PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

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Studies show that despite the focus of much educational research on closing the gap in higher education between students from different socioeconomic or racial/ethnic backgrounds, the gap remains. While student characteristics do play a role in influencing educational attainment they do not explain the persistence of the gap. To understand this more fully, research has looked into how campus racial climates affect educational outcomes for underrepresented students. These studies have shown that culturally engaging campus environments help students feel a stronger sense of belonging on campus, which improves the likelihood they will eventually attain a degree. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of campus climate by African American students at a predominantly white university utilizing the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments framework (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). For this study, I interviewed 17 African American students at the University of Pittsburgh about their experience on campus as related to aspects of cultural relevancy and cultural responsiveness to understand their perceptions of campus climate. These interviews provided insight into how students structure their campus environment in ways to promote their success by 1) fostering relationships with faculty and staff that are sources of cultural responsiveness and relationships with peers for a sense of cultural relevancy, 2) choosing peer groups and student organizations

which provide support in navigating the mental and emotional load of their experience at a PWI, particularly as related to dealing with racial micro-aggressions, and 3) carefully considering to engage in cross-cultural interactions when given a choice as experiences of cross cultural engagement are complex. The implications of these results for practitioners in higher education are discussed and recommendations are provided on how to improve educational outcomes for African American students at the University.

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Like the students in this study, I have had my own network of support to get me to this point in my education. My parents instilled a love of learning for me early in life but never would I have expected it to lead me here. Those that I have met in this journey with me, especially my fellow SCAE cohort and the students I have had the privilege of working with, have given me the opportunity to learn from their experiences and perspectives so that I may better understand this complex system. I am so grateful for their support throughout this process.

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1.0   PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Participation in higher education has increased over the last few decades such that today about two out of three high school graduates will continue in college; however, there remains a gap in completion rates across racial and socioeconomic lines. Enrollments of minorities has increased over the past several decades as only 3% of African Americans over 25 years old had earned a college degree in 1960 compared to 16.5% in 2000; Hispanics have also increased college enrollment from 4.5% of those 25 or older in 1970 to 11% in 2000 (Roksa, Grodsky, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). Past policies and interventions have attempted to improve enrollment gaps which helped to create this increase in enrollment and degree completions. These include Title IV of the Higher Education Act, Title IX and Affirmative Action, which have improved access for African Americans and women; however, there remains persistent inequality in regards to actual degree attainment (Roksa et al., 2007). Lower percentages of African American, Hispanic, Native American and students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are completing bachelor's degrees (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010).

African American students graduate from postsecondary education within six years at a rate of 41% compared to White students who graduate within six years at a rate of 63% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). This has important social and economic implications because in today's world, schooling is still the most important factor in determining economic welfare, particularly for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Rumberger, 2010). Despite the policies and

practices that have been put into place to allow greater access to education for students of all backgrounds, the continued gaps in attainment create concern for institutions of higher education and society at large (McLendon & Perna, 2014). Educational research to determine why this gap in attainment continues to exist and, in turn, how our institutions of education may contribute to the successful completion of degrees for underrepresented students, has been undertaken. Much previous literature focuses on what occurs on the student level, with student behavior and characteristics but other research calls for a greater focus on the institution and how institutions can help to improve the environment and likelihood of success for underrepresented students at our increasingly more diverse schools (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Hurtado, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Museus et al., 2017).

The motivation to close the gap in educational attainment drives this increased access and therefore greater diversity within higher education, but more needs to be done to see real improvements in attainment for all students. Diverse educational environments in all levels of education actually improve educational outcomes for low-income and minority students (Pike & Kuh, 2006). Research shows benefits of diversity in the K-12 environment in measures such as test scores higher rates of high school completion, college attendance, and college completion in addition to lower teenage childbearing and rates of delinquency (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). Research is starting to follow at the level of higher education, particularly with recent affirmative action cases, which investigates the benefits of diversity in post-secondary institutions. Higher education is becoming increasingly diverse in student population, but that access has not translated into the same level of success for all students. White, high income students still have an advantage. For individuals born in the 1980's from high-income families, college completion

rates rose by 18 percent as compared to individuals from the 1960's, but college completion rates for individuals born in low-income families rose by only 4 percent, continuing gaps in educational attainment (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Literature in the area of student persistence and retention tends to emphasize individual student characteristics which may hinder educational attainment at the postsecondary level such as academic preparation before college enrollment, continued influence of secondary school contexts in higher education, family's socioeconomic status, social and/or cultural capital and even personality traits that are more conducive to students earning a degree (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Klugman, 2012; Rumberger, 2010). Quantitative analyses looking at national data sets have been employed to determine what student characteristics are most important to academic success and educational attainment. Although it may be true that on average underrepresented students enter college with less academic preparation than their white counterparts, in a survey of first year students across 18 four-year schools, such student level characteristics had less of an impact on African American students' intent to persist than campus climate (Cabrera et al., 1999). In a study utilizing NELS data, Rumberger (2010) confirms that even when student level characteristics (SES, race/ethnicity, test scores, grades, etc.) are controlled, the likelihood of a student from a higher SES background completing a degree is six times higher than a student from a lower SES. A student's decision and ability to complete a degree is related to many complex factors which include, but are certainly not limited to, individual student characteristics.

In addition to this student level data, research highlights postsecondary school contexts which influence whether students are able to be successful in graduating with a degree, such as how the social and political climate of a college campus promotes success for all student groups

(Fischer, 2010; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2012; Love, Trammell, & Cartner, 2010; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Roksa et al., 2017; Yi, 2008). Overall campus climate, the immediate environment students are exposed to, which includes peer groups and formal institutional structures, is a prominent contributor to a student's success (Cabrera et al., 1999; Denson & Chang, 2008; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008). This is particularly salient to address for underrepresented students in order to improve educational outcomes based on the research of perceptions of negative campus racial climates by students of color; however, research also suggests changes to be made through campus-wide efforts that address all areas of the institution with a focus on peer to peer interactions as researchers find the main perpetrators of harassment are other students (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

There are certainly many practices an institution may improve to create inclusive campus environments and certainly many institutions are already implementing strategies to support students to graduate. It is in the higher education institution's best interest to do so in order to continue collecting tuition dollars for four or five years from the students it admits. Strategies such as designated programming, academic supports, financial aid, mentoring and scholarships for traditionally underrepresented groups are already in place in many institutions to address the gap in degree completion between students. Improving campus climate may also have practical implications for admissions policies. For example, if it is determined that students have better levels of success at institutions with greater diversity, then it would be in the best interest of both students and institutions to adopt admissions policies that aggressively work to increase student diversity to support overall student degree completion. It is not enough to simply enroll a diverse student body and expect all students to be equally successful. Educational institutions have a

responsibility to ensure there are structures in place which support success for all students. This may mean that traditional structures which have been in place to support traditional students in higher education are not doing enough to ensure every student can be successful today.

1.1   PURPOSE OF INQUIRY

Despite the policies and practices that have been put into place to allow greater access to education for students of all backgrounds, the continued gaps in attainment create some concern that our institutions of higher education are simply an "instrument of class reproduction" rather than a route of social mobility (Michael B Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 230). There is an apparent race and class-based success structure in higher education which continues to reproduce inequality in the U.S. Given this gap in degree attainment, an area that needs to be more fully understood in education is why this gap in educational attainment continues to exist and, in turn, how our institutions of education contribute to the reproduction of inequality in American society (Hurtado et al., 2012). Once we understand how the education system acts as an instrument in the reproduction of inequality, we can work to improve the system so more underrepresented students can have access to the opportunities available to degree holding members of society. As student populations at institutions of higher education become more diverse, more needs to also be done to support students traditionally underrepresented in higher education in completing a degree.

To address this problem of practice, I want to explore the overall institutional structures in place in the education system that may be inhibiting all students from having equal chances at success. I have been working in higher education for six years in supporting student's academic

success in college. In my work with students during their transition to college, I see students who come to college thinking it is the gateway to the career and lifestyle they desire but are met with many challenges along the way. Even high performing underrepresented students, very intelligent students on scholarship who have fewer financial concerns than others, are challenged by the higher education environment and seem to be at a greater risk of dropping out before earning a degree.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions of campus climate by African American students with the goal of learning more about what the institution may be able to do to create a more inclusive environment and support students through to graduation. Literature documents the influential role campus climate plays in student success and decisions to persist in higher education, especially for underrepresented students (Gurin et al., 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2012; Locks et al., 2008; Museus et al., 2008; Yi, 2008). The professional expertise that I bring to this research relies on my work with a diverse population of undergraduate and secondary students. From my first experience in education, working with elementary and high school students, I met many bright students being left behind their peers. I saw firsthand the inequality within our public education system and the effect that it had on students of color and lower socioeconomic status. In working with high school students who were returning to school after dropping out, I learned that even students with many resources still struggled to make it through school. In my work with underrepresented scholarship students at the University of Pittsburgh I learned of the difficulties high-achieving students face as a student of color at a predominantly white institution (PWI).

Although each of these experiences has been different, the common theme among them is that student level characteristics are not the only determining factor to an individual's success.

There are mediating factors within our educational institutions that can either exacerbate challenges for students or make their journey easier. My motivation for completing this study is to gain a deeper understanding of what this particular institution may be able to do to better support student success and in turn, lessen the attainment gap. Having had many one-on-one conversations with students motivated to succeed leads me to understand the complex factors associated with their journey to finding that success within higher education. With this basic understanding of some of the struggles students go through, I want to further explore and understand to a greater degree how institutions of higher education, and the University of Pittsburgh specifically, can better support a diverse student population in academic success. I hope that the data collected will provide a more thorough understanding of the student experience from which practitioners can learn how to create a more inclusive environment for African American students with the ultimate goal to see the gap in degree attainment decrease between African American students and their White peers.

1.1.1   Research question

Although data collected and analyzed through this study will hopefully be utilized by the institution to reflect on how various aspects of the institution can promote a more positive campus climate for students, the main purpose is to more deeply understand the student experience from their unique perspectives. As practitioners in education, we are consistently making decisions about policies or programs which can have direct or indirect effects on the student experience, but it is not often that we get a full picture of how those decisions are perceived by the students we serve. Those decisions are made within a complex system of decisions from multiple areas of the institution which contributes to how students perceive

climate in various forms. Being able to undertake this study is an opportunity to hear about the student experience in a manner that we often do not have time for in our day to day responsibilities.

In order to gain a better understanding of this experience, the overall question guiding this inquiry is: How do African American students perceive campus climate? Literature documents the influential role campus climate plays in student success and decisions to persist in higher education, especially for underrepresented students (Gurin et al., 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Yi, 2008). The culturally engaging campus environment model theorizes that many aspects of the campus environment influence the success and persistence of students in higher education (Museus, Zhang, & Kim, 2016). With the understanding that perceptions of climate are affected by many factors, the research question is deliberately broad to allow as many of these factors to be explored within the question as possible.

1.2   OVERVIEW OF METHODS

In order to understand how African American students perceive campus climate, this study utilizes a qualitative research approach within a case study design. Case study has been chosen for this research as it is often the preferred method when asking "how" or "why" questions and the focus of research is a contemporary phenomenon, i.e. it is referring to current rather than purely historical situations (Yin, 2014). Campus climate is a complex issue which is influenced by many factors both within and outside of the educational institution (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). Knowing this, case study is appropriate as it allows for the research to look more in depth at the complexities within the context of interest (Yin, 2014).

Participants were asked to take part in the study through various gatekeepers at the University who work with student organizations that have high rates of participation for African American students, as well as those targeted to the broader student population. Gatekeepers were provided with an email invitation to send out to students in their programs which outlined the purpose of the study and the type of students who would qualify for the study. Juniors and seniors who have attended Pitt since their first year were targeted as they have had at least two years within the campus climate. As older students, they may also be better able to reflect on their experiences and provide valuable insight into campus climate than students with less time on campus would be able to provide.

The initial goal of the study was to interview 30 students on campus; however, despite best efforts only 17 students completed an interview. Even with the smaller sample than desired, diversity exists within the sample that provided different perspectives on campus climate. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each student to ensure that the research question was thoroughly addressed while also allowing for natural follow-up questions to arise within the interview session (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). This structure allowed me to explore new topics as students responded to the structured questions which helped to provide a detailed picture of the student experience (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011).

Students were first asked less personal or in-depth questions to put the student at ease before beginning to ask more in-depth questions regarding their student experience, as suggested by Merriam (2009). Students were interviewed about their experiences on campus both in and outside of the classroom. The questions covered areas identified as relevant to perceptions of campus climate identified in the literature review and specifically within the Culturally Engaging

Campus Environments (CECE) model which guides this inquiry such as relationships with faculty and peers, cross-cultural student engagement and sense of belonging.

Interviews were then transcribed and coded. Due to the highly contextual nature of this study, building a snapshot of the student experience at one particular institution, analysis relied heavily on the data to provide insights rather than analyzing the data through a particular theory-driven lens, which is why In Vivo coding followed by focused coding was chosen for data analysis. The literature framing the study is helpful to understand what themes may have materialized but this study was emergent in nature, allowing the students to give voice to their true experience rather than assuming their experience based on prior studies within other institutional contexts (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). This method of analysis allowed me to keep the student voice at the core of this research which I felt was important to preserving each student's perception of their environment.

1.2.1 Research setting

The setting for this research is the University of Pittsburgh, a four year public, Research I institution. The University is located in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA and currently has a total undergraduate population of 19,326. About 60% of the students who apply to the University are granted offers of admissions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Ninety-five percent of the undergraduate student population is 24 years old or younger and 95% attend the institution as full time students. Sixty-two percent of students are considered in-state students. The student population is about evenly split between male and females with 51% of the population female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

In the fall of 2017 African American students totaled 984, or 5.1% of the total undergraduate student population (*University of Pittsburgh Factbook*, 2017). The University includes nine schools from which students can graduate with a bachelor's degree: College of Business Administration (CBA), College of General Studies (CGS), Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, School of Computing and Information (SCI), School of Education, School of Health and Rehabilitation Science (SHRS), School of Nursing, School of Social Work and the Swanson School of Engineering (SSOE). Most of the students in this study were enrolled in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences which is also the largest school in the institution with 10,971 undergraduates; SSOE is the second largest with 2,892 students followed by CBA with 2,047 students. All other schools enroll fewer than 700 undergraduate students.

1.3   SIGNIFICANCE

Closing the gap in degree completion between underrepresented and majority students is certainly a complex issue, as it has been the focus of much research and many interventions, yet the gap still remains (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; McLendon & Perna, 2014; Roksa et al., 2007). According to Hurtado et al. (2012) "the success of diverse college students is tied to our collective social and economic success" (p. 42). Therefore, enabling more students to succeed in higher education is important for the future of the nation in addition to having an important effect on the lives of individual students and their families. Understanding more about the student experience could influence many different stakeholders in institutions of higher education trying to support students in their progression through postsecondary education be better able to address the issues and challenges that are preventing underrepresented students from being able to

graduate at rates similar to their white peers. This includes perceptions of the campus environment in which they are expected to succeed.

Individuals invested in addressing the issue of equity in educational attainment include the students themselves but also the institutions they attend. Universities and colleges which enroll diverse students do so hoping that all students can be successful. They spend a large amount of funding to entice students to attend their institution. Students that do not persist to graduation result in a loss of revenue for the school in addition to affecting the graduation rates which institutions receiving federal and state dollars are required to report. In turn, government systems are invested in such a cause as the money they invest in education is expected to result in more graduates for their region or state.

Rankin and Reason (2005) find differences within student perceptions of campus climate to be an important concern for higher education institutions; underrepresented students perceive campus climate more negatively than their White peers. Understanding why underrepresented students may perceive their campus environment more negatively is important to making positive strides in improving campus climate. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) highlight the importance of understanding these differences in perception of campus climate to developing appropriate programs and policies to address campus climate issues; strategies to begin to make change must be based specifically within the concerns of the underrepresented student group. This study is the first step in understanding student perceptions at the University of Pittsburgh so that improvements to campus climate can be undertaken with the eventual goal of supporting all students in attaining their academic goals and earning an undergraduate degree.

1.4   CONCLUSION

In this chapter I described the problem of practice which lead me to pursue this line of inquiry which is understanding more deeply the perception of campus climate by African American students at the University of Pittsburgh. It has been reported that African American students nationally, and at this university, graduate at rates less than their White peers. As such, the gap in educational attainment is one that has seen much attention over the last five decades yet the gap remains. While there are many complex factors which influence this outcome, literature has shown a link between campus climate and educational attainment. New research calls for a greater understanding of how a student experiences their institution. It is my hope that this study which used a qualitative case study design, interviewing African American students regarding their perceptions of the campus climate and their experiences within it, will help me and other practitioners and stakeholders at this University to support degree attainment for all students.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes the available research on closing attainment gaps in higher education through the lens of campus climate. First, a general review of diversity research in higher education is covered to illustrate how the diversity of student populations in higher education has changed over the years and how this changing diversity is related to educational outcomes. Then, specific research on racial campus climates is reviewed, highlighting what is already known in regard to how and why the racial climate of a campus influences educational outcomes for students. Finally, the conceptual model guiding this research, Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE), is discussed as it relates to understanding student success in diverse, complex higher education environments.

2.1   DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There has been much quantitative research to demonstrate that diverse educational environments in K-12 education actually improve educational outcomes for low-income and minority students. Results of this research show benefits of diversity in increasing test scores and higher rates of high school completion, college attendance, and college completion in addition to lower teenage childbearing and rates of delinquency (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). At the high school level, outcomes are better for students in schools where racial make-up is more mixed (at least 50%

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White students); schools in which the proportion of White students was lowest saw the greatest likelihood of college degree attainment for all students (Owens, 2010). It makes sense then that similar positive effects of diversity are seen in higher education.

Many studies have shown the importance of diversity in improving educational outcomes in learning, or cognitive growth, and democracy (Bowman, 2013; Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006; Denson & Chang, 2008; Gurin et al., 2002; Pascarella et al., 2014; Roksa et al., 2017). A study of national data by Gurin, Dey, Hurtado and Gurin (2002) showed that diversity experiences of students "consistently and meaningfully affect important learning and democracy outcomes of a college education" (p. 358). Educational outcomes with significant relationships, according to their study, involve the learning outcomes of intellectual engagement and academic skills and democracy outcomes measuring citizenship engagement and racial/cultural engagement.

In a study looking at outcomes for first year students on the four scales of leadership skills, psychological well-being, intellectual engagement and intercultural effectiveness, Bowman (2013) found that higher levels of diversity (as measured through interactions with individuals differing from oneself) result in greater positive outcomes on each of the four scales. The variable which had the greatest effect on these outcomes was interracial interactions, indicating the importance of racial diversity and the need to foster interracial interactions which can challenge students' pre-existing worldviews in a safe space (Bowman, 2013).

Chang et al. (2006) support this finding in their study of the educational benefits of diversity in undergraduates. Across all three measures of the study, frequency of cross-racial interactions is significantly related to students' openness to diversity ("knowledge of and ability to accept different races/cultures"), cognitive development ("growth in general knowledge,

critical thinking ability, and problem-solving skills") and self-confidence (Chang et al., 2006, p. 449). Conclusions can be made that increasing diversity on college campuses is beneficial to learning and democratic outcomes although the actual interactions among groups seem to enhance these effects (Chang et al., 2006; Gusa, 2010; Locks et al., 2008).

There is a benefit to institutions of higher education to enroll a diverse student body as a more diverse student body creates opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that improves educational outcomes for students; however, this kind of structural diversity is not the only goal. While quality cross-cultural interactions between students can improve educational outcomes, it is also important for students to see representations of themselves on campus within the faculty. African American students who have access to professors of the same race have significantly higher GPAs than their African American peers without such professors (Fischer, 2010), highlighting the importance of considering the benefits of diversity within all levels of higher education institutions.

Research suggests greater structural diversity within institutions of higher education is the first step in creating an environment in which students can gain skills necessary to be successful in our increasingly diverse world, but what happens once students step foot on campus is also important (Hurtado et al., 2012). Simply enrolling more diverse students or hiring more diverse faculty does not necessarily create the positive educational outcomes an institution of higher education desires. Researchers find that the quality of those interactions among diverse peers is important, as supported by other studies (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2005). Students' predispositions to diversity and cross-cultural interactions influence not only how students interact across groups but also how those interactions on campus can influence a greater sense of belonging across racial groups (Locks et al., 2008).

In their study of students' transition to college across 10 public research universities, Locks et al. (2008) found that "positive interactions with diverse peers result in a greater sense of belonging to one's college or university" (p. 277) for all students at predominantly White institutions, not just underrepresented minorities. The important piece of evidence within the study is "positive" cross-cultural interactions as not all interactions can be positive for all students involved. "Positive" interactions with diverse peers included events such as sharing a meal, studying for a class, sharing personal feelings/problems, having intellectual discussions outside of class or having meaningful discussions about race/ethnic relations outside of a class environment.

Positive cross-cultural engagement can influence a student's sense of belonging. Hurtado (2005) also demonstrates that it is not only the frequency of diversity interactions but the quality of diversity or intergroup interactions that support both cognitive and social development of young adults in higher education. Hurtado's major claim, in her review of previous empirical studies, is that improvements in intergroup interactions at the college level not only result in better educational outcomes for individual students, but is good for the whole of society in the long term. This line of inquiry supports reasoning for increased campus diversity to improve educational outcomes because it also carries over into societal benefits in terms of increased citizenship. This research, however, also highlights the importance of not only accepting a diverse student body into the institution but actually embracing these students into an inclusive campus environment (Hurtado, 2005). Cabrera et al. (1999) find similar results in their study comparing the transition to higher education for African American and White students and in fact consider "merely increasing the number of minorities on campus without the benefit of a

well thought out strategy is inherently dangerous" as interactions among students can be harmful due to discrimination or racial micro-aggressions (p. 154).

Of some concern is that while positive diversity experiences increase the development of critical thinking skills for all students, negative diversity experiences tend to decrease cognitive skill development in college students (Roksa et al., 2017). The study by Roksa et al. (2017) shows that this inequality in skill development is not related to academic experiences in college but rather correlated to their experiences with diversity. This indicates that in addition to being less likely to graduate from higher education, underrepresented students stand to gain fewer critical thinking skills from their education because underrepresented students experience negative diversity experiences at a higher frequency than their White peers (Roksa et al., 2017). Improving the campus environment for underrepresented students is then not just an issue of improving educational attainment outcomes but also the actual educational skill building of minority students.

2.2   RACIAL CAMPUS CLIMATE

As research suggests, it is in the best interest of institutions to support a highly diverse student body, but while creating the necessary structural diversity is the first step in promoting positive educational outcomes for students across various educational measures, it is equally important that such growth takes place within a positive campus environment (Pike & Kuh, 2006). Through a synthesis of research since 1992, Harper and Hurtado (2007) identify three important themes in campus climate literature which relate to educational attainment: "(1) differential perceptions of campus climate by race, (2) racial/ethnic minority student reports of prejudicial treatment and

racist campus environments, and (3) benefits associated with campus climates that facilitate cross-racial engagement" (p. 9). Understanding how these three components of campus climate, particularly the final theme of cross-racial engagement as it is closely aligned with important educational outcomes (Chang et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2014), is important for postsecondary institutions to consider when looking at the inclusivity of climate for all the students it serves.

While the effect of campus climate on educational outcomes has been well documented in the literature, the term is used broadly to define perceptions students have of their immediate surroundings as related to "diversity issues and quality of life issues" but there is yet to be a narrowly defined concept of climate (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008, p. 222). It is a complex construction which has many levels and components. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on conceptualizations of campus racial climate. In some of the earlier research on campus racial climate, Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Walter and Milem (1998) provide a framework to conceptualize campus racial climate within specific racial contexts divided between two domains: external and internal (institutional) forces. External forces include the broader impact of governmental policies and the impact of sociohistorical forces ("events or issues in the larger society") (Hurtado, Clayton-Pederson, Allen, & Milem, 1998, p. 282).

The second domain outlined by Hurtado et al. (1998) of internal forces or institutional forces includes four dimensions of the institution:

> historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups, its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and the behavioral climate dimension, characterized by intergroup relations on campus (p. 282).

As a concept, campus racial climate is obviously complex, including factors both internal and external to the institution; it follows that research on climate can be just as broad looking at the varying layers of climate and the effect it has on the student experience and educational outcomes (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Despite the focus of so many studies to understand the complexity surrounding campus climate, particularly in how to improve climate to better support underrepresented students, "themes of exclusion, institutional rhetoric rather than action, and marginality continue to emerge from student voices" (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 21).

As a result of focus groups on five predominantly White campuses and their review of 15 years of campus climate research, Harper and Hurtado (2007) report several themes that emerged from the data which indicate campus racial climates can be a barrier to student success and how institutions play a key role in student perceptions of campus climate. Institutions may claim to value diversity as seen in the increasing of a diverse student population, for example, but students (both minority and majority) do not always see that played out in any of the actions of the institution around race; for many students taking part in the research study on campus racial climate, the only time they discussed race as a possible issue on their campus was in the context of the study (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). This is relevant to note as discussing issues of race can be considered positive cross-cultural engagement which improves students' sense of belonging on campus (Locks et al., 2008). While increasing diversity may be an initiative of an institution, following through in making sure that a campus is inclusive for all students may not be a focus of institutional practice and that can influence student perceptions.

This is important for institutions of higher education to be aware of as research shows that institutional climates can influence educational attainment outcomes for students. External and internal forces, in addition to individual student characteristics, influence perceived campus

racial environment on college campuses. This racial climate, which is a complex mix of these layers, then influences educational attainment outcomes for students. Museus, Nichols and Lambert (2008) propose a conceptual model summarizing the effects of campus racial climate on eventual degree completion as shown in Figure 1. Mediating variables include structural academic involvement (a student's grades), normative academic involvement (an index based on connections with peers for study groups, interactions with faculty, and interactions with an academic advisor), social involvement (referring to the level of participation a student had within student groups, organizations and events), goal commitment (the highest level of education a student expected to attain), and institutional commitment (a measurement of student satisfaction with their institution).
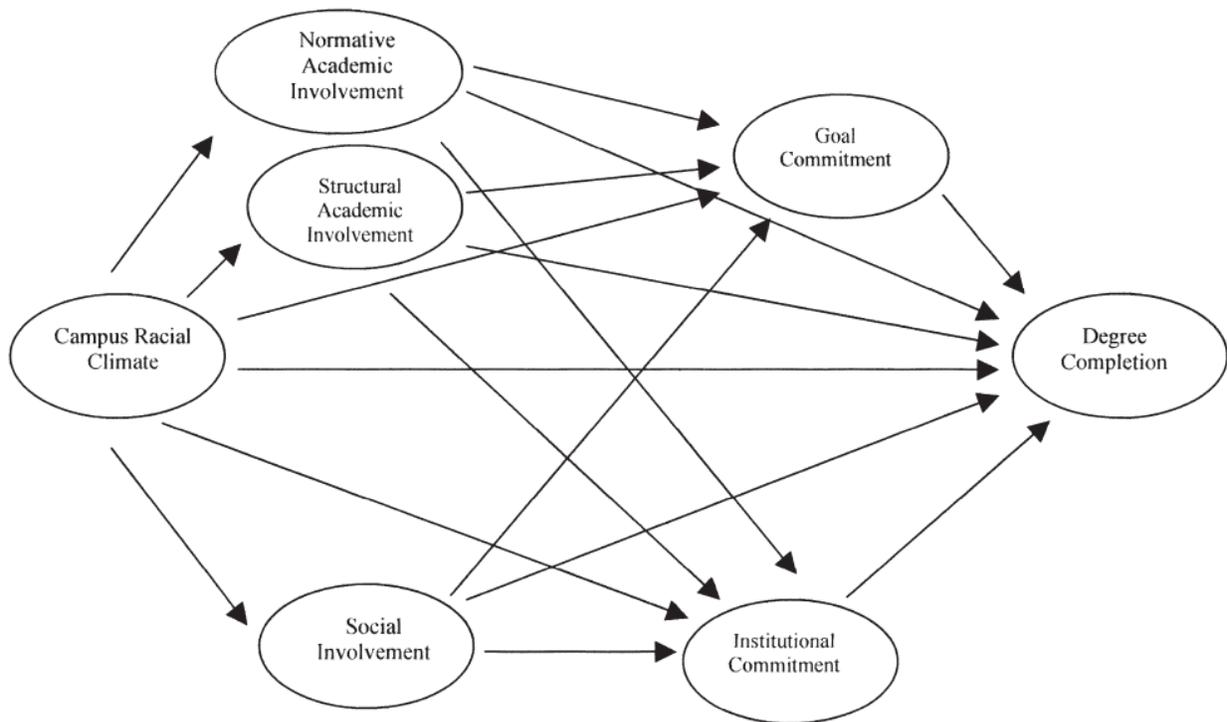
Figure 1. "A conceptual model of the effects of campus racial climate on degree completion" from: Museus, S. (2008). Racial differences in the effects of campus racial climate on degree completion: A structural equation model. *The Review of Higher Education, 32*(1) p. 115, Figure 1. © 2008 Association for the Study of Higher Education. Reprinted with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press.

In testing this model using national survey data, Museus et al. (2008) found that "perceived campus racial climate was the most powerful predictor of institutional commitment" for all student groups (Asian, Black, Latina/o and White) with the largest effect seen among Black students (p. 125). Interestingly, for Black students, higher satisfaction with the campus racial climate was related to higher levels of normative academic involvement, followed by higher levels of degree attainment. A more positive campus climate translates to better quality of the connections students make with faculty, academic peers and academic advisors – all of which are important to a student's academic success in higher education. Literature on campus climate broadly supports this finding that perceptions of campus racial climates are influenced by the relationships and interactions students have with faculty and peers (Fischer, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998; Museus et al., 2008; Nuñez, 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

In a large quantitative study surveying college students at various institutions, Fischer (2010) found that negative perceptions of racial climate are significantly correlated to the educational outcome of graduating within four years even after controlling for such factors as SES and academic preparedness. These findings highlight the importance of forming relationships around academic success for African American students among peers, faculty and staff. Though these studies indicate that campus racial climate affects degree attainment indirectly, it does play a role in the eventual success and immediate satisfaction of students.

In addition to normative academic involvement, another important component of promoting a positive campus climate involves creating an environment where all students feel included and valued as part of the institution of higher education, feeling they belong on campus and can be successful there (Gusa, 2010). This is often referred to in the literature as a student's "sense of belonging." Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) define "sense of belonging" as

"the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804). This measure may include the influence campus climate has on a student in addition to their own personal characteristics and can be a good indicator of whether a student will be successful in completing a degree (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Locks et al., 2008).

In a longitudinal study regarding first year students' sense of belonging and persistence, Hausmann et al. (2007) conclude that early social interactions for students play an important role in helping students develop a sense of belonging on campus through peer relationships, interactions with faculty and parental support, consistent with Museus, Nichols and Lambert's (2008) model describing the effects of normative academic involvement on institutional commitment. Most important to note is that this holds true for students regardless of demographic characteristics or academic preparedness; sense of belonging predicts intentions to persist across all student groups. Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow and Salomone (2002) surveyed first-year students and found that a sense of belonging stems from a perception of "valued involvement" in the college environment and is predicated on: "1) establishing functionally supportive peer relationships" and "2) the belief that faculty are compassionate and that the student is more than just another face in the crowd" (p. 251). In addition to the relationships students form around their academics, the social relationships students form with peers and others on campus outside of the classroom also support the development of a sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002).

Providing the space for students to feel valued can support student success regardless of their background which is important due to the negative effects that negative perceptions of climate may have for students, including longer time to degree attainment. Harper and Hurtado

(2007) summarize how negative campus racial climates contribute to feelings of "isolation, alienation, and stereotyping" (p. 12) which underrepresented students often struggle with on predominantly White campuses. Stereotype threat refers to the theory that students who belong to a particular race or ethnic group for which there is a negative stereotype, "may be vulnerable to underperformance in the domain to which the stereotype pertains, particularly if this domain is an important part of their identity" (Fischer, 2010, p. 20). This means African American students who are often portrayed as underachieving may feel specific pressure to prove the stereotype wrong and put greater pressure on themselves to demonstrate their ability to the majority students believed to hold negative stereotypes to be true.

Fischer (2010) supports this finding in their research comparing African American students to their White counterparts. The study finds that negative perceptions of campus climate are significantly related to time to graduation; students experiencing a negative climate take longer to graduate, if they graduate at all (Fischer, 2010). Fischer (2010) finds this is largely due to the "burden to perform" that African American students face in a predominantly White environment where they may be faced with stereotype threat and an added pressure to disprove stereotypes of "intellectual inferiority" (p. 37). The long term effect of this threat is that students report higher levels of anxiety related to their academic performance which leads to lower GPAs and a longer time to graduation (Fischer, 2010).

Research has also highlighted how the relationship between diversity on college campuses and intergroup interactions may be related to the creation of a more inclusive campus environment which may positively influence degree completion for underrepresented students (Gurin et al., 2002). A balance needs to be found for students to both feel a place where they can connect with students with a similar background within the campus community and through

ethnic student organizations (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2015; Hurtado et al., 1998) while also interacting with diverse peers within an inclusive environment (Gurin et al., 2002). This is a complex balance. Nuñez (2009) studied sense of belonging in college through a national survey of Latino students and results showed almost contradictory data. Students reporting positive diversity experiences felt a greater sense of belonging than students with fewer positive diversity experiences, however, those same students with positive diversity experiences viewed their campus environment as more racially/ethnically hostile (Nuñez, 2009). A student can feel a sense of belonging within an institution as a result of positive experiences or within specific groups on campus while holding negative perceptions of their broader campus climate due to their experiences bringing hostile or offensive beliefs held by some of their peers to the surface (Nuñez, 2009).

Another factor which contributes to the complexities in understanding student perceptions and sense of belonging is that students' previous experiences before entering college also influence how they both perceive and interact with their peers within their college environment (Locks et al., 2008). Locks et al. (2008) demonstrate that students from very diverse environments tend to view PWIs as less diverse while students coming from predominantly White home contexts tend to view PWIs as diverse environments. This previous experience with diversity then influences engagement in diversity experiences and their responses to those experiences. Students with greater diversity experiences before college are more likely to engage with diverse peers in college which leads to a greater sense of belonging within the institution (Locks et al., 2008). Providing the appropriate climate for students to be successful regardless of this background is the important responsibility of the institution.

2.3   CONCEPTUAL MODEL

As research discussed demonstrates, understanding the factors relating to students' persistence and educational outcomes is complex. Campus racial climate is made up of factors external and internal to the institution (Hurtado et al., 1998), and climate includes a student's relationships with faculty and peers on campus (Fischer, 2010; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus et al., 2008) and overall feeling of belonging to the campus community (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Locks et al., 2008). Therefore, previous research has struggled to adequately model the phenomenon. The most well-known and widespread model of student persistence is Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration which assumes all students must integrate academically and socially into their campus environments in order to be successful. However, scholars have criticized Tinto's model as failing to apply to underrepresented groups (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Museus, 2014; Tierny, 1992; J. C. Weidman, DeAngelo, & Bethea, 2014; J. Weidman, 1989).

Kuh and Love (2000) call for a cultural perspective of student departure which is built from the perspective that the culture of an institution constantly evolves through the interactions of those within the institution. This is a particularly relevant perspective today as our college campuses are becoming increasingly more diverse; the student body is shaping the campus in addition to the campus which influences the individuals within it (Hurtado et al., 2012). This makes understanding student success much more complicated. A model which considers the important relationships between the student and their campus is related to what is known about campus climate and the importance of positive relationships to foster an inclusive campus climate and sense of belonging among students (Cabrera et al., 1999; Fischer, 2010; Gurin et al., 2002; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Locks et al., 2008).

Culturally Engaging Campus Environments

Cultural Relevance

Cultural familiarity
Culturally relevant knowledge
Cultural community service
Cross-cultural engagement
Cultural validation

Cultural Responsiveness

Collectivist orientations
Humanized environments
Proactive philosophies
Holistic support

External Influences
(e.g., family, finances, employment)

Individual Influences

Pre-college Inputs
(e.g., demographics, initial academic dispositions, academic preparation)

Sense of Belonging

Academic Dispositions
(e.g., self-efficacy, motivation, intent to persist)

Academic Performance

College Success Outcomes
(e.g., learning, development, satisfaction, persistence, degree completion)

Figure 2. "The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model of College Success" as appeared in Museus, Yi and Saelua, (2017). The impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *The Review of Higher Education, 40*(2), p. 192 Figure 1 adapted with permission by Springer Nature from Museus, S.D. (2014). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model: A new theory of college success among racially diverse student populations. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed.) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research.* New York: Springer.

Working from this perspective, Museus and Quaye (2009) attempted to study student success by better understanding how campus cultures influence the experiences of students of color. Utilizing a qualitative study, interviewing 30 racial/ethnic minority students in a large, rural, public, research university, Museus and Quaye (2009) found evidence that cultures may play a larger role in understanding student persistence than previously understood. Building on

this research, to understand how the interaction between institutional and individual cultures affect student success, Museus (2014) developed a model of Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (figure 2). This model describes nine indicators of a culturally engaging campus separated into two categories: cultural relevance ("the degree to which students' campus environments are relevant to their cultural backgrounds") and cultural responsiveness ("the extent to which campus programs and practice effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse student populations") (Museus et al., 2017, p. 192).

Museus, Yi and Saelua (2017) tested this model through a quantitative study of 499 students across a variety of institutions and student groups looking specifically at the relationship between culturally engaging campus environments and sense of belonging. The findings of this research indicate that the CECE model explains 68% of the variation in belonging across demographic groups, making this model a better fit in explaining the effect of campus environments on student success than previous models. This is in alignment with campus climate literature which indicates the aspects of cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness influence perceptions of campus climate such as relationships with peers, support from faculty and sense of belonging (Fischer, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012; Locks et al., 2008; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009).

Roksa et al. (2017) highlight the strengths of the CECE model in its "integrating crucial insights from both the college student development and critical perspectives" (p. 135). What also sets this model apart from others is denoting the importance of how the college affects the students but also how the students affect the environment (Roksa et al., 2017). This again shows support for the role of structural diversity in creating a culturally engaging campus though the model allows for the complexity in the mechanisms through which structural diversity influences campus environments. The CECE model allows for the interaction between individual student

characteristics and experiences, and the campus environment to be more salient and relevant than previous models making it a better, though not a perfect fit to describe educational outcomes for students in higher education. There is still much yet to understand about these complex relationships between institutions and their student populations but the CECE model provides an appropriate framework to begin to better understand campus climate as it relates to college success outcomes.

2.4   CONCLUSION

In reviewing the literature regarding the persistent gap in educational attainment between minority and White students a common theme related to the success of underrepresented students in higher education emerged: underrepresented students have improved educational outcomes when they feel a greater sense of belonging in a positive campus climate within their institution. Understanding the role campus climate plays in student success continues to be an important focus of research despite the lack of a perfect model. The complexity of its very nature makes it an area with much more to discover that may provide further insights into the persistent gap in educational attainment. Hurtado (2005) recommends further research to help make strides in seeing greater benefits of diversity in higher education, particularly in the area of institutional commitment to increasing diversity and improving diversity interactions on campus; marginal programs that attempt to provide interventions for specific groups may have less of an impact than if overall campus climate surrounding diversity can become more inclusive, as the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model suggests.

3.0   METHODS

In order to understand how African American students perceive campus climate, this study utilized a qualitative research approach within a case study design. Case study has been chosen for this research as it is often the preferred method when asking "how" or "why" questions and the focus of research is a contemporary phenomenon, i.e. it is referring to current rather than purely historical situations (Yin, 2014). Campus climate is a complex issue which is influenced by many factors both within and outside of the educational institution (Hurtado et al., 1998). Knowing this, case study is appropriate as it allows for the researcher to look more in depth at the complexities within the context of interest (Yin, 2014). In this instance, I am looking specifically within one institution, the University of Pittsburgh. Within this context, I am interviewing only upper-class undergraduate students who identify as African American.

A qualitative design was used for this case study because it is an attempt to understand the perspectives of individuals. Qualitative research allows us to better understand "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). To gain a deeper understanding of how students perceive campus climate it is imperative to learn about the student experiences that shape those perceptions. Only through talking with students about their experiences on campus and their reflections of those experiences can we hear their perceptions. Also, as previously mentioned, much of the research on campus climate has been conducted utilizing quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires. Collecting

qualitative data provides more specific insights into campus climate at this university than surveys or other quantitative data collections methods could have provided.

3.1   SETTING

This study collected interviews from 17 undergraduate students at a predominantly White four year research institution, the University of Pittsburgh. The University is located in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA and currently has a total undergraduate population of 19,326. In the fall of 2017, African American students totaled 984, or 5.1% of the total undergraduate student population. In contrast, the city of Pittsburgh has a Black or African American population of 24.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). About 60% of the students who apply to the University are granted offers of admissions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Figure 3 shows the demographic breakdown by race/ethnicity for the campus undergraduates from 1996-2016. Though the institution is becoming more diverse in racial demographics as White students made up 84% of the population in the fall of 1996 and only 72% as of the fall of 2017, it is very much a predominantly White institution.

Despite the decreasing percentage of the African American student population from around 9.6% in 1996 to 5.3% in 2016, the University of Pittsburgh has had a history of attempts to promote a diverse and inclusive campus. Interestingly, when adding students identifying as two or more races to the Black or African American population the levels stay somewhat consistent, around 9% percent each year although that does not necessarily mean students identifying as two or more races includes Black or African American as one of those races. However, creating a diverse and inclusive campus is an explicit goal of the current leadership as

outlined in strategic planning documents and student groups looking for better representation on campus, not only in the student body, but in faculty and leadership positions as well. Despite the commitment in the leadership for a more diverse and inclusive campus, it is often students within the system of higher education that can create the most change. For example, Pitt's Black Action Society was created in response to the need for change from the student's perspective in the 1960's.
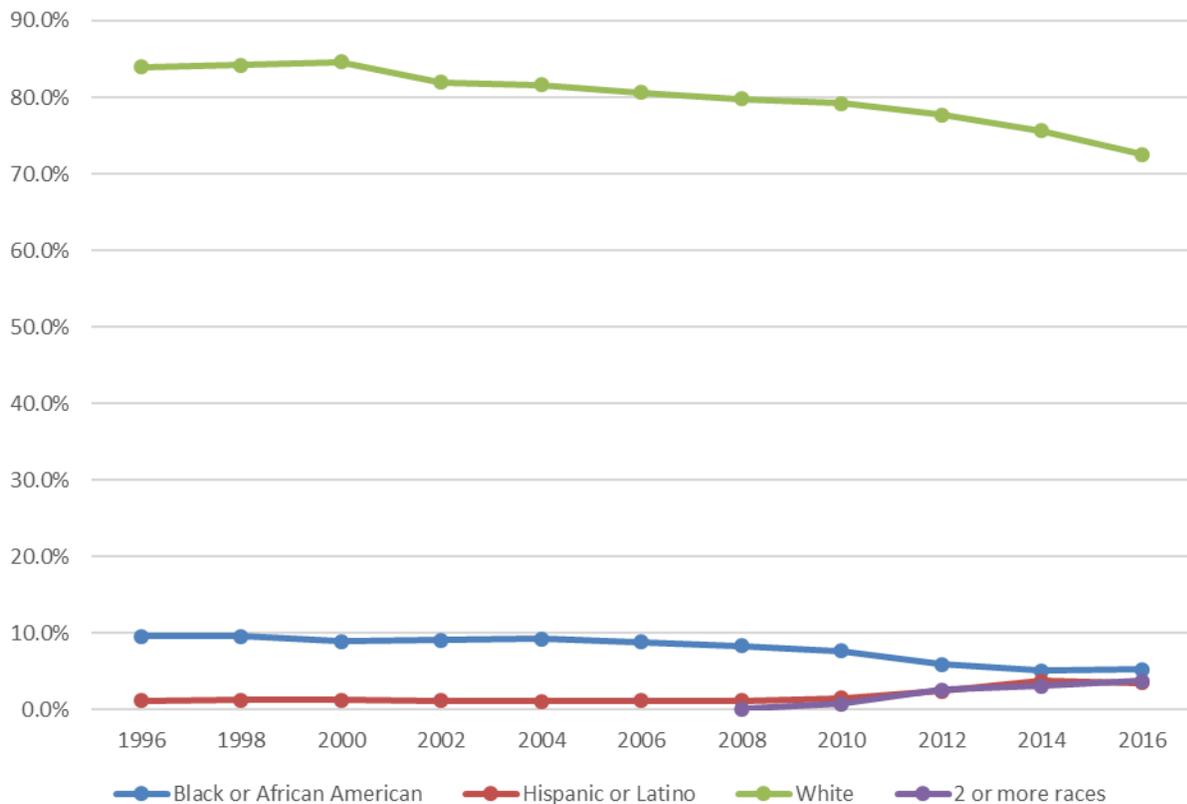
Figure 3. Demographics of University of Pittsburgh undergraduate student population at the Oakland campus from 1996 to 2016. Data taken from University Factbooks (http://ir.pitt.edu/facts-publications/factbook/).

In 1969 about 48 students staged a sit-in in the University's computer center to call attention to the lack of black students and faculty at Pitt (Ramirez, 2009).

> The demands were as follows: 1) that a recruiting team be employed by the University to specifically attract Black students; 2) that the true role of the Black man in history be incorporated into the history courses now being taught at the

university; 3) that the number of black faculty be increased and the present members elevated in stature. Also that prospective Black professors be interviewed by the Black Action Society prior to hiring and that our opinion be one of the determining factors in the final decision of hiring; and 4) that a Black Studies program, which would be staffed and directed by Black scholars in its entirety be instituted immediately at the University. This program would have the same status as a department but would be interdepartmental in nature. ("History of BAS," 2014)

At that time Black students numbered only 266 of the student population. After the demonstration and negotiations with administrators, Black student enrollment increased to 638 by the following fall, almost tripling in number (Ramirez, 2009). Such gains were in large part due to student involvement. Students played an integral role in the recruitment of new students and faculty, and the creation of the Department of Black Studies, now known as the Africana Studies Department (Ramirez, 2009). The organizers of the event called themselves the Black Action Society, a student group still in existence on campus today, continuing the mission of those first students.

While progress has certainly been made over the years, there is much work still to be done to see better outcomes and experiences for underrepresented students at Pitt. It is well documented that students are not retained or graduated at the same rates at institutions across the nation; differences in SES, race, and academic preparation all influence how well students perform in higher education and whether they eventually succeed in attaining a degree (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Michael B Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). Pitt is no exception. Six-year graduation rates are an average of 81% over four years (based on the entering classes in the fall term of 2007 through the fall term of 2010). White students graduate from Pitt within six years at 82% while Black or African American students graduate at only 69%, as Figure 4 shows. While this is better than the overall national average of 65% and 44%, respectively, for students attending four year institutions of similar selectivity to the University

of Pittsburgh there is still a clear disparity between the two groups which needs to be addressed (NCES, 2018).
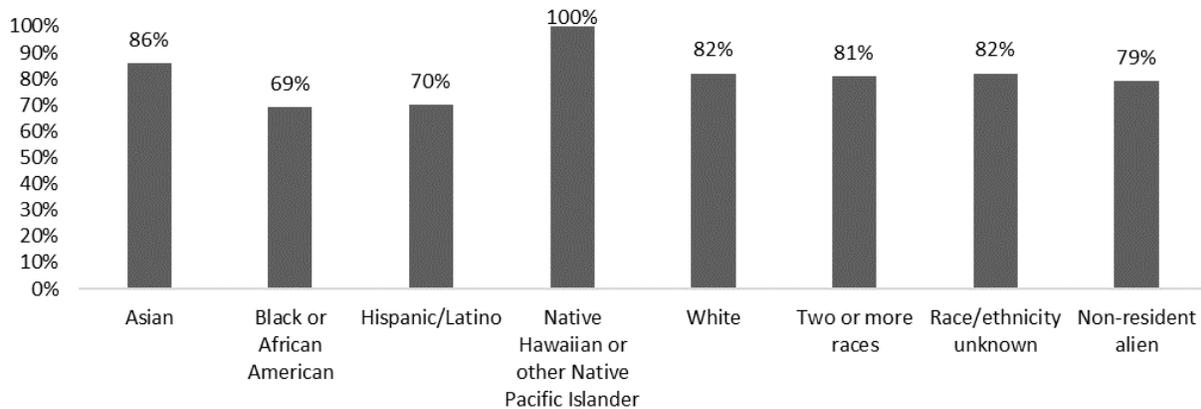
Figure 4. Percentage of full-time, first time students at the University of Pittsburgh who received a degree or award within 6 years and began their studies in fall 2010 (https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=university+of+pittsburgh&s=all&id=215293).

3.2   RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions of campus climate by African American students with the goal of learning more about what the institution may be able to do to improve the climate for African American students and close the gap in educational attainment. Literature documents the influential role campus climate plays in student success and decisions to persist in higher education, especially for underrepresented students (Gurin et al., 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Yi, 2008). The culturally engaging campus environment model theorizes that many aspects of the campus environment influence the success and persistence of students in higher education (Museus et al., 2016). With the understanding that perceptions of

climate are affected by many factors, the research question is deliberately broad to allow as many of these factors to be explored within the question as possible.

This study is guided by the following research question: How do African American students perceive campus climate? To answer this question, inquiry regarding how students experience campus climate within the various parts of an institution such as in the classroom, extracurricular experiences, residence halls/living communities, relationships with peers, faculty and staff, and overall institutional policies and practices were included to add further depth to the inquiry. Interview questions (see Appendix B) covered various aspects of the CECE model to determine how such aspects of the campus climate such as cultural familiarity, cross-cultural engagement and humanizing environments may influence a student's perception of their environment.

In approaching this research through the lens of critical theory, the research question is intentionally broad. Levinson (2011) states that critical theorists have similar goals which will be the focus of this research, "equality of economic and educational opportunity" and "social justice, equity, and respect for human dignity across lines of cultural difference such as class, nation, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and the like" (p. 10). This research question asks how campus climate is perceived by African American students. Students were asked how they experience the climate as an African American student, highlighting some of the social justice and equity issues which affect student experiences and perceptions. The discussion of the findings emphasizes areas where the institution may already be supporting an inclusive campus environment and those that students feel could better support inclusivity which will guide practitioners within the institution who work with the student population to ensure they are setting up students for success.

3.3   OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

I approach this research from a constructivist perspective, meaning that I believe that reality is socially constructed and that no single "true" reality exists (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, each individual within this study will have their own interpretation of reality based on their previous experiences and observations. Critical theory also informs this research. Levinson (2011) summarizes the development of modern critical theory as it relates to the expansive ideas of power, knowledge and identity. Using critical social theory in educational research can have important implications then as "education is a big part of the way social structures do their work to distribute power and knowledge and life chances unevenly" (Levinson, 2011, p. 15). As campus climate is influenced by external and internal factors (Hurtado et al., 1998), using a critical lens to understand more deeply how students are experiencing *and* interpreting the social structures influencing their success may be especially useful in supporting unique insights into student perceptions. Looking at campus climate through a critical lens will allow us to better understand how campus climate is affecting students marginalized by our educational system as it is currently structured.

Policies and interventions, as McLendon and Perna (2014) remind us, can maintain or exacerbate inequality despite the best intentions. As we look at campus climate, it is important to keep in mind the unintended effects the most well intentioned institutions may produce as it is introduced into a system of well-established inequality in the attempt to improve educational attainment for the students it serves. An effective method to understand complex phenomena from an individual's experience within this complex environment is by utilizing responsive interviewing which allows the researcher to hear about the topic of interest from someone with direct knowledge and experience with it (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

3.3.1 Data collection

Data for this study was collected in the form of 17 semi-structured interviews with junior or senior African American students at the institution. Use of a semi-structured interview allowed for natural follow-up questioning to arise which helped to understand the student perspective more in depth as it relates to the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews are a helpful method to understand an individual's perceptions as it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of why participants think the way they do (Menter et al., 2011). In this case, interviews allowed for exploration of student experiences or reflections which could provide deeper insight into why they help certain perceptions of their environment. The interview questions covered areas identified as relevant to perceptions of campus climate through the literature review such as relationships with faculty and peers, cross-cultural student engagement and sense of belonging (see Appendix B for interview script). This interview structure provides the format necessary to adequately address the research question while also providing flexibility to explore new topics as students respond to the prompts (Menter et al., 2011).

Participants were asked to take part in the study through various gatekeepers at the University who work with student organizations that have high rates of participation for African American students, as well as those targeted to the broader student population such as TRiO Student Support Services, Pitt EXCEL, RISE and BRIDGES. I was concerned that such sampling would limit study participants to students active in those student organizations which would limit the diversity in the sample. Students active in organizations may have similar perceptions based on their common experiences with the university or may be more positive about the institution due to their involvement on campus. On the other hand, students active in

the organizations may be more critical of the university as they may understand more about broader campus dynamics.

Due to the potential for bias within this sample, best efforts were made to reach a broader student population in order to attract students from outside these organizations as well. I attempted to utilize snowball sampling, encouraging study participants to communicate with other students about the research project to gain further interest (Merriam, 2009), but the few students that study participants connected me with either did not show to a scheduled interview or never responded to my attempts at communication. Despite only connecting with students through various campus gatekeepers I was able to interview students involved in the organizations in a wide range of capacities, some who didn't participate in the organization any longer but responded to the request for an interview and others who were very active with many falling in between.

Gatekeepers were provided with an email invitation to send out to students in their programs which outlined the purpose of the study and the type of students who would qualify for the study. Students were then instructed to contact me directly to express their interest (see Appendix A for email invitation script for gatekeepers). As students responded I asked a few questions to ensure they qualified for the study which included: Are you considered a part-time or full-time student? How long have you attended this institution? What is your academic year? What is your racial/ethnic identity? Only full-time students who have attended Pitt since their first year were eligible for the study as I wanted the students to have had experience with the climate for an extended period of time. If their answers indicated they were qualified, we scheduled a time to meet. All interviews were conducted in person in an office on campus. Only two students who contacted me were ineligible for the study as they were transfer students who

had only been at the University for one year. Though not relevant to this current study, given the unique perspective transfer students have on campus climate due to transferring in from another higher education context this would be an interesting population to explore in future research.

3.3.2 Participants

Initially, I had wanted to interview 30 students for this study but was unsuccessful in recruiting that many to participate. I did have interest from 22 students but five did not show to a scheduled interview or stopped responding to communication in the midst of determining a time to connect. This is a result likely of many factors. Due to the timing of the study, students were contacted just after the spring break holiday which is only a few weeks until the end of the term. Seniors were busy finishing their coursework, interviewing for jobs and graduate schools and preparing for graduation, so while they may have wanted to support this study, it was not a priority in their busy schedules. Juniors were similarly busy but I was able to connect with a few of them over the summer when their schedules were more open. However, if I hadn't connected with students before the end of the spring term I was not able to connect with any new students during the summer months.

Despite the smaller sample than desired, diversity exists within the sample that provided different perspectives on campus climate. Of the students interviewed, eight were in their junior year and nine were in the last year, two of those were fifth year seniors. Seven students were male and ten were female. I asked students to self-identify their racial and ethnic background which provided variation in responses. About half of the students identified as Black/African American ($n = 8$) while others identified as strictly African American ($n = 4$). Two students identified themselves as African. They were both born in Africa and came to the United States as

young children and despite spending most of their years in the U.S. and all of their school years here, they identify as African more than African American. Only one student identified as multiracial (White/African American) which provided a unique perspective in the study. It would be helpful to have more voices of multiracial students included, but it is possible that students who are multiracial did not respond to the request for participants since in that communication I requested students who identified as Black/African American.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	7	41.2%
Female	10	58.8%
Race		
African	2	11.8%
African American	4	23.5%
Afro-Latino	1	5.9%
Black/African American	8	47.1%
Caribbean-American	1	5.9%
Multiracial (White/African American)	1	5.9%
Year		
Junior	8	47.1%
Senior	7	41.2%
Fifth Year Senior	2	11.8%
Status		
First-Generation	3	17.6%
Not First-Generation	14	82.4%
Major		
STEM	11	64.7%
Not STEM	6	35.3%

Students were also categorized by their majors, either STEM or not STEM. Eleven of the students are studying in a STEM field. About half of the undergraduate degrees awarded from the University of Pittsburgh are in STEM fields so this is in alignment with the broader student population. Students in the STEM fields included three engineering majors in the Swanson

School of Engineering, one student studying rehabilitation science in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Science, one student studying computer science in the School of Computing and Information and one student studying Natural Sciences through the College of General Studies. The rest of the students were enrolled in the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences with majors such as biological sciences, economics and statistics, applied mathematics, neuroscience, ecology and evolution, and microbiology. The six students in non-STEM fields included students studying social work, communication, sociology, political science, urban studies, linguistics and anthropology. Eight of the students, only those in the School of Arts & Sciences, were pursuing more than one major along with at least one minor. Only three students interviewed were first-generation college students which seems to be consistent across the broader campus population.

3.4   DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of the analysis was to discover patterns within student perspectives regarding their campus environment. To do this, analysis was comprised of three main steps: transcription of each individual interview, first-cycle coding using in vivo coding and focused coding to describe common themes in the data (Saldaña, 2016). During each interview I took brief notes recording the student's body language in addition to highlighting parts of their responses that stood out to me in the moment. After each student interview, I took notes on my initial impressions and my general thoughts on the interview noting in particular things that seemed surprising or perhaps unique to that particular student. I referred back to these notes before coding each transcribed interview to remind myself of some of the body language of the student that I was not able to see

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in the transcribed interviews in addition to reacquainting myself with my initial impressions of the student and their experience.

After transcription, In Vivo coding was completed as a first step in the analysis. In order to understand more completely the student perspective, preserving their language and voice is important. This coding method allowed for the voices of the participants to be preserved as codes were taken directly from the actual language used by the study participants (Saldaña, 2016). Due to the highly contextual nature of this study, building a snapshot of the student experience at one particular institution, analysis relied heavily on the data to provide insights rather than analyzing the data through a particular theory-driven lens which is why In Vivo coding followed by focused coding was chosen for data analysis. The literature framing the study is helpful to understand what themes may have materialized but this study was emergent in nature, allowing the students to give voice to their true experience rather than assuming their experience based on prior studies within other institutional contexts (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010).

For example, one of the initial In Vivo codes used was "block it out" which several students used exactly to describe situations of racial micro-aggressions on campus and their need to "block out" such experiences from their mind in order to be successful. Other students utilized similar phrasing which then became a focused code in the second round of coding I referred to as "blocking out racial micro-aggressions." This second round of focused coding uncovered overarching categories within responses (Saldana, 2016). Another example is first coding for "safe spaces" which many students indicated they found within student organizations. Focused coding then categorized these codes within "student organizations provide safe spaces for students of color at a PWI." These categories emerged directly from the initial coding of student responses preserving their language and allowing the data to speak for itself.

3.5 LIMITATIONS

I believe utilizing this method to study perceptions of campus climate was a good fit for this study, but it does come with some limitations. An important limitation of using semi-structured interviews lies in the position of the researcher. Menter et al. (2011) claim that many characteristics of the interviewer such as age, gender and even how the researcher dresses, may affect the credibility of the interviewer with participants. In this particular study, race also plays an important role in the perception of the interviewer. Sensitive topics can always be difficult to discuss face to face, and the position of the interviewer can affect how much an interviewee is comfortable disclosing (Menter et al., 2011). Talking with students face to face may create an uncomfortable situation due to the fact that I am a White female, speaking to non-White students, regarding their experiences with intergroup interactions on a predominantly White campus. This may result in students holding back from saying some things they may say differently were they talking with someone of their own race. Best efforts were made to make students comfortable in our meeting by first asking less invasive or personal questions regarding the student's experience before asking questions that were more in depth as suggested by Merriam (2009). While students were recruited via email and in theory were not aware of my race when agreeing to participate, it is possible students knew me through my work on campus and decided not to participate due to this reason as well.

It is critically important to the success of this study to ensure I am aware of the perspective I bring to the table and how others may view my position. As Owen (2009) states in his article discussing White men in diversity leadership positions in higher education, "privileged identities unavoidably shape our epistemological perspectives" (p. 190). Though I am female, I

hold many privileges due to my race and class which will shape the construction of this research project and possible responses within interviews.

In addition, the relatively small sample size means that I cannot possibly capture every student's perception of the campus environment. Though I took steps to attempt to have as diverse a sample as possible, some student perspectives are naturally excluded. This small sample size also means that results of this study are not generalizable beyond the sample. That is not the goal of this research, however, as the purpose is to provide us more detail regarding student perspectives at this particular institution. Even this small group of student perspectives can help practitioners to better understand the student experience at Pitt as long as these limitations are noted. Despite these limitations, this method provided a good avenue for gaining a deeper perspective of student perceptions of campus climate and results may be transferable to similar contexts.

3.6   CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined the research question regarding students' perceptions of campus climate at the University of Pittsburgh in addition to a detailed description of the setting. I framed the decisions I made in choosing a qualitative case study design utilizing semi-structured interviews as a means to best understand the student experience in their own words, adding to the literature regarding quantitative data on campus climate. I described the process for requesting participation in this study and subsequently described the students I was able to interview. Though I did not interview the number of students I set out to, the participants did provide a diverse set of responses due to the variation within the group. This occurred despite the

purposeful sampling technique used to find study participants through gatekeepers within the University. I then explained the three step process for data analysis which kept student voices at the center of the analysis through the use of In Vivo followed by focused coding. Finally, I outlined the limitations of this research method and my position within it. In the next chapter, I describe the findings from this process of data collection and analysis.

4.0   SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The core of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model claims that a student within a culturally engaging campus will have "higher levels of sense of belonging and, in turn, greater likelihood of success in higher education" (Museus et al., 2017, p. 192). The students interviewed for this study provided a variety of perspectives on campus climate at the University. While elements of a culturally engaging campus did emerge from those stories demonstrating the existence of some of the components of cultural relevancy and cultural responsiveness required to have a culturally engaged campus environment, students seemed required to structure their environments in order to be able to find those elements on campus.

As expected, relationships affect many components of a culturally engaging campus but for students interviewed, three types of relationships emerged as being most influential to a student's sense of the environment: relationships with faculty, staff and peers. Each relationship has the potential to influence a student's sense of the cultural responsiveness and relevancy of their campus. Cultural relevancy refers to "the degree to which students' campus environments are relevant to their cultural backgrounds and identities" and responsiveness refers to "the extent to which campus programs and practices effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse students" (Museus et al., 2017, p. 192). Patterns emerged in which students find cultural relevancy through relationships with peers which foster cultural familiarity and validation, and sometimes cross-cultural interactions. Cultural responsiveness was found through collectivist

orientations within specific sectors of the campus, and humanized environments, proactive philosophies and holistic support provided by some members of the faculty and staff.

Students view the overall campus environment through the lens of these relationships they have on campus whether it is the more formal, forced, relationships with faculty, those of the peers they choose to surround themselves with or the staff who is with them throughout their college experience. These relationships are deliberately structured to ensure students create a positive campus community in support of their own success. These relationships also help them navigate an overall environment that is competitive (not collectively oriented as a culturally engaging campus would be) and deal with the stressors of being a student of color at a predominantly White institution. Students must find a way to establish a supportive community on campus in order to handle the emotional and mental load of simply navigating a competitive higher education environment as an African American student at a predominantly White institution.

However, while students make attempts to structure their environment in ways that align with a culturally engaging campus there are many factors that are outside of their control. Research suggests the value of cross-cultural engagement in promoting an inclusive campus environment, but students expressed complex emotions and outcomes of such experiences. Due to the very nature of attending a PWI, students of color cannot choose when they interact with students unlike themselves as they may be the only student of color in a lecture of 250 students. Such kinds of situations require African American students to engage across cultures in their everyday life on campus. Students react to this position in different ways. Some students confront uncomfortable situations while others consciously alter their behavior to avoid the possibility of negative interactions. Regardless of how students choose to respond, experiences

of cross-cultural engagement are often difficult for students despite benefitting from those interactions in many ways.

Through these student stories, patterns emerged around the importance of relationships in successfully navigating the campus environment, the toll that being a student of color at a predominantly White institution takes on students as individuals and the complex experiences of cross-cultural engagement within the institution. While all of these elements of student perceptions can be found within the CECE model posed by Museus, Yi and Saelua (2017), analysis of the data indicates students may respond differently than expected to some of the components of a culturally engaging campus. This chapter summarizes the three themes which emerged from this study as related to the components of a culturally engaging campus set forth by the CECE model.

4.1   THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

For students of color at a PWI, relationships are particularly important to their perceptions of their environment. Certainly it is true that for any student in higher education relationships influence perceptions of climate. For students of color, it is particularly important due to the increased mental and emotional load they take on as underrepresented students on a predominantly White campus. Some relationships students choose to take part in, like many of their relationships with peers and even some chosen staff relationships. Faculty relationships are not chosen as easily and are more forced for students. This seems to be an important distinction; some relationships students can choose to include as part of their campus environment while

others they are forced to make work. In this way, students have some control over their environment but not complete control. Most often, students choose to include students of similar racial identities in their peer support network which provides a sense of cultural familiarity and validation fulfilling some of the components of cultural relevancy. Cultural responsiveness refers to how the institution itself responds to the needs of a diverse student body. This can mostly be found through relationships with individuals of the institution: faculty and staff.

Faculty relationships to a degree, cannot be chosen, as students must take certain courses and therefore must find ways to form relationships with faculty in order to be successful. While students spoke about some faculty relationships that supported a sense of cultural responsiveness, it was relationships with the staff, which are more frequently chosen, not forced, that more supported a sense of cultural responsiveness. For students interviewed each type of relationship fulfills different components of cultural relevancy and cultural responsiveness. Each type of relationship then plays a different but significant role in the student experience. How these relationships fulfill cultural relevancy and responsiveness is discussed in greater detail below.

4.1.1 Faculty relationships demonstrate humanized environments, proactive philosophies and holistic support

For the students in this study, relationships with faculty members varied from poor to very strong, but for the most part, students reported generally good or neutral relationships with faculty on campus. When describing positive relationships with faculty, students reported those relationships involved much more than just connecting over coursework but rather included faculty who had a particular interest in who they are and where they want to go in life. These

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types of relationships are good indicators of what the CECE model categorizes as "humanized educational environments" which refer to environments in which "institutional agents" (in this case the faculty) "care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with students" (Museus et al., 2017, p. 192).

Students explained such "humanized environments" as instances when faculty went beyond the basic teaching of curriculum and instead showed genuine interest in them as individuals. This seems to send a message to students that despite being in large lectures or only working with a particular professor for one term, positive relationships were forged on the simple fact that a professor demonstrated that they care about their individual success. These faculty members took time to learn about their academic and career interests, encouraged students to pursue those interests, let them know about research or internship opportunities, wrote letters of recommendation or simply took the time to have meaningful conversations about more than just an assignment or exam. This signals to students that a faculty member cares enough about them to take the time to develop a meaningful relationship with their students, not just a relationship based on success in a singular course but rather success as a whole person. Kevin explains, "It's nice when you can connect with a faculty member and talk about things other than just class assignments." Kevin also appreciated a professor that noticed his hard work in a course in a meaningful way: "He actually took time to write on my test and show that he acknowledged the improvement that I had."

Relationships like this made students feel "valued" and that they "care" about their students' success. For Brandon, it helps that the faculty member can see him as an individual rather than a number: "It makes you feel less like just a drop in the pond and more as like a significant facet in the professor's eyes, like they find value in you and that's a great thing." In

turn, this made students want to work harder in their courses and feel respected by what they bring as individuals to the classroom. Jeremy explains that while he has had some faculty relationships that have been positive in this way, it is not the typical type of faculty relationship that he has and considers it to be "refreshing" when he does come across a faculty member with that level of care for their students:

> It was just refreshing for a professor to ask me about myself and not just how I was going to do in their class or how I was going to perform in their class. It was just refreshing to hear that, just to hear the care that she had for students.

Additionally, for some students, faculty provided an even higher level of support. When students struggled with a particular course, or challenging situations outside of their academics, conversations with professors were necessary. In these circumstances, faculty play an integral role in whether students are able to be successful in their coursework and for the most part, for students who found themselves in more serious situations, the students communicated that faculty were receptive to their concerns and willing to help them reach their potential. Students describing relationships like this have been able to find the holistic support and proactive philosophies the CECE model claims is integral to a culturally engaging campus environment. With these kinds of relationships, students are able to confide in and trust a faculty member who is willing and able to provide them with the support they need regardless of whether it is related to their particular class or something more personal, going above and beyond what they may normally expect of a faculty member.

For two students, Layla and Roger, professors played a direct role in supporting them through an especially challenging period by being available to listen to their problems and offer their advice and support. In her sophomore year, Layla was taking a capstone course for one of

her majors, much earlier than she probably should have taken such a course. She was the only sophomore in the small seminar class and was not prepared for the work load. In addition, she was also struggling with some financial issues at the time while managing a challenging schedule. She was getting little sleep and falling behind in the class. When her professor approached her, noticing that she wasn't doing well not just in class but noticing her lack of sleep, he provided her some advice on handling her responsibilities and allowed her extra time to turn in some of her work. Layla remarked, "I had no hope, he gave me hope;" it was a turning point for her not just in that class but in her whole outlook on her semester. That conversation allowed a strong relationship to form, which she still maintains today, and allowed her to finish the course and continue in her major field of study. Layla believes if this professor did not provide such support she would not have been able to finish out her degree in that major.

In his senior year, Roger found himself grappling with some personal problems that were taking a toll on his academics. Knowing that if he didn't act his grades would suffer, he proactively reached out to his professors that semester. One professor in particular not only showed empathy for Roger's situation but then provided support that went beyond just what he could do to make accommodations for him in the class. He directed Roger to some external resources to help him which proved to be very beneficial in the long run. Roger commented, "I was able to talk to a faculty member and they actually gave me tangible advice, and they were very considerate of what was going on."

These kinds of proactive philosophies may be of particular value for first generation college students who have limited knowledge of the higher education environment and the resources and opportunities available on campus. For Alexis, a first generation college student, a faculty member helped her in many more aspects than just her coursework, spending time talking

to her about possible careers, how to find scholarships and study abroad experiences, and pointing out the opportunities which would allow her to make the most of her time at Pitt; she reported, "He literally went above and beyond to make sure that I had success no matter how many ups and downs I had." Alexis never thought she would be able to study abroad but through her relationship with a faculty member, also one of her advisors in the School of Social Work, she was able to take advantage of opportunities she had never before considered.

James also found a strong faculty mentor in a Biology professor that noticed his potential in his first semester as a student. He was awarded a special acknowledgement for outstanding first year students in the Biology department and was asked to become an undergraduate teaching assistant (UTA) for the course in his second semester, something that he continued throughout the rest of his career. This helped him to establish a strong relationship with a faculty member that supported him in many aspects of his professional and academic development. He explains:

> It's been kind of great, ever since being a UTA for multiple times and doing the teaching project with her. She's been a great faculty mentor. She is pointing me out to opportunities and she is giving me the recommendations for it. It's been a good relationship with her.

As mentioned previously, students structure their environment in ways to promote their own success but they cannot do that as easily in regards to their faculty relationships. Therefore, it is important to also note some of the negative experiences students have had with faculty members that they cannot avoid. Though for the most part, students reported positive experiences, or at the very least neutral relationships with faculty, nearly all students ($n = 15$) reported at least one negative experience or poor relationship with a faculty member. These

experiences varied from students simply feeling that a professor is unapproachable and intimidating, as Charis shared when a professor refused to meet with students outside of their office hours even if they had a class conflict during that time, to refusing to answer questions a student brought to office hours. In another reported example of a negative interaction, Chloe recalled a professor making sexist remarks frequently in the class causing her to leave one particular course meeting after only 20 minutes of a 2.5 hour session because she felt too uncomfortable to stay. Allison did not respond with any specific negative relationships with faculty members but overall, she explained the basic relationship with any of her professors to as, "You are the professor, I'm a student. I show up to class, I do what I'm supposed to do. You give me a grade. That's it. Like no personal connection."

Jeremy finds that there are differences between faculty who seem to make teaching and their students a priority who do find ways to connect with students in a meaningful way while others prioritize their research and take less time getting to know their students:

I've met faculty that did not want to teach, they're more focused on their research. There was just a lack of concern for students' well being within the class, the course material, and the way that things are being presented. Some faculty that are tenured could do whatever they want and because of that, they made it very clear they could do whatever they want and they make decisions based on the fact that they can do whatever they want.

This perception of professors may vary between departments. Despite most of the students interviewed coming from STEM fields, most of the positive interactions with faculty they described occurred within departments in the social sciences or humanities. Evelyn, a double major in political science and economics, describes the relationships she has with professors within political science differently than those in the economics department: "They

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[economics professors] are less willing to hear you out, they are more just like, 'do it on your own' kind of thing. They are not as helpful as the political science department." Similarly, Kristiana describes her most positive relationships with professors being within the English department as she just finds it difficult to connect with faculty in her large classes within biology and chemistry. Charis, a senior molecular biology major, shares this sentiment as well:

> I definitely feel more welcomed [in the Africana Studies department] and comfortable going to my professors outside of classes. But in the Bio department, where my science classes are, it sometimes feels detached still, the classes are so big and I know that they try but, it sometimes it just still feels detached.

These experiences with faculty do not reinforce a student's perception of a culturally engaging campus as those relationships do not further humanize the environment. After multiple bad experiences with faculty members in one of her majors who were not personable and who were not supportive when she was seeking help to understand the course material, Evelyn simply gave up on attempting to work with faculty in that department and instead tried to get through her courses on her own. Evelyn wishes she had more friends or knew more students within that major so she could go to them for help instead of having to work with the professors. It is possible to then see how multiple negative experiences with faculty across the university could influence a student's view of the overall cultural responsiveness of the campus if students are continually seeking help and not finding it in their faculty. As Brandon stated, "One good relationship with a faculty member doesn't rescue the entire experience here. There's all these other things that come up."

4.1.2 Staff relationships often provide deeper support in cultural responsiveness than faculty

While every student interviewed could think of at least one faculty member with whom they were able to develop a strong relationship that supported them in some aspect of their college experience, overwhelmingly students reported more, and stronger, relationships with staff on campus. In contrast to how they describe their few impactful relationships with faculty, students were eager to describe their relationships with staff members. Typically, students interacted with staff through campus jobs, student organizations and academic advising. For many, even those reporting at least one or more strong relationships with faculty, praise for the staff they interact with on campus was more abundant and more specific than how they described their faculty relationships. Jeremy mentioned only two professors with which he felt he was able to establish a good relationship; he commented on the frequency in which he dealt with professors who he felt were not interested in him or his success. However, when asked about staff on campus, Jeremy remarked, "I could go on and on about great experiences that I've had with staff here at the university, some of the greatest people I've ever met. They've been my mentors, my motivators." This is a sentiment that was shared by most students.

There are many reasons this may be the case but one important one is that for many students, their interactions with staff came through the student organizations in which they chose to participate. This is partly how students structure their environment to ensure their needs are met. Students noted another important distinction as to why this might be the case. Staff are often part of their journey from the beginning of their college experience. Evan, a fifth year senior, emphasizes that "they're interested in me succeeding – since freshman year they have been a part of my success all the way through and still are to this day." Charis felt similarly about the staff

within one of her organizations when she commented, "I just feel like in general they're more supportive, they care more about what's going on in my life, personally…some of them become part of that journey with you."

This is again in alignment with the proactive philosophies and humanized educational environments outlined in the CECE model. However, when students describe these qualities in their relationships with staff members it is more extensive and spans years of a student's education rather than just one or two courses as described with faculty. Rather than just being in a class for one term with a particular professor, staff may work with them over the course of their entire college career, or at least longer portions of it. Staff relationships often include much broader aspects of their life as well; it is not just limited to a specific course but rather can concern their personal, professional and academic development. As noted earlier in relationships with faculty, it is the connection beyond coursework where students feel that someone cares about them. Staff are often in unique positions, especially the staff working with student organizations in advising roles or supervising student workers, to support students through their entire journey in higher education. Such close relationships become an important component of many student's support systems, even being referred to as "family" as Krista explains regarding staff within one of her student organizations, "They get involved not just in your academic life but in your professional and also your personal life, so, I mean they become like family."

Some students, like Allison, described deep relationships with staff who acted as supervisors in on campus jobs. Allison has worked as a resident assistant (RA) for three years and in that role, she works closely with many staff on campus. She believes they know her better than many of her peers do on campus. Ultimately, she sees them as "more than just supervisors…they are people who are always checking in on me to make sure that I'm really

okay and it's helpful because they're the people that actually see me." Allison describes herself as a fairly introverted person who tends to keep to herself; she doesn't have a large network of close peers, just a very small group of friends that she only sees occasionally due to her busy RA schedule and schoolwork so these staff members who she sees on a regular basis are in a better position to notice when she is struggling than anyone else. Because they care enough to check in with her and make sure she's doing ok, Allison trusts them more than most people on campus. In fact, Allison considered not returning for her senior year but knowing that the Residence Life staff and her fellow resident assistants were counting on her to return, she didn't want to "let them down."

Having access to such relationships on campus provides students with the responsiveness from campus individuals that can make big differences in how a student perceives their campus environment. For Chloe, it actually made a profound impact on her experience. In her first year, Chloe went through a rather traumatic experience but did not reach out to faculty or even any friends regarding the situation. However, when she became a resident assistant in her sophomore year and developed a strong relationship with her resident director (RD), she found someone on campus that she trusted enough to divulge her experience. The RD was then able to provide the appropriate support that Chloe lacked when she tried to handle the situation on her own.

Chloe describes this as a major turning point in her college career; before meeting her RD, Chloe was unsure of her fit at Pitt and whether she wanted to continue here but being able to have such a good relationship with her RD, who was able to help her through such an emotional situation and continued to be a close confidant in the years that followed, played a significant role in her student experience. At the core of it, Chloe felt that she was "able to disclose so much to her," and the RD in turn was able to "empathize" with her and "be very available no matter

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how busy she was." Without that kind of support, that Chloe did not find in other places on campus, even in her peers, Chloe reported she may have left school entirely.

4.1.3 Peer relationships reflect students' need to structure safe spaces on campus

The influence of peer relationships is well documented in higher education literature and this study confirms the positive effect peer relationships can have on a student's experience; for students interviewed peer relationships provided support, encouragement, confidence and a sense that they were not alone in their experiences on campus. Over half of the students in the study (n = 11), considered the network of peers included in their support network on campus to be mostly Black while only three considered their peer group to be diverse, including Black, other minority students and some White students, and the remaining three students have a peer group to be majority White. Students referred to the importance of having a peer group of students who looked like them and could relate to what they were going through in a way that students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds could not. This can be an important source of cultural familiarity and culturally validating environments which the CECE model claims is relevant to a student feeling culturally relevant in their campus environment; by surrounding themselves with peers of similar backgrounds, students created an environment on campus in which they feel that their culture is valued and understood by others.

Evan felt that his peers helped to ensure he found his place on campus, particularly upperclassmen students when he first arrived on campus. Evan was able to take advantage of a summer program for underrepresented engineering students which brought him to campus two weeks before the rest of his cohort to take classes and prepare for the upcoming academic year. There he found other students who he was instantly able to connect with on many levels, one of

which was being an African American student at a predominantly White institution. Evan made connections not just with his peers but also with older students in the program who were able to direct him to the important opportunities and resources early on in his college experience. Forming bonds with these students early gave him confidence with which to approach his courses once the fall term began and he took courses with the rest of the incoming class. The relationships he formed in those first two weeks are some of the same relationships he reports as part of his close network of friends even in his fifth year. Jeremy, who also participated in this same program in his first year (the students attended in different years), remarked, "I feel like if I didn't have Pitt EXCEL I would probably struggle more academically here at the university or my support system might be a little different." Students attribute their academic success in part to the support received from their peers.

Like Evan and Jeremy, many other students talked about how the peer relationships formed through student organizations played a major role in supporting them through their college experience by providing a source of cultural familiarity and cultural validation. Similar to Evan's story, students reported organizations as being helpful in feeling supported on campus by their peers, particularly older peers or mentors within the organizations. Younger students could see and draw from the success of older students who were similar to themselves – they could see themselves in those student mentors and leaders providing role models for their future endeavors. These mentors were able to provide valuable insights into the college experience with things like which professors were preferred, how to find research experiences, how to study or good classes to take; but this is also where students mentioned having necessary support from staff members as well.

While students reported being involved in a wide range of organizations from Black student organizations like Black Action Society or the African Students Organization to service fraternities or special interest groups like the Barbell Club or Sports Club, a majority of the students ($n = 14$) were involved in at least one organization considered to be a part of "Black Pitt." Most of those students ($n = 11$) were then involved in two or more Black organizations. Some examples of the organizations within "Black Pitt" are the African Students Organization, Black Action Society, RISE (Reaching Inside Your Soul for Excellence), NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers), BRIDGES (Building Relationships, Inspiring Diversity and Generating Excellence in Scholarship) and RCMBA (Roberto Clemente Minority Business Association), among many others. Students chose a variety of organizations in which to be involved in with different goals in mind, whether related to their eventual profession/career, hobbies or interests, or leadership development. It is interesting that with all the choices students have, Pitt has more than 600 student organizations to choose from, nearly all students in this study chose to participate in at least one, if not more than one Black student organization. This indicates that for students of color on a predominantly White campus, such spaces are sought after and fulfill an important role in their college experience.

Brandon describes the importance of these organizations in providing an opportunity to connect with like-minded students who can better relate to his own experience and help to build his confidence; he said, "The interactions I've had here [within Black student organization] have so easily made me more confident walking around on campus… it's so much easier because when somebody can really truly empathize with you it's just different." Students need spaces on campus where they can be themselves without having to explain themselves, part of the cultural familiarity component of the CECE model. Additionally, as Brandon went on to say, these

organizations provide a sense of teamwork and mutual success that is missing within the broader campus environment. For him, the students he connected with the most within "Black Pitt" were other Black, male, pre-medical students. He spoke of their "iron sharpens iron" mentality which motivated them each to push themselves harder and accomplish their goals while also being their "brother's keeper" and having a "lift your neighbor up mentality" that on the whole, the campus does not seem to employ.

Teo also mentions the need to find places on campus which give him a space to "detox" from the rest of the academic and social environment providing an "outlet" for his shared interests with students who look like him. While Teo is involved in many organizations on campus and is one of the students interviewed who participated in more than just organizations considered to be part of "Black Pitt," he noted a particular need to be able to get away from the stress of his academic life and relax with peers who understood him more completely, where he could find a sense of cultural familiarity lacking in other spaces on campus.

For Layla, a first generation and low-income student, finding a group of students who could not only relate to her on a cultural level but also a socioeconomic one was invaluable. She even went so far as to say, "if it weren't for the Black folks here, I would have quit a while ago." At the end of our interview, she commented that she would tell a poor African American student not to enroll at Pitt, that they should go somewhere else because her experience has been so difficult. Her struggles with finances required her to work two or three jobs. She also found the academics more rigorous than she expected. This combination of challenges led her to want to quit many times. Though she made some strong connections with staff and a couple faculty members, she credits her ability to stay at Pitt and succeed to the peer relationships she was able to form within a Black Bible study group. The group included several other students of lower

socioeconomic backgrounds in addition to sharing similar racial identities: "A lot of the students were in similar socioeconomic backgrounds and had a lot of the same complaints about school. It was good for morale that we could get together and vent sometimes and encourage each other and push each other."

While these Black student organizations provided safe spaces for many students, for Chloe, who identifies as White and African American, it caused her to question where she fit into the campus environment. She had her own struggles as an underrepresented student at a PWI but didn't feel like she fit in with the Black student organizations. Chloe is one of only three students who reported not being involved in a Black student organization commenting, "I've always just struggled with where I fall racially in this community." She does not see herself as White but she does not see herself as fitting in with the Black organizations either. Chloe wanted to belong in those groups but hesitated going to their events not because she didn't think they would allow her, but because she didn't see herself as fitting in there. Chloe talked about wanting to find other students like her, wondering if there was a "mixed" student organization that she could belong to. It is clear that she wanted to find a group or organization in which she could share in that kind of common experience with her peers but was unsuccessful in doing so.

Roger, another student who reported not participating in "Black Pitt" wished he had known about it earlier in his college experience. Roger didn't know that these organizations existed until his junior year when he had already pledged a fraternity and had seemed to find his niche elsewhere. But if he could do it over again, he thinks a connection to those organizations would have made his difficult transition his first couple years a little easier. Roger talked at length about the challenges he faced as one of only a few students of color within his major field of study, the others being younger and further behind in coursework than he is. He felt like he is

constantly having to prove himself in his major. If he had been able to find a group of people who shared this experience he thinks it would have made his first couple years easier than it was. Roger pledged a fraternity, not a historically Black