifically noted finances will play a role in their ability to attend college. Participants credited their school counselor and college coach as helping them with college preparedness, specifically college entrance exams and financial aid (Means et al, 2016).

Means et al. (2016) sought to increase policies that are created to increase college access for African American students in rural areas. These students typically had fewer school resources and less strong academic courses, putting them at an extreme disadvantage in comparison to their peers that attend college (Means et al, 2016). Means et al. (2016) demonstrated how college finances play a role in the college decision making process.

In contrast, Caldwell et al. (2021) qualitative study explores the student readiness of colleges and how one specific community college in Midwest Michigan engages student readiness and the disconnects that causes students to lack preparedness. The study utilized interviews, observations, and collected artifacts to help with their investigation. The following themes emerged from the study: community, support, and disconnect. Participants of the study included students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Participants described the college as offering support services to students such as “financial aid guidance and resources, FAFSA nights, a writing center, and a food pantry” (Caldwell et al, 2021, p. 36). Some students were not aware of support services and did not access them such as students who came to campus just for class and left when class was over which contributes to the disconnect on their campus. Caldwell et al. (2021) suggests the college should put forth an effort to build a sense of belonging on campus among students to address the disconnects. This can help students feel welcome and connected to their campus.

There are many issues that can affect African American student preparedness. Financial and academic preparedness are two that heavily affect African American students. Lack of financial preparedness can be attributed to students and their families not being educated about the college financial aid process. Lack of academic preparedness can be attributed to the lack of college readiness programs at high schools and low academic achieving schools. Having such a

lack of preparedness can lead to African American students not having the same opportunities as their peers. They can also lead to African American students being unable to attend college or even complete a college degree.

## **STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND SENSE OF BELONGING**

A student's experience on a campus can affect their feeling of belonging on campus in a negative or positive way. In Simmons et al. (2013), the authors sought to understand the experiences of African American undergraduate students at PWIs through focus groups and individual interviews. Simmons et al. (2013) suggested that PWIs are in a partnership with their African American students and recommends that PWIs develop strategies for improving and maintaining these relationships. Simmons et al. (2013) recommended the following three strategies:

university leaders should make special efforts to include parents of first-generation college students. University leaders would benefit from acknowledging all these dialectical tensions, especially Blackness-Whiteness and Integration-Segregation, and create programs that give voice to both cultural perspectives", and "instructional training should be provided for professors and graduate teaching assistants on the need for, and inclusion of, diversity in their courses. (pg. 390-391)

McCoy (2014) carried out a qualitative study to learn about the experience of first-generation students of color at extreme PWIs. The research was guided by the following question "What are the transitional experiences of first-generation college students of color from urban areas to an extreme predominantly White institution?" (McCoy, 2014 p.157). The institution the study focused on was in New England and enrolled close to 14,000 students. The student demographic was predominately white, where students of color only made up 10% (McCoy, 2014). Students that participated in the study discussed their experience transitioning into college from urban areas (McCoy, 2014).



Participants described experiencing culture shock due to the population of White individuals compared to those of color (McCoy, 2014). During the study, participants identified the use of their campus' multicultural center as a counterspace. McCoy (2014) defined counterspace as a safe space for students of color that is positive and supportive. This finding suggests the importance of having multicultural centers on PWI campuses. The study found that by becoming involved in student organizations and having the support of mentors, participants were able to be successful in their transition into college. McCoy (2014) recommended that colleges and universities should be aware that first-generation students can lack cultural and academic abilities to be successful in their transition to college. Due to this, colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide students with orientations and workshops to educate students and their parents.

A qualitative campus-based study was conducted at Fresno City College (FCC). FCC is a community college located in Fresno, California. In the spring of 2015, FCC conducted a study that had a goal to find strategies to improve completion in their African American student population. The study also looked to gain an understanding of African American student experiences that affect their academic success. Participants in this study were African American students and were split into three focus groups. Participants were asked questions about what helped them be successful at FCC and about the six success factors: directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued. Fresno City College (2015) found that students needed to feel valued, focused, and nurtured to be successful. The participants reported that faculty engagement contributed to them feeling supported and nurtured and expressed that they wish to see more African American faculty (Fresno City College, 2015). Having faculty of color is important as they help to build intercultural competence.

In Fresno City College (2015), participants reported experiences of microaggressions on their campuses. Racial microaggressions were defined as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Fresno City College, 2015, p.7). According to Fresno City College (2015), participants reported feeling and experiencing white faculty behaving with unwarranted animosity towards them, as well as white students saying damaging things to and about African American students. One participant reported they were afraid to ask their instructor for help because they often felt as if the faculty member would talk down to them. When issues of inequity occur in the country, participants reported that they want to see their institutions and non-African American faculty show care and concern about how it affects the African American student population (Fresno City College, 2015). Participants expressed the importance of student clubs as being a positive means of support on campus and feeling like an asset (Fresno City College, 2015).

Fresno City College (2015) recommended that FCC uses the results to “engage student support stakeholders such as faculty, counselors, student services professionals, administrators, staff, and students in conversations about these findings” (p. 8). By using these results, FCC can determine new initiatives to increase completion and retention in their African American student population. They can place a focus on hiring faculty that are reflective of their student population.

Taggart (2016) found that some students feel as if they do not fit in or belong when they begin their higher education journey. To add more, Havlik, et al. (2017) conducted a study that highlighted the challenges of the first-generation college student at a private PWI. The institution in this study is considered mid-sized with 10,000 enrolled in a suburban area. The first-generation student population of this institution was reported as 800, which is equivalent to 12%

of the total student enrollment. This institution often has unchallenged and unrecognized issues of discrimination toward those of color and ethnic groups other than White (Havlik, et al, 2017).

In Havlik et al. (2017), there were two themes that emerged from the study. The first theme is “Otherness” while on campus, which is in relation to the following three identities first-generation student, a student of color, and a student from a lower socioeconomic status. The second theme is Motivators for continuing college on campus while facing feelings of not belonging. Participants in this study described feelings of otherness by their white counterparts and instructors as “a sense of possessing an outsider status, feelings of not belonging, being viewed as different or less than, being misunderstood, excluded, or invalidated, or being disadvantaged in comparison to the majority” (Havlik et al, 2017, p. 7). Participants described their factors for persisting through the many challenges such as their personal identities, drive, and resiliency. There were 18 participants in this study ranging from age 18 to 22. Ten of the participants identified as female and seven identified as male. Participants could self-select their race where all but two identified themselves as a person of color.

Havlik et al. (2017) suggested that first-generation college students must have the support and shared effort from family members, peers, faculty, and retention experts to be able to address issues of “transition, feelings of isolation, financial struggles, and exclusionary actions of others according to intersectional identities” (p. 18). Havlik et al. (2017) suggests that colleges and universities should make a conscious effort to create and implement policies and procedures to address the challenges first-generation students face such as feelings of isolation. Ballen et al. (2017) conducted similar research that found that feelings of isolation, being stereotyped, and lacking confidence can be damaging to African American students’ academic abilities.

Thompson (2020) conducted a qualitative study that examined the experiences of students of color who graduated from PWIs in rural areas. The study highlighted three themes:

(a) the inadequate plans for transitioning or onboarding SoC at PWIs located in rural environments, (b) the importance of opportunity programs like HEOP to the success of SoC, and (c) the of importance of relationships and their integral role in the success of SoC at PWIs in rural environments. (Thompson, 2020, p. 103)

Thompson (2020) conducted phone and face-to-face interviews that were semi-structured. There were nine participants. Thompson (2020) found that students of color that transition to PWIs struggle because they do not receive adequate support during their transition, implying that high school and college administrators did not aid students of color, which caused for the students to face additional challenges. In Thompson (2020), participants described feelings of isolation, culture shock, imposter syndrome and racial inequities (p. 103).

Thompson (2020) found the importance of Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), an academic bridge program that helps students transition into their first semester of college, and relationships. Based on these findings, Thompson (2020) gave the following four recommendations to college faculty, support staff, and administrators

(a) to create and implement a process that provides intentional support for effective onboarding, (b) to establish and expect college personnel to attend and complete training focused on understanding issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; (c) to hire a chief diversity officer (CDO) for effecting systemic change within the institution and supporting the advancement of a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and (d) to establish college-based programs founded on the practices and principles of HEOP and other formal bridge programs. (p. 104)

Thompson (2020) believes that by implementing these recommendations, PWIs in rural areas will provide immediate improvement to supporting their students of color.

The African American student experience can be positively impacted by having faculty of color that represents their ethnicity. Southern Regional Education Board (2021) stated that approximately 33% of undergraduate students are African American or Hispanic and only 10.5%

of faculty is reflective of this (see Table 2). According to Southern Regional Education Board (2021), having faculty of color provides students with positive educational experiences and positive outcomes in their collegiate journey. Having diversity in faculty helps cultivate a culture of comfortability for all students of color.

**Table 2. U.S. Adult Faculty Statistics by Race 2021**

	TOTAL U.S. CITIZENS	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	ASIAN/PAC. ISLAND	AMERICAN INDIAN
U.S. Population	100% 325,719,178	60.6% 197,385,822	12.4% 40,389,178	18.1% 58,955,171	5.7% 18,565,993	0.7% 2,280,034
Faculty	100% 832,119	68.8% 572,586	5.5% 45,748	5.0% 41,403	10.3% 86,035	0.4% 3,413

*Source: Southern Regional Education Board, 2021*

Ensuring that there is a culture of belonging and welcomeness on campus is essential to a student’s collegiate journey. This is especially true for African American college students, particularly predominantly at white institutions, or institutions where they are the minority. Helping African American students feel like they belong starts with institutions having intentional resources and spaces for them. Student organizations tailored to African Americans are also a way to help these students feel connected to campus. Lastly, having staff, such as faculty and administrators, that are reflective of the student demographics is important and can help build trust amongst African American students and staff.

## **STUDENT SUPPORT**

Sledge (2012) conducted a review of modern literature to examine research on the support African American students in a four-year college and or university setting receive from their “family socioeconomic status, structure, and available emotional, financial, social, and academic support” (p. 1). Sledge (2012) concluded family involvement and constant support

during a student's higher education heightens their chance of persistence. In contrast, Baker (2013) conducted a study on the effect of institutional personal support, peers, and faculty influence on African American and Latino student performance. The study was a mixed method study and included results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF). There were 991 African American study participants and 916 Latino participants. The study found that African American students believe that African American faculty are more considered as role models and can incorporate Black culture, ideas, and history in their courses (Sledge, 2012). Baker (2013) confirmed this finding and stated, "professors who are similar in race to the students they teach positively impact those students' academic performance" (p. 306). This confirms that African American students who take classes with professors that are the same race as they are positively impacted (Baker, 2013). Baker's (2013) study put focus on the importance of personal support on-campus and described faculty as the most important support for African American students.

Johnson (2013) studied the impact a comprehensive retention program at a predominantly white university had on African American student enrollment. The results of the study showed that the program had a positive impact on African American student success. Students involved in the program reported the program as being academically, culturally, and socially beneficial. Johnson (2013) suggested that PWIs should have offices established to support African American students and address their needs. In addition, Johnson (2013) suggested PWIs establish a retention program for supporting African American student retention and stated that it is rare for institutions to have such program specifically for African American students.

Simmons (2013) conducted a qualitative study to examine what factors contribute to the perseverance of African American men involved in a student organization at their PWI. The

purpose of the student organization is to enhance retention in African American male students. In Simmons (2013), four themes emerged because of the study: college preparedness, high aspirations and goals, social connections and relationships, and growth through student organization commitment. The study found that African American male involvement in the student organization supports their perseverance in their collegiate journey. Simmons (2013) suggested the need for ethnic-based student groups and programs for African American male students in higher education. In contrast, Bartman (2105) argues the need for “three specific and innovative strategies—Black sorority engagement, cross-cultural mentoring, and population specific counseling techniques” to overcome the issues faced by African American women in higher education (p. 5). African American woman need strategies, specific to them, to contribute to their success in higher education.

Through a project at the University of Newcastle (UON), Allen and Nichols (2017) found that student support services help promote academic success, retention, and are created to give students a support system for when they have issues. The project at UON established the Office of Student Advocacy (OSA) to promote the importance of the student voice. The OSA consisted of UON staff and students, where students were viewed as partners of student support to inform students of success. The OSA created a communication strategy for student representatives and a method for students to report their concerns and have them communicate to university leaders who are responsible for decision making (Allen and Nichols, 2017). The project was effective as it was proactive and responsive to the concerns of students, having a positive impact on student success and retention.

In Wilson (2018), the effect of student support services on African American students was discussed, revealing that African American students are more likely to be engaged and

complete their degree when receiving institutional support. Tolliver and Miller's (2018) study attempted to determine the critical factors to African American men graduating from college. Participants included in this study were African American men, aged 25 or older, with at least a bachelor's degree. The following themes emerged from the study: mentorship, socialization, on campus support, and family and community expectations. The authors identified mentorship as individuals who supported the participants during their college journey and those who promoted the development and self-actualization of participants during their journey and transition into the world (Tolliver and Miller, 2018). The authors identified socialization as the conflict participants faced between their background and the campus culture. The authors identified on-campus supports as opportunities for students to engage and live the college experience. The authors identified family and community expectations as family and community members who showed participants support and encouraged and motivated them to complete college.

Each of the four themes were identified as a supportive measure to the participants completing their degree. Almost all participants described feeling secluded and underrepresented on their campus (Tolliver and Miller, 2018). Participants reported they found comfort through involvement with student groups and individuals with similar backgrounds and or student support services offered by their institutions. Tolliver and Miller (2018) suggested that colleges and universities should intentionally help all student be successful by identifying practices to aid in the growth and academic success of their African American students. Some academic practices and services include tutoring. Tutoring is an excellent support service that can help students grow academically (Ghenghesh, 2018). Tutoring and other academic activities such as study groups and help sessions, performed outside of the traditional classroom setting, can increase student motivation (Carr and London, 2019). Some other support services that help



students through their collegiate journey include counseling and advising (Carr and London, 2019). Although they are not academic based, counseling and advising are both beneficial to the success of students.

According to Ludvik (2019) universities and colleges utilize support services to reduce retention gaps and improve the overall success of their students. Luckett (2020) found that African Americans face academic challenges, such as developing connections with faculty and lacking motivation. These challenges delay graduation for African American students, causing them to complete college at lower rates. To solve this issue Luckett (2020) was able to establish a professional development training program for the student support services department “to provide additional professional best practices and recommendations for identifying student needs and providing the appropriate support while the university has a more systemic conversation about the other identified challenges to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students” (p. 4). The training program was created to go for three days and will give the student services department a map of how to support incoming and current African American students at the institution. The hope is that this training program will improve retention and faster degree completion for African American students at the university (Luckett, 2020). The success of this program is reliant on how motivated the staff is to lean and apply what they learned.

Crumb and Chambers (2022) wrote a review of their book *African American Rural Education College Transitions and Postsecondary Experiences* to discuss best practices to improve the experiences of African American students and professionals in rural secondary and postsecondary spaces. Crumb and Chambers (2022) identified “rural educators, administrators, counselors, families, and community stakeholders play vital roles in creating higher education pathways for African American students” (pp. 105). The authors emphasized the importance of

promoting college for African American youth starting as young as elementary school. They stated that this can be done by inviting alumni back to the school to discuss their college experiences, college scavenger hunts, partnering with sorority and fraternity mentorship opportunities, and providing collegiate exposure through school trips to a diverse range of higher education institutions.

Crumb and Chambers (2022) argued that once an African American student from a rural background is enrolled in college, they can be successful. Furthermore, they stated that students who were exposed to dreams of college early on felt prepared and able to succeed in higher education. Although these students feel prepared, they still face challenges commonly associated with college students such as adjusting to college life and low academic performance (Crumb and Chambers, 2022). However, through support programs such as the Emerging Scholars program at Clemson University, inclusion, equity, and a students' overall success can be improved.

Student support goes beyond just institutional support at the collegiate level. Such support should begin at the primary and secondary school levels and continue to the post-secondary level. Such support is essential to a student's success in college and professional journey. Such support can be facilitated through academic support, faculty-student relationships, mentorship, administration, student organization involvement, parents and family, counselors, and community stakeholders. African American students require a combination of factors to feel supported in during their collegiate journey. This includes representation, collegiate bridge programs at the primary and secondary education levels, getting involved in racial and ethnic based student organizations, and programs to promote retention and completion.

## **GAPS IN LITERATURE**

While several studies have highlighted the experiences of African American students during their journey into and in higher education, there was limited mention on what specific institutions are taking to support their African American students. While there were suggestions made, there was a lack in research on actions that institutions are taking and if those actions are successful Thompson (2020) found the importance of an academic bridge program that helps students transition into their first semester of college was beneficial to students of color. There was a lack of information on how the program has specifically helped African American students.

The literature has revealed that African American students, more than others, have lack of information as it relates to college finances and being prepared academically (Means et al, 2016). However, there is a gap in what institutions are doing to help African American students feel prepared for college as it relates to finances and academics. The literature also revealed that institutions should be aware of the support students of color, specifically African American, need to be successful in their collegiate journey. McCoy (2014) recommended that colleges and universities be aware of the support first-generation students required but did not specify how to specifically support African American students from this background. Thompson (2020) found the importance of an academic bridge program that helps students transition into their first semester of college was beneficial to students of color. There was a lack of information on how the program has specifically helped African American students.

Thompson (2020) revealed that many African American students have feelings of not belonging on campus and feelings of isolation. Thompson (2020) even gave suggestions on what institutions should do to improve this issue. However, the literature did not specify the actions

institutions are taking to combat isolation to better support their African American students. Additionally, the literature stated that PWIs should do more to improve the experiences of their African American students; there is a significant gap on the types of programs and resources institutions have in place contribute to the African American student success in rural PWIs. Crumbs and Chambers (2022) discussed ways to support and contribute to the success of African American students from rural areas, yet do not specifically target how these students can be successful at PWIs in rural areas.

While the existing literature has addressed improvements to be made at PWIs to increase support for African American students, not much research has been done on what PWIs are doing to support their African American students. In addition, there is an absence of information on the specific programs and resources PWIs in rural communities have in place for their African American students that will be beneficial to their collegiate journey. Overall, there was limited research specifically on PWIs located in rural communities.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The challenge that PWIs in rural locations face is that there is work to be done to improve the preparedness, experiences, and overall support for their African American students. African American students are often underprepared financially and academically for college (Means et al, 2016). African American students that come from a low-income background are more susceptible to not being prepared academically and financially (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Caldwell et al. (2021) stated that rectifying issues of student preparedness can be done on campus by better informing students of support services on campus. This can build a sense of belonging on campus.

The research gave many suggestions on what PWIs should do to cultivate a sense of belonging on campus for African American students. Simmons et al. (2013) suggested that institutions should intentionally develop relationships with their African American student population and the Southern Regional Education Board (2021) suggested that institutions increase diversity on their faculty to be reflective of their student population. This is important as faculty is the most important support for African American students (Baler, 2013). With this, institutions should be more intentional on the methods they are using to support their African American students as it can contribute to their sense of belonging on campus.

While there are support services and programs in place in many institutions, the research indicated that there is more work to be done on creating and identifying services and programs specific to African American students. It is no secret that African American students struggle with completing college (Johnson 2013). African American students have a higher chance at completion when they receive institutional support and personal support (Wilson, 2018 and Baker, 2013). Supporting African American students can also improve their overall academic performance and success (Ludvik, 2019). Increasing the overall success of African American students is directly related to their preparedness, on campus experiences, and the overall support they receive. Theories of critical race theory and Tinto's theory of integration were common within the literature.

There is an obvious lack in literature on the experiences of African American students at rural PWIs. While it is noted that African American students experience shock coming into these institutions, and face academic and completion challenges, there is not information on why. This could be attributed to a lack of belonging or feeling connected to the institution. It is safe to assume that many rural institutions lack diversity and representation in their students and staff.

This alone can be a shock to students. In addition, these students may come from urban areas, which are opposite of rural areas.

Chapter Three will take a dive into the methodology used to conduct the research, including research design and data analysis process. The chapter also discusses the institutions and representatives that participated in the study and how they were selected. Lastly, the chapter provides context into the study's limitations and theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

Disproportionately, African American students are considered underprepared and under supported to be able to complete college in comparison to their White peers (Means et al, 2016). Furthermore, African American students' success rates are comparatively lower than their White counterparts (Shapiro et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the initiatives rural PWIs in Michigan have in place to support their African American students.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The research followed a qualitative, phenomenological design.

#### RATIONALE FOR A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Qualitative research is collecting and analyzing data to understand people and their experiences, concepts, and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research focuses on four main characteristics; process, understanding, and meaning, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and the product is richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through a qualitative study, the researcher utilized multiple perspectives, which allows researchers and learners to learn about the same topic from different views, interpretations, and voices (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This allowed the researcher to learn about and analyze several human experiences.

## RATIONALE FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY DESIGN

According to Padilla-Diaz (2015) phenomenology has been defined as “the philosophy or school that explains being and consciousness on the basis of the analysis of observable phenomena” (pp. 102). Furthermore, phenomenology is referred to as a “rigorous science of experience and human consciousness” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, pp. 102). Overall, phenomenology seeks to understand the nature of the experience individuals share within a commonality.

Phenomenology is best used when “the research problem requires a profound understanding of human experiences common to a group of people” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, pp. 104). In order to understand these experiences, Padilla-Diaz (2015) cited interviews as the most appropriate way to collect data. Existing literature suggests that interviews should be semi-structured or open, as “these two types of interviews allow the researcher to address the phenomenon profoundly, providing a space of aperture for the informants to express their experiences in detail, approaching reality as faithfully as possible” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). To understand the experiences of participants in this study, the researcher utilized interviews.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The study addressed the following research question:

- How are rural institutions contributing to the success of their African American student population?

## PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

In phenomenological research, participants are typically chosen through purposive sampling (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Purposive sampling incorporates specific criteria that participants meet during selection. In this study, participants were recruited through maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling technique that reflects someone who represents every aspect of the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for this study included: (1) professional in



higher education, (2) who implements or create the support services for African American students at their institution, and (3) involved in supporting African American students in their day-to-day work.

To find participants, the researcher contacted every rural PWI in the state of Michigan to ask for administrators to participate in the study. Participants interested in participating responded to the researcher via email. In return, they were emailed a contact form and a typed document explaining the purpose of the study. Participants were screened based on the selection criteria. The participant contact form encapsulated information relevant to the study such as participant's position title and an overview of their position. Participants had the option to participate in the study or not.

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The researcher interviewed three administrators, employed at a rural predominately white institution in Michigan, that represented the support services offered at their institution for African American students. Participants were selected through maximum variation as the researcher contacted every rural predominantly white institution in Michigan. The first participant employed at a public University, located in the upper peninsula in Michigan. The participant's title is Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Director of Student Success and Engagement. The institution has approximately 2,000 students enrolled. The institution's white student population is around 74%. The student of color population is slightly below 30%, with African American students making up approximately 10% of the total student enrollment (Data USA, 2021)).

The second participant is employed at a private Christian liberal arts college, located in rural southwest Michigan, with approximately 968 students. This participant's title is Director of

Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives. The institution's student population is approximately 75% white. The student of color population is 25%, with African American students making up approximately 5% (Data USA, 2020).

The third participant is employed at a private liberal arts college in rural southeast Michigan, with about 1,900 students. This participant's title is Director of Student Life and Athletics Designee for Diversity and Inclusion. The institution's student population is approximately 65% White. African American students make up less than 10% of the total student enrollment (Data USA, 2021).

#### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), *epoche*, which means doubt and was derived from Greek origin, is utilized in phenomenology to remove "the suspension or suppression of judgments and the positioning of the researcher with regard to the experiences of the studied phenomenon" (pp. 102). *Epoche* ensures objectivity by separating the phenomenon from the researcher. To address this, the researchers *epoche* was removed through phenomenological reduction, also known as bracketing. By using bracketing, the researcher temporarily set aside prejudices and assumptions as it related to the study.

Protecting the confidentiality of study participants was a top priority of mine. To assure confidentiality and protect identities, each participant was given a pseudonym. Furthermore, additional information related to the participants and electronic documents such as notes, interview recordings, and transcripts were stored on a password protected hard drive. This information will remain password protected for 5 years following a successful dissertation defense. After the 5-year period, all information will be destroyed by the researcher.

## DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

To conduct the research and collect data, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Ferris State University was required. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews, conducted via Zoom. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), there are five issues that should be addressed at the onset of every interview:

- Investigator's motives and the purpose of the study
- Protecting the respondent's identity
- Determine who has the last word in deciding the content of the study
- Any payments
- The basics of where and when the interview is taking place and the number of respondents

According to Seidman (2005) interview structures should be followed, even if the participant is discussing things that will be covered later. Following such a structure will help to create a foundation where details will be received as needed and the interview will occur with purpose and logic (Seidman, 2005). In this research, interviews were semi-structured. By using semi-structured interviews, the interviews were structured, but there was also flexibility for the researcher to utilize probes. Probes are follow-up questions or comments a researcher can utilize when needing to know more details, clarification, or examples (Meriam and Tisdale, 2016). During the interviews, follow-up questions were asked when information relevant to the research topic was needed.

Seidman (2005) suggests that interviews should have a time frame to help keep each interview unified. In this research, interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes. Participants were asked a series of questions. The researcher asked participants a series of questions. (See **Appendix**) Each participant had one interview session with the researcher and interviews were

spread throughout one week. Seidman (2005) states that spreading interviews will allow time to pass between each interview, which can reduce the chance of idiosyncratic interviews. Each participant received a thank you card and a \$25 Visa gift card to thank them for their time.

The researcher used Zoom to observe participants' body movements and facial expressions. During the interviews, the researcher utilized field notes to document the observations. According to Saldana (2016) field notes are thick in description and rich in content. The field notes documented by the researcher included interpretations, thoughts, and general observations. Zoom recordings were uploaded to Rev.com and were transcribed to include English closed captions. The researcher also recorded each interview using voice memo on their iPhone to ensure that participants' responses were documented. Recordings via voice memo were emailed to the researcher's school email and deleted from the iPhone directly after. In addition, the researcher took notes during the interview via Microsoft Word. Notes included observations. All recordings were properly titled with the date and each participant's pseudonym. Transcribed Zoom interviews to include closed captions, notes, and digital recordings will be deleted 5 years after the researcher's success dissertation defense.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

When starting the data analyzation process, that data first had to be managed. The data was managed through preparation, identification, and manipulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). The researcher prepared the data by transcribing the interviews and formatting interview notes, where the data began to be coded. Data coding is the process of creating and assigning codes to categorize selections of data, which includes labeling and grouping ((Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). The process of data coding allowed the researcher to organize data into segments to identify

themes and patterns. The researcher used a hybrid coding approach where priori and open coding was used (Saldana, 2016).

Priori coding, which are codes developed beforehand, was utilized in this study (Saldana, 2016). Priori coding was developed based on the researcher reviewing literature and based on the theoretical framework of the study, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The researcher documented each of the pre-established codes, including a detailed description, to ensure codes were applied consistently. Open coding was used following priori coding. Open coding allowed the researcher to identify additional themes from the data not identified using priori coding (Saldana, 2016). The process of coding the data allowed the researcher to keep track of their thoughts and ideas. Lastly, the researcher manipulated the data by sorting and rearranging it. When sorting through the data, the researcher used horizontalization, where the researcher gives participant statements the same value, to ensure all data was laid out and treated equally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Repetitive statements were removed as well as statements that were not related to the study and questions. The researcher kept a log of detailed notes during the coding process.

The coding process helped the researcher to begin analyzing the data. To begin the analysis process, the researcher categorized the data codes. Categorizing data consisted of the researcher reviewing all codes and putting them into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). This allowed the researcher to make connections between different groups of codes. Categories used for data analysis were based upon the following:

- Categories should respond to the purpose or answer the research questions.
- There should be a category to fit every type of data.
- Categories should be exclusive, where specific data should fit into only one category.
- The name of categories should be sensitizing, where someone from outside the study can understand its nature.

- All categories should be consistent in their context or abstract. (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009)

Once the data codes were categorized, the researcher synthesized the data to develop and identify themes. The researcher used thematic data analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes, ideas, and topics that emerge in the data to ultimately develop conclusions from the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). In data synthesis, the aim is to combine and evaluate the extracted data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). The themes identified helped the researcher begin to write their analysis of the data and develop conclusions.

## **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

The researcher was able to identify limitations and delimitation to the study. According to (2021), limitations are the study's weaknesses, based on factors not in your control, while delimitations are based on what the researcher intentionally included and did not include in the study. There were two limitations to this study. The first limitation was that only specific institutions responded to participate in the study. Additional perspectives may have emerged if every PWI in rural areas responded. Instead, the study was limited to the perspective of three participants.

The second limitation was the timeline. The study was based on a specific timeline and because of this, the researcher had to state a deadline for responses. This limited potential participation because some people the researcher reached out to may not have had a chance to respond to the invitation. A more extended timeline for the study could have resulted in additional participants and responses.

In addition, there were two delimitations to the study. The first delimitation was that the researcher only allowed administrators involved in African American support efforts to be participants in the study. Being able to get responses from students would have provided insight

into their perspectives and conclusions about the support services offered. Being able to get responses from other staff and faculty would have given additional insight to what individuals are doing to support African American students.

The second delimitation was that the researcher limited the geographical location of the study to Michigan. Instead, the researcher could have allowed rural institutions in other states to participate. Geographically expanding the study could have provided additional information and data on support services offered to African American college students across the country. Additionally, being able to expand the study would allow for a larger comparison of support services offered at PWIs in rural institutions in the country.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework is described as the “foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p.12). The theoretical framework serves as a structure for the literature review, methods, and analysis. Lastly, it serves as support for the study’s reasoning.

An important aspect to supporting students is to ensure that students feel like they are a part of the institution and campus. Ensuring this requires students to feel connected academically and socially (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). This is reflective of Tinto’s Integration Framework: Tinto concludes that “students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution” (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008, pg. 2). Under this framework, academic integration happens when students become connected to the intellectual life of an institution and social integration happens when students connect with others through relationships outside of the classroom (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008).

Academic and social integration enhance and interact with one another. However, they do not need to be integrated equally for a student to persist. In fact, Tinto notes that there are formal and informal ways to encourage integration (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). According to the framework, students who become integrated both academically and socially are more likely to be retained and complete their degree (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). Activities that contribute to this include developing connections with individuals, student organization participation, and academic activities. Students who are isolated and do not feel connected socially and academically are less likely to persist (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008).

Tinto's Integration framework shows the importance of integrating students into their institution. Integrating students socially and academically can be guided through student support services. Tinto's framework has been applied to help with the implementation of student support services geared towards integration at various institutions (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). This framework displays the importance of supporting students throughout their college journey so that they can feel a part of the campus. Integrating students into campus is integral to their success. This is especially true for African American students who often face issues of isolation and otherness. Facing issues of isolation can affect African American students' academic abilities (Ballen et al., 2017). This in turn can cause them to not complete college.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Chapter Three provided a summary of the methodology used to conduct this study along with the research design and data collection process. In addition, chapter three discussed the research participants and the type of institutions they represent. The study included insight from 3 participants employed at a PWI in rural Michigan. The institutions and participants were selected through maximum variation sampling. The primary data collection was 45 to 60-minute



semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews were recorded and downloaded from Zoom. Interviews were transcribed by Zoom through the transcription feature. Electronic documents and recordings related to the study were protected securely and confidentially.

The data analyzation process was also described in Chapter Three. To begin the process, data was coded using priori and open, then categorized and synthesized. From here, the data was analyzed through thematic analysis. Furthermore, Chapter Three discussed the limitations and delimitations of the study and the theoretical framework, which allows the dissertation to be structured and have an organized flow from chapter to chapter. Chapter Four will provide an analysis of the study results and findings in detail.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to identify and understand the initiatives rural PWIs in Michigan have in place to support their African American students. Specifically, the study guided by the following research question: “How are rural institutions contributing to the success of their African American student population?”. This chapter introduces the participants involved in the study. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to conceal their identity. The data collected offers a look into the support mechanisms PWIs in rural areas have in place to support the overall success of their African American student population.

### PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This study included three participants who identified as administrators that are employed at PWIs located in rural Michigan. Participants represent institutions in both the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan. A more detailed description of each participant will be provided in the following section, including participant’s demographic, position title, and day-to-day work responsibilities.

#### ARETHA

Aretha identifies as African American and Native American woman. Aretha is employed at an institution located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Aretha holds two titles: Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Director of Student Success and Engagement. In addition, Aretha is

the advisor for the National Society for Leadership and Success, NSLS, at her institution. Aretha has been in her current position and with her institution for five months.

As Director of Student Success and Engagement, Aretha's day-to-day work responsibilities include working on their success program, ASP, where students that may be struggling can receive academic and life support. Students must be invited to the program to receive support. ASP employs peer mentors who work directly with the students. Aretha is responsible for training and supervising these peer mentors. In addition, Aretha is responsible for ASP's student engagement center, which she describes as a "student lounge but more of a focus on where you come to study, have group study sessions, and gain resources". The center gives students free planners, sticky notes, markers, etc. The center also has a divergent space for those who may need stimulation, which she ensures is maintained.

As Associate Dean, Aretha serves on several committees including the Scholastic Standards Committee. This committee supports students that may have failed a class due to extenuating circumstances by granting a late withdrawal or grade change. In addition, she works with her institution's Title 3 Grant through a retention implementation team to ensure students are meeting academic standards. When students are placed on probation or receive an academic dismissal, Aretha meets with them to see if there is a way of retaining them. Aretha serves as the chair of her institution's Behavior Concerns Team. Her role is to streamline communication to keep faculty and staff informed of students that may be of concern, while also directing struggling students to the various campus resources. Lastly, Aretha serves on the events committee and works to develop a unified calendar which includes all campus events.

In her roles, Aretha may not see African American students that are academically strong due to her roles having a focus on students that struggle academically. For a student to be invited

to their success program, they must be considered academically and financially disadvantaged. This requires that the student's GPA is below 2.5, they are eligible for a Pell Grant, and they are a resident of Michigan. Aretha stated that her contact with the African American students at her institution is not as much as she would like.

JAMES

James identifies as an African American man. James is employed at an institution located in rural southwest Michigan. James holds the title of Director of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives. In addition, James is the advisor for HA Student Success Academy (HASSA) at his institution. HASSA is named after the first African American student who graduated from his institution. James has been at this institution for three years and he has served in his current role for approximately one year.

As the Director of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives, James describes his office as being continuously full of students of color, primarily African American students. Continuing, James stated that his office is a safe space, open to anyone. He iterated that the African American student population knows that they are welcome because they hear it, feel it, and see it. James stated that African American students come to talk with him to express concerns, come laugh, or just say "what's up", which takes up a lot of his day. In his office, James has pictures of his life including some with his fraternity members and celebrities that are representative of African American students. James describes his office as looking like a museum and being purposeful because it "lets students know that this is a space for them".

Furthermore, James's responsibilities include administrative work such as talking with colleagues and faculty and trying to take care of the needs of students as they arise. James shared that he created a food pantry in his office that he oversees. As the Advisor for HAASA, James is

responsible for organizing their trips and events and securing funding. In addition, James makes sure to provide information and resources to students such as tutoring and accommodations to ensure their academic success.

James was unable to quantify the effect his day-to-day responsibilities have on African American students but was able to describe how students feel because of his work by stating “students feel as if there is a listening ear, someone who sees them, hears them, understands them”. James describes this as being helpful in their day-to-day transition as it strengthens their ability to feel connected to someone at the institution.

ELLA

Ella identifies as a biracial woman with an African American father and a mother who is Caucasian. Ella is employed at an institution located in southeast Michigan, not too far from the Michigan-Ohio border. Ella holds two titles: Director of Student Life and Athletics Designee for Diversity and Inclusion. Ella has been with her institution for approximately one year and in her current position for eight months.

As the Director of Student Life, Ella’s day-to-day work responsibilities are centered on student engagement and events. Specifically, Ella is responsible for planning events on her campus, including partnering with student organizations and planning their events. In addition, Ella described a large portion of her work as comparing and analyzing current and past data to see what events are successful on their campus and what events are not as successful.

Ella described her institution as recently having a focus on bringing groups and organizations to campus that promote and benefit the success of African American students on their campus. Ella stated that the most recent group that visited their campus was the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), where her institution is working to bring a chapter onto

her campus permanently. SAAB, a national student organization, seeks to mentor and support African American male college students. Ella stated that everything SAAB stands for is something that is needed on her institution’s campus to benefit African American male students.

## RESULTS

### THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Data analysis revealed three primary themes and six subthemes. The three primary themes include 1) campus support; 2) student challenges; and 3) campus needs. Each of the primary themes included two sub themes (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Themes and Sub-Themes**

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Campus Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support offices</li> <li>• Student organizations</li> </ul>
Student Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and social</li> <li>• Financial</li> </ul>
Campus Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation</li> <li>• Safe spaces</li> </ul>

### CAMPUS SUPPORT

Each participant cited a plethora of support services their institutions have in place to support their African American students. During their responses to interview questions, participants cited support offices and student organizations as the main avenue of campus support. Support offices and student organizations are two sub-themes that emerged from the theme of campus support.

#### *Support Offices*

There are offices that help encourage student success by giving them tools and guidance they need to be successful. Ella described academic services as the main support office on her

campus. Ella did not discuss any additional support offices on her institution's campus. Aretha cited ASP as a main support office on her campus for African American students as anyone student can come right in and receive help. Although ASP is only geared towards students that are academically and financially disadvantaged, Aretha stated "if you come in and you want help, you are going to get help until you are like whoa, whoa, I'm good. Like that's enough. That's enough help."

Aretha also discussed her campus' tutoring center and Supplemental Instruction (SI). Aretha stated that SI is where students that received an A in a class and are a junior or senior, are given lectures notes by a professor to redo a lecture for students that may be struggling. Aretha described SI sessions as being 90 minutes long verse the traditional 45-minute class time where students seeking help can ask following the lecture.

James takes pride in his office as being a huge support for African American students as it is "a black office" that is representative of African Americans. James describes his office as being representative because he has pictures from his life that include places he has traveled to and celebrities he has met. He stated that students have come into his office to "see who is on the wall and so that's been a way that students have come to introduce themselves to the office because of what's up in here". Along with the Dean of Students, faculty, and staff, James described himself as being available and a resource to African American students on his campus. He stated that students know about these individuals as resources as "we profess it". In addition, James stated that his office's pantry, which includes black products such as the Honey Pot and a career closet is available to African American students.

James discussed several other campus offices that is supportive of African American students. One office that offers help for African American students is Financial Aid by helping

them with the financial aid process. In addition, James stated that his institution's Student Success and First Year Experience Coordinator is a resource for African American students, as she goes after them to let them know she is there for them. Lastly, he described his institution's Health and Counseling Services as being a resource for African American students where the counselor is culturally sensitive. James stated that the counselor has a barber chair in the office and has purchased "condoms for black folks made by black folks" out of her budget.

### *Student Organizations*

Student organizations help students on campus become further connected to their institutions and to meet new people. Black Student Union (BSU) is a student organization that both Aretha and James have on their campuses. Aretha described BSU as being inactive this current academic year as well as the past academic school year. James stated that BSU on his campus was more active in past years in comparison to this year. James stated that BSU is trying to "find themselves" and "due to lack of leadership they are not able to be as proactive as they could be". James described the mission of BSU as putting on programs that would meet the need of African American students on their campus.

In addition to BSU, Aretha cited the following active student organizations as being inclusive to African American students: Cannabis Study Club, Chess Club, His House, Kinesiology, SAGE, Psych-I, Robot X, Brazilian Ju Jitsu, and UAB (University Activities Board). Aretha stated that there is at least one African American student in each of these organizations.

In addition to BSU, James cited HASSA and his institution's societies as being the main student organizations on his campus that are inclusive to African American students. James



stated that there are five total Societies, three male and two female, that are all predominately black and serve as a social and sometimes academic resource to African American students.

James described HASSA as the most active group on campus, that

provides experiences that the students would probably normally not get through travel. So, whether it's a trip to Chicago, or to a Pistons game, or to New York, or to Battle of the Bands; we went to Battle of the Bands in South Carolina.

Currently, HASSA is organizing a trip to Ghana so that students can get that experience with passports. James is trying to find ways to pay for the trip so that it can be all expenses paid. James stated that HASSA has positive donor relations and has raised more than 100k in the past year, so the trip is very possible.

Furthermore, James stated that once a month, HASSA has Soul Food Thursdays, through the cafeteria or catering. James stated Soul Food Thursdays are typically attached to a program such as a talent show or a dance, where attendance reaches 80-100 people. James cited HASSA as having a Book Club where books are purchased for whoever would like to participate and discuss the book being read. James stated that HASSA is attempting to create a book scholarship to provide money for those who cannot afford books. The book scholarship will not affect a recipient's financial aid.

James stated that HASSA is a

group that is a household name now and it's an opportunity for students to galvanize.... outside of Tuesday nights, there is not much targeted activity for students. We're in a rural area, so not many places to go, particularly if you do not have a car.

Because of this, HASSA takes students on monthly "cultural runs" where they go to a beauty supply store for African American based hair products. HASSA also does birthday acknowledgements where they give people cards to celebrate their special day. Lastly, to keep

communication flowing, HASSA sends out weekly emails that include but is not limited to shouting out students' success, academic information, as well as social and cultural information.

Ella stated the best campus resources at her institution are the student organizations. Ella mentioned a total of two student organizations, Sisters that Empower, Prevail, and Succeed (STEPS) and the Majority Minority that is inclusive to African American Students. Ella described STEPS as just starting back up and being

geared towards minority women and bringing them together so they have that space where they can talk about their issues, what they are frustrated about, learning about different things on campus, and kind of bringing what they talk about and what they discuss back to the rest of campus.

In addition, Ella described the Majority Minority as being a “group of African American students with a mission to bring change and increase retention in African American students on their campus”. The Majority Minority is a new student organization on their campus that started this academic year. As mentioned earlier, Ella is working to bring SAAB, as a student organization on her campus.

#### STUDENT CHALLENGES

During their responses to the interview questions, participants were able to discuss what they believed were the main challenges that African American students faced on their campus.

Cultural and Social and Financial are the two sub-themes that emerged from the theme of student challenges.

#### *Cultural and Social*

Each of the participants alluded to African American students at their institutions having a hard time adapting to the culture and social environment of a rural area. Aretha described African American students at her institution as being “culture shocked” when they arrive on

campus. This is due to a lack of representation of people that look like them. Furthermore, Aretha stated there are two types of culture, where some non-people of color state “oh my gosh we don’t have Black people, we’re so glad you’re here! Tell us about yourself.” Aretha describes this culture as being “preciously ignorant.” For the other type of culture, she stated that non-people of color are “not necessarily like you don’t belong here, but they’re definitely like...” Aretha did not finish her statement for the second type of culture. Instead, she shook her head in disappointment and described it as being “racist.”

Along with Aretha, James cited cultural and social and area adjustments as being a challenge African American students face. Ella stated that African American students on her campus feel as if they do not have a voice or a say on what happens on campus. Ella continued to say these African American students struggle with staying at the institution because they feel like they do not fit in and there are not many resources that are directed at them.

### *Financial*

When asked what the largest challenge is that African American students face at his institution, James responded with the following

The cost of it in terms of their ability to stay. What’s sad is if football doesn’t work for them, they are not likely to stay. If finances are just not working, then they are not likely to stay. They come here because of the ability to get in. You got a 2.0, you can get in.

Sor for some, this is their last resort. That’s why we have such a high contingence of African American males from the MI area because this is the only school that will let them in. But it’s also private and \$40,000 a year. And football is why they come.

James continued to say that majority of the African American students at his institution are athletes, and if athletics do not work out, they cannot stay due to the costs of the institution.

Although Ella did not specifically list finances as a challenge African American students face, this can be concluded since she described majority of the African American first-generation students, whose enrollment is based on athletics.

#### CAMPUS NEEDS

During their responses to the interview questions, participants were able to discuss what additional resources are needed on their campus to support the success of their African American students. Each participant was able to cite several resources they believe would be useful on their campus to continue the support of their African American student population. Representation and safe spaces are the two sub-themes that emerged from the theme of campus needs.

#### *Representation*

Each participant described the lack of African American representation on their campus as it relates to students, staff, and faculty. Aretha described the African American student population on her campus as being less than 5%. In addition, Aretha stated that she was the only African American staff on the executive level. Aretha stated that “representation here is nothing. That means I drive 5 hours to Detroit to get my braids redone”. James described the African American student population on his campus as being primarily athletes from Michigan and low-income backgrounds. James stated there was approximately 100 African American male students and less than 30 African American female students. As far as professional staff goes, James calculated the total number of African American staff and faculty as ranging from 40-45. Like James, Ella stated that most of the African American student population is male athletes from first-generation backgrounds. Each of the participants discussed resources that need to be brought onto their campus to increase African American representation and the overall success of African American students.

James stated that his institution needs more African American staff and faculty, which includes African American and other BiPOC male and female counselors. The increase in African American staff and faculty can increase chances of staff to student mentorship for African American students. Adding more, James believes that there needs to be cultural classes and classes geared towards African American students and affordable study abroad opportunities to enhance the overall experience of African American students. Adding on to enhancing the overall experience and representation on campus, James stated “I would have it institutionalized where there are cultural foods at least once a month. Not necessarily just soul food, but cultural foods once a month”. Lastly, James stated that he would like to see a vending machine that “kicks out black products” to send a message that “we are sensitive to your needs”.

Both James and Ella believe that their institution needs African American fraternities and sororities to increase representation on their campuses. James stated, “if I could wave a magic wand, I would have a national fraternity and sorority on campus as well.” In addition, Ella believes that two, almost three student organizations for African American students are not enough. Ella stated

there's many different viewpoints and things that need to be focused on that we could start these students or students can start for themselves and they don't even realize how easy it is to start one of these organizations. So, I think just adding more options and resources for African American students is definitely something that's needed on our campus.

Aretha would like to see BSU active again so that there is a student organization tailored for African American students on her campus. In addition, Aretha brought up the idea of having a black student ministry (BSM) on their campus and shared why it is important for African American students by stating the following

if there was some way to have a BSM, a black student ministry. I think that would really, because I mean if we're trying to feed them on all sides, if we're trying to make sure that

their needs are met on every level. I'm not trying to diss anyone else, because I know it's a lot of white folks who are Catholic and are very embedded in their church, but church is black folks' business. Like we do church, we go to church! And to not have it. You come to school, and you can't drive down the road and, like go to church, you can't do it.

In addition, Aretha believes that having a BSM at her institution would keep African American students there and it would take them back to the feeling of having family on campus. Lastly, Aretha believes that there should be some sort of diversity acknowledgement where all diversities represented at her institution are publicly acknowledged.

### *Safe Spaces*

Aretha described her institution as having spaces for Native American students and Veterans and Military students. Aretha stated that she would love to see another space for African American students.

Ella stated that her institution needs academic counseling for their African American 1<sup>st</sup> generation students as

this counseling could really help them gear their focus towards graduation. A lot of our students come in thinking that sports and athletics are their main priority, and as a D. 3 institution, we need to think about academics and graduation first.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION RESPONSES**

The objective of this study was to identify and understand the initiatives rural PWIs in Michigan have in place to support their African American students. The research was guided by one research question: How are rural institutions contributing to the success of their African American student population? Through the data collected from individual interviews, the research question was able to be addressed. Participants made significant statements, which were coded and organized into themes and sub themes, which captured the initiatives rural PWIs are

doing to support their African American students, the challenges African American students face, and the support resources that are needed.

Campus support offices were instrumental for Aretha and James. In her interview, Aretha stated a student told her the following as it relates to the ASP she oversees

I don't think anyone cared about me. I was ready to drop out, but the fact that you hounded me like crazy. You got me a peer mentor, who would not leave me alone, you walked me to counseling" "I thought that I was just a number, I thought I was gonna just get lost in the shuffle. I thought that you would just bug me for a minute and just give up like everybody else in my life has given up on me.

Furthermore, Aretha stated that the student returned the following semester and is continuing to find success with the institution.

James stressed the importance of his office as being a safe space that is continuously full of students, primarily African American students. James elaborated that students are coming to his office to "chat, coming to express their concerns, coming to say what's up, coming to get some encouragement, coming to get a laugh."

Student organizations proved to be beneficial to the success of African American students on Ella, Aretha, and James' campuses. Ella stated that the student organization dynamics are often used as mentorship opportunities where "motivated students are willing to mentor these younger students that are coming in helping them with academics. Tell them what works for them, tell them what didn't work for them". Ella continued

a lot of our organizations that I was just talking about are through leaders that excel in school. They excel socially here and want to take those younger students under their wing and basically make sure that they succeed. We really try our best to back these organizations.

In addition, James stated that HASSA has made a lasting impact on the African American students on his campus as they have expressed feelings of belonging as a result of being

connected to HASSA. James shared the following quotes from two African American students and their feelings about HASSA

- HASSA has meant so much to me. It's a safe space for students to be their authentic self. They try to make everyone feel special and it allows me to feel included and focus on my leadership skills.
- I was able to travel out of state for the first time with HASSA. We went to Chicago, and I saw buildings so tall. HASSA welcomed me and has become my second family. I love HASSA.

Recognizing the challenges that African American students face can increase the capacity of support they need to be successful. I asked the participants what they believed were the challenges African American students faced on their campus. Ella, Aretha, and James cited African American students as having cultural and social challenges.

Aretha stated for African American students to be successful on their campus, they must be confident in all aspects, including overcoming social challenges. Aretha gave an example of a student being sick and needing to go to the health center for a note to be excused from class where she stated students may say "they're going to judge me". Aretha described African American students being confident on campus stating "that is success. That's going to help you graduate".

When asked about the challenges African American students face on her campus, Ella stated

I think, what I've heard is that they feel that they don't have a voice on campus, that they don't really have a say on what happens on campus. They have a lot of ideas and a lot of great ideas, but they feel that they can't really be heard.

James recognized finances as one main challenge African American students on his campus faced. He discussed his institution having a scholarship advantage where any Pell Grant eligible students can attend his institution for free. Although tuition is paid for, James clarified



that students still must pay for room and board and other expenses. He continued “I am still trying to figure out how these other scholarships are impacted”. As a result, James stated he is working to create a book scholarship to support African Americans students that cannot afford books.

Having participants identify the resources their campuses need to continue supporting African American students was addressed in the interviews. All participants expressed the dire need for increased representation on campus. Aretha stated, “I would love it if we had a diversity space or office” and have “surveys to know exactly what African American students want.”

James stated “more Black males, more Black staff, more Black faculty” is needed on his campus to increase success in African American students. Ella stated

I have heard a lot of our students talk about how they want an African American fraternity, or an African American sorority on campus. We don't have that, and it's been a want. And now I think it's going towards a need. Our Greek Life is predominantly white. So, I want our African American students to feel that they can be included in this.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter gave a description of the three participants, from varying rural PWIs in Michigan whose day-to-day work responsibilities involve supporting the African American students on their campuses. Data was collected via interviews and separated into codes. From this, three themes emerged. The three themes that emerged are campus support, student challenges, and campus needs. For each of the three themes, two sub-themes emerged, making a total of six sub-themes. The research question, “How are rural institutions contributing to the success of their African American student population?” is answered through the three themes that emerged because of the study.

Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study’s findings and connection to the theoretical framework, along with ways to implement the results. The chapter will also address

the limitations and delimitations and what should be done next. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with a reflection of the study's importance to the researcher.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the support measures rural institutions have in place to contribute to the success of their African American students. The research question centered on understanding how rural institutions are contributing to the success of their African American students through the lens of administrators. Overall, three themes and six sub themes emerged from the discussion with study participants. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the study results and connect them with relevant literature and theories. I will also connect the themes with the theoretical framework.

Additionally, I will discuss ways rural PWIs can enhance their support of their African American student population. Ensuring that these students feel supported is integral to their overall success. I also will discuss ways to implement and expand this study by reviewing its limitations and delimitations. Lastly, I will conclude the chapter with a reflection on why this study is important to me.

### DISCUSSION

#### THEMES

The three primary themes that emerged in this study include: 1) campus support; 2) student challenges; and 3) campus needs. With each theme, two sub themes emerged, making the study have a total of six sub themes.

### *Campus Support*

The first sub theme that emerged from campus support was support offices. The findings indicate that campus support offices are instrumental to African American students on rural PWI campuses. James stressed the importance of his office as being a safe space that is continuously full of students, primarily African American students that come chat and "express their concerns, coming to say what's up, coming to get some encouragement, coming to get a laugh". Aretha stated that the intervention of the academic program she oversees helped an African American student persist. The student was supported by Aretha, in which she walked him to the Counseling Center and the Disability Services Office to get him the support he needed. The effect of campus support was highlighted by Wilson (2018), who found that African American students are more likely to be engaged and complete their degree when receiving institutional support.

The second sub theme that emerged from campus support was student organizations. The study found that student organizations are important to African American students feeling like they have support and a safe place on rural PWI campuses. Ella described the dynamics of African American student organizations as mentorship opportunities where "motivated students are willing to mentor these younger students that are coming in helping them with academics. Tell them what works for them, tell them what didn't work for them". Simmons (2013) found that African American male involvement in student organization supports their perseverance throughout their collegiate journey.

Overall, the importance of campus support for African American students at rural PWIs was indicated from the findings. Campus support can range from support offices to student organizations. While campus support is integral, to implement campus support services, institutions must also understand the challenges African American students face on their campus.

Understanding these challenges can help institutions implement better resources, policies, and recruitment techniques to further support their African American student population.

### *Student Challenges*

The first sub theme that emerged from student challenges was cultural and social. Every participant stated that their African American students found it difficult to adapt to their culture and social environments. Specifically, Aretha described African American students at her institution as being “culture shocked” when they arrive on campus because of the lack in African American representation. The second sub theme that emerged from student challenges was financial. James stated since many of the African American students at his institution are athletes, they are limited because if athletics do not work out, they lose the money to pay for their schooling. Since his institution is private, the tuition and room and board costs are expensive. Like James, Ella stated that most of their African American student population are athletes and from first-generational backgrounds. These student athletes financially depend on their athletic scholarships, which makes them vulnerable to financial hardship if athletics does not work out for them.

Identifying student challenges at rural PWIs gave me a better understanding of the additional support and resources African American students need to be successful. The cultural, social, and financial challenges African American students face at rural PWIs are no surprise from my perspective. The financial challenges are not any different from the challenges African American students face at any institution. For example, Means et al. (2016) stated that African American students are often underprepared financially for college. The cultural and social challenges are not different from the challenges African American students face on PWI campuses, regardless of location. In McCoy (2014), African American students, enrolled at

extreme PWIs, described experiencing culture shock due to the population of White individuals compared to those of color. This shows that the cultural and social challenges for African Americans students are consistent on campuses where they are grossly underrepresented.

### *Campus Needs*

The first sub theme that emerged from campus needs was representation. Findings indicated that representation was important for rural PWIs to implement as additional support for their African American students. James stated “more Black males, more Black staff, more Black faculty” are needed on his campus to increase success in African American students. This is supported by Baker (2013), where African American students believe that African American faculty are more considered as role models and “professors who are similar in race to the students they teach positively impact those students’ academic performance” (p. 306). Furthermore, according to Southern Regional Education Board (2021), having faculty of color provides students with positive educational experiences and positive outcomes in their collegiate journey.

James and Ella both stressed that their campuses need representation in their Greek Life, citing the desire for African American fraternities and sororities. James stated, “if I could wave a magic wand, I would have a national fraternity and sorority on campus as well”. Bartman (2105) argued the need for Black sorority engagement, cross-cultural mentoring, and population specific counseling techniques to overcome the issues faced by African American women in higher education (p. 5). In addition to representation in Greek Life, Ella stated that there should be additional student organizations for African American on her campus.

The second sub theme that emerged from campus needs was safe spaces. Aretha stressed the importance of having a space specifically for African American students. Another type of

safe space Ella stated her campus need is academic counseling for their African American 1<sup>st</sup> generation students. She stated

this counseling could really help them gear their focus towards graduation. A lot of our students come in thinking that sports and athletics are their main priority, and as a D. 3 institution, we need to think about academics and graduation first.

#### CONNECTION TO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that shaped this study was derived from Vincent Tinto's Integration Framework. Tinto's Integration framework shows the importance of integrating students into their institution. Tinto (1993) concluded that "students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution" (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008, p. 2). Under this framework, academic integration happens when students become connected to the intellectual life of an institution and social integration happens when students connect with others through relationships outside of the classroom (Karp, Hughes, & Gara, 2008). Integrating students socially and academically can be guided through student support services. Activities that contribute to this include developing connections with individuals, student organization participation, and academic activities. Tinto (1993) cited supportive relationships as being essential for the persistence of African American students.

Findings indicated that relationships are an important aspect of making African American students feel supported at PWIs in rural areas. James took pride in the positive relationships he has built with African American students on his campus. He stated that most of his day-to-day work responsibilities include talking with these students and building relationships. As a result, these students often hang out in his office and feel like they belong. Aretha described that her

hands-on approach to building relationships has made students feel supported. She stated that she has personally walked students to counseling and other support offices.

### *Social Integration*

Tinto (1993) stated “for black students, as much as for white students, social involvement also influences persistence” (p. 74). Findings indicated that support offices and student organizations are the main avenue of campus support and ensuring that African American students feel welcome and supported on their campus. Participants shared reflections on the influence their support services have on the overall success and persistence of their African American students. During his interview, James quoted a student who described how their involvement with a student organization made them feel:

HASSA has meant so much to me. It’s a safe space for students to be their authentic self. They try to make everyone feel special and it allows me to feel included and focus on my leadership skills.

Findings also indicated the importance of African American students feeling socially connected to campus, so they feel like they belong. Ella stated that many African American students at her institution feel as if they do not have a voice or a say on what happens on campus. Ella continued to say these African American students struggle with staying at with the institution because they feel like they do not fit in and there are not many resources that are directed at them.

### *Academic Integration*

Findings indicated that when African American students feel academically supported to their institution, they are likely to persist. In her interview, Aretha stated a student told her the following as it relates to the academic support program she oversees:



I don't think anyone cared about me. I was ready to drop out, but the fact that you hounded me like crazy. You got me a peer mentor, who would not leave me alone, you walked me to counseling. I thought that I was just a number, I thought I was gonna just get lost in the shuffle. I thought that you would just bug me for a minute and just give up like everybody else in my life has given up on me.

According to Aretha, this individual returned the following semester and is still going strong. James discussed several other campus offices that are supportive of African American students, such as his institution's Student Success and First Year Experience Coordinator.

Overall, Tinto's framework emphasizes the importance of supporting students throughout their college journey so that they have a sense of belonging on campus and can be successful. This is especially important for African American students on rural campuses as they often face issues of isolation. The need to be integrated both socially and academically to feel connected to the institution. When African American students feel isolated, their academic abilities can be affected, which cause them to not persist (Ballen et al, 2017).

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study helped me to identify some challenges African American students face at rural PWIs. Student challenges were social, cultural, and financial. The study also identified the resources that rural PWIs need to develop to strengthen their support for African American students. These challenges helped me create five implications for practice in this research. Rural PWIs can utilize these findings and implications to improve the success of their African American student population.

The first implication relates to representation. African American students need people who look like them to feel like they are not isolated. They need staff and faculty that look like them. According to Southern Regional Education Board (2021) having diversity in staff and faculty helps cultivate a culture of comfortability for all students of color. With this, rural PWIs

must also ensure representation for African American students in every support measure. This includes but is not limited to student and staff/faculty recruitment, food and product choices, courses being taught, student organizations and clubs, and Greek Life.

The second implication is safe spaces. Every institution, especially PWIs in rural communities, need to have a safe place for African American students. McCoy (2014) highlighted the importance of a “counterspace”, a safe space for students of color that is positive and supportive, to help African American students feel safe and supported. Having a safe space for African American students will allow them to feel like they have a sense of belonging and connection to the campus. This can help address issues of isolation and culture and social shock. Furthermore, this can increase student’s confidence and social interactions on campus.

The third implication is mentorship programs that give African American students the opportunity to receive support from others during their collegiate career. In their study, Tolliver and Miller (2018) identified mentorship as individuals who supported African American students, that felt underrepresented on campus, through promoting their development and self-actualization throughout their collegiate journey and transition into the world. Implementing mentorship opportunities for African American students at rural PWIs can be a critical part of their journey. Tolliver and Miller (2018) highlighted mentorship as a supportive measure to African American students completing their degree.

When building a mentorship program for African American students at rural PWIs, the structure can vary. There can be peer to peer, staff to student, or community member to student mentorship opportunities. In addition, mentors do not have to be solely African American staff and faculty, in fact, mentors should be diverse. Bartman (2015) defined cross cultural mentorship

as an innovative strategy to support African American students while they navigate through their higher education journey.

The fourth implication is fostering school-university-community collaborations (SUCCs) through the creation of bridge programs that target the African American student population (Crumbs and Chambers, 2022). Crumb and Chambers (2022) highlighted the importance of college integration starting early at the primary school education level to increase completion and success in African American students and professionals utilizing SUCCs. These programs should target primary and secondary schools with student populations that are predominately African American.

Through intentional bridge programs at rural PWIs, African American students will be exposed to college at a young age, increasing their overall knowledge of college. Cultivating and implementing such programs will give institutions the “opportunity to proactively address equity and inclusion” for current and future African American students (Crumbs and Chambers, 2022, pp. 107). Such programmatic structures can include college tours and school visits, collegiate to high school mentorship opportunities, and dual enrollment opportunities at high schools. Within this structure, there should also be a residential program where African American high school students experience living on campus for a few weeks, while taking classes specific to their academic development.

Crumb and Chambers (2022) stated “for many African American families, sending their children to college is an experience full of unknowns, but through demystification of the process and proactive and regular communication, trust is built over time” (pp. 107). In support of this, rural PWIs should include educational workshops and opportunities for parents and families, educating them on resources and collegiate structures, including financial, academic, and social.

This will give parents and families opportunities to not only be educated, but also connected to one another, forming a community of support that ultimately contributes to the success of their students. Regular communication and opportunities for inquiry should be built into the program structures for students, parents, and families.

The fifth and final implication is for rural PWIs to foster a stronger climate for African American employee success. This can be done through intentional recruitment, placing a focus on DEI and equitable practices, and retention efforts. First, institutions should ensure that roles, especially ones where candidates of color are being recruited, are attractive in pay and benefits. Essentially, prospected employees should be able to live comfortably off their salary and the salary should be reflective of the work they are being asked to perform. This helps to ensure longevity in the position.

When creating the job posting, inclusive language should be used that appeals to a broad range of people and reflects types of candidates the institution seeks. Bunn-Jones (2022) stated that diverse talent is sometimes located through unconventional means such as word of mouth and non-traditional sources (Y. Bunn Jones, personal communication, March 19, 2022). To complement this, positions should be posted on social media networks, and professional networks such as LinkedIn and Handshake in addition to traditional job boards. Rural PWIs should also consider implementing Employee Referral Programs with incentives for successful referrals.

Next, throughout the selection phase, institutions should use equitable and non-discriminatory hiring processes. According to Dessler (2022) employers must be equitable in their hiring and everyday practices. Furthermore, institutions should be intentional when hiring, steering away from “trophy professionals” that simply fit an institution’s agenda to hire someone

to fit a diversity quota. Once hired, African American employees should be properly integrated into the institution and made to feel valued from the start. Additionally, they should be immediately connected to resources and other employees of color. Resources for African American employees should be intentionally and specifically developed for them to further support their journey at the institution.

The importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should be enforced from the top down through equitable practices. Specifically, executives such as the President, Chancellor, VPs, etc., are responsible for demonstrating these best practices in their day-to-day work and ensuring that their institution is welcoming to all. In addition, rural PWIs should implement specific HR policies that both protects African American employees from inequities and mistreatment and hold employees accountable who cause harm. Additional policies that support this idea include structures for impartial employee evaluations. Furthermore, diversity training should be ongoing for all employees, including trainings on sensitivity, biases, and microaggressions, with a focus on African American students and employees. This can combat ignorance that may linger within employees as it relates to equity, social justice, and treatment of African Americans.

Retaining African American employees can be done through empowerment, motivation, and succession planning. Bassett (2015) states that employers should empower employees through implementing a culture of trust. Rural PWIs can build this culture of trust with their African American employees through open communication, transparency, and training. Supervisors should specifically be trained on how to supervise employees of color, ensuring that African American employees feel supported and empowered by their supervisors.

To keep African American employees motivated, institutions can create systems of recognition. They can also recognize cultural holidays and celebrations such as Martin Luther

King Jr. Day and Juneteenth – giving employees the day off, Black History Month, and more. Lastly, efforts of retention can be supported through succession planning, giving African American employees the opportunity to move up within the institution and develop professionally. This can contribute to their overall motivation, as well, and their loyalty to the institution.

Placing a focus on fostering a welcoming climate for African American employees can increase their desire to want to stay, which ultimately increases representation at rural PWIs. Increasing representation can positively affect African American students and other students and employees of color.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

Before acting on the findings of this study, it is important to understand some of the limitations that came with it. The first limitation was the sample size. I had a goal of three to seven participants for the study, with my hope being the latter. Getting the administrators to participate was difficult due to me not having a connection with many of the institutions. In addition, I had 2 participants that never got back with me about setting a date and time for their interview. As a result, my sample size was much smaller than I anticipated.

I placed three limitations on myself, also known as delimitations. The first one was that I limited my study to only include participants that represented rural institutions in Michigan. Allowing for participants outside of Michigan could have diversified my study's findings. The other delimitation was that I only interviewed administrators. Doing this, I excluded the experiences of African American students, whose experiences are central to the study. The final

delimitation I faced was the timeline I placed on myself. I believe that if I was more flexible with my timeline, I could have had additional participants.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations for further research are based upon the limitations and delimitations connected to the study, as well as the overall outcome of the study. The first recommendation I have is to expand the study beyond Michigan. I would suggest considering including participants from rural institutions in the Midwest region. This could broaden the sample size for participants to receive more responses and diverse perspectives.

My second recommendation would be to include African American students at rural PWIs as participants instead of administrators. Utilizing students as study participants will allow researchers to get the student's perspective and hear about their experiences on campus. In addition, students can tell the researcher what additional support they believe is beneficial to their overall success at their institution. Furthermore, I would suggest utilizing narrative inquiry for the research design. Narrative inquiry will allow the students to reflect on their life experiences and tell their story from first-person accounts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Understanding these student experiences can bring further development of support services and resources these students may need.

My third recommendation is to explore Nigrescence models, also known as Black Racial Identity Models, as an additional or alternative theoretical framework. Parham and Austin (1994) described Nigrescence as the process of developing and emerging one's identity as an African American, suggesting that experiences with oppression and racism play a vital role in navigating stages of racial identity. Cross (1989) stated that Nigrescence involves the process deracination, which involves White people in positions of authority exerting their influence over African

Americans and displacing them from their “blackness” by encouraging feelings of insecurity and shame and forcing them deny their heritage and adopt a “Whiter” outlook. This was sometimes done through the threat of physical violence and harm (Parham and Austin, 1994).

Some scholars defined this concept of stripping away one’s “Blackness” as Negromachy and defined it as being confused about one’s self-value and depending on White society to self-identify (Parham and Austin, 1994). These scholars identified Nigrescence as having the following stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization, in which African Americans go through negative feelings towards their heritage before transitioning to a place of pride in their heritage and acceptance of other cultural groups. Although repetition through stages can occur, stages are not hierarchical, and you do not have to encounter every stage.

This is relevant to African American students at rural PWIs because they face challenges of social integration and feelings of otherness. Without the proper support, African American students may get stuck in Negromachy, causing self-doubt in who they are and their racial and cultural heritage. This framework can be used if African American students are used as the participants as they will be able to define if and how attending a rural PWI has affected their racial identity.

My final recommendation calls for expanded research surrounding PWIs in rural areas. The participants alluded to the need for an increase of acknowledgment of the issues African American students and other students of color face on their campus. My fear is that because there is not enough of this population of students, their issues and concerns can sometimes be overlooked. There is much more information to be uncovered surrounding these institutions and



African American students that study there, including but not limited to the challenges African American students face, why they chose these institutions, and their overall experience.

## **RESEARCHER'S REFLECTION**

Black Excellence is a mindset that celebrates the success and achievements of descendants of the African and Black diaspora, while highlighting perseverance. - Amari McGee

The history of African American students in America is extensive and full of trials and tribulations, as well as victories and accomplishments. Historical, social, and economic factors have played a huge role in African American students' higher education journey, including racism and segregation (Taylor, 2021). Although many African American students have persevered through these challenges, African Americans are still less likely to complete college in comparison to their peers in other ethnicities (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). As an African American woman, I am passionate about education. I take pride in my educational journey, and I embrace the good and the bad that I have endured.

I started my college journey at 19 years old. I took a gap year — not intentionally, but because I did not have the proper support nor guidance in high school. I had no idea how to apply for college, financial aid, nothing. I did not have much support at home because neither of my parents attended college and they did not understand how to help me. When graduation came around, I remember myself feeling extremely sad as my classmates were honored with scholarships and expressed their excitement for their college choices. I felt like I was being left behind.

By that fall, I was working at KFC and determined to go to college. I had always loved learning and I knew I deserved the opportunity to experience college and further my education. I

initially enrolled to take courses at a community college for the upcoming Winter/Spring semester, but I truly desired to attend a university, so I went for it. A year later, I began my collegiate journey at Wayne State University. I had so many odds stacked against me including a lack of support from Advisors and other university Administrators, who told me that I would not be successful and that I would not be able to complete college. However, I proved them wrong. I graduated four years later with Cum Lade Honors and did not stop there. I successfully earned my master's degree, where I was inducted into Pi Alpha Alpha, and now my Doctorate degree.

Whilst my higher educational journey has been successful, it is my hope to bring awareness to the needs of African American students, especially at PWIs in rural communities. My experience as an African American student helped fuel my passion for my study. Although the institution I attended was in an urban community, I still experienced discrimination, lack of support, feelings of otherness, and more. My passion to focus on rural communities stemmed from my time as a professional, where I was employed at two rural PWIs. During my employment, I witnessed African American students express feelings of not belonging, being stereotyped, and lack of care by non-person of color staff and faculty. These students expressed the desire for diversity in student organizations and resources and safe spaces. These students deserve support to be able to be successful and complete college. I am committed to advocating for African American students to feel supported and like they belong on their campus. I am committed to advocating for Black Excellence.

Since this study has given me the opportunity to advocate for African American students and Black Excellence on larger scale, it is my hope that this study and my story will reach many people. It is my hope that other researchers and scholars utilize my study to contribute to the overall support and success of African American students in the country.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the support measures rural PWIs have in place for their African American students through the lens of administrators. From this study three primary themes emerged: 1) campus support; 2) student challenges; and 3) campus needs, and six subthemes emerged: 1) support offices, 2) student organizations, 3) cultural and social, 4) financial, 5) representation, and 6) safe spaces. The conceptual framework was based on Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model. The discussion on the study's findings included a summary of the results. The results found that there are additional support measures and resources African American students need at rural PWIs. The results were also connected to relevant literature and the study's theoretical framework.

The study highlighted the various measures of support rural PWIs have in place to support their African American students. The study found that institutional support for African American students is essential to their success in college at rural PWIs. Such support can be supporting offices, staff-student relationships, mentorship, student organization involvement. African American students require a combination of factors to feel supported in during their collegiate journey. This includes but is not limited to having faculty that look like them, getting involved in African American student organizations, and programs to promote retention and completion.

This study provided readers with an understanding of the support measures rural PWIs have in place for their African American students. The support measures identified showed that there is more to be done in supporting African American students at these institutions. Specifically, these institutions need to increase representation in the support measures they have,

as well as on their campuses. Representation can be increased through staff and faculty, students recruited, cultural activities and student organizations.

This study also provided readers with resources that can be implemented to impact the success of African American students of rural PWIs. For example, offering safe spaces to African American students can help them feel more connected to the campus and ultimately improve their chances of success. In addition, mentorship programs can positively the success of African American students.

Lastly, this study serves as a foundation for future research into the support African American students need to persist and complete college, as well as feel like they belong at rural PWIs.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your name and position title?
2. What racial ethnicity do you identify as?
3. How long have you been in your current position and/or your institution?
4. Can you describe your day-to-day work responsibilities.
5. How does your day-to-day responsibilities benefit the success of the African American students at your institution?
6. Describe the African American student population at your institution.
7. What resources are available to African American students at your institution? How do these students learn about these resources?
8. Are these resources beneficial to the academic success of African American students? Social success?
9. What student organizations do you have at your institution that are inclusive to African American students?
10. What is the largest challenge African American students face at your institution?
11. What does success look like for African American students at your institution?
12. Have you heard of any feedback about the programs and resources that your institution offers to African American students? Can you describe that feedback?
13. What additional resources do you think African American students need at your institution to be successful?
14. If you can add or change any resources available to the African American students at your institution, what would that look like?

## APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Date: February 9, 2023

To: Susan DeCamillis, EdD and Amari McGee

From: David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair

Re: IRB Application *IRB-FY22-23-88 The Impact of Location: Supporting Black Excellence at Rural Collegiate Institutions*

*The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, The Impact of Location: Supporting Black Excellence at Rural Collegiate Institutions (IRB-FY22-23-88) and approved this project under Federal Regulations Exempt Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:*

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your protocol has been assigned project number IRB-FY22-23-88. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

This project has been granted a waiver of consent documentation; signatures of participants need not be collected. Although not documented, informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights, with the assurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must be provided, even when documentation is waived, and continue throughout the study. Ferris IRB requires submission of annual status reports during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. **The Annual Status Report for this project is due on or before February 8, 2024.**

Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

Regards,



David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair  
Ferris State University Institutional Review Board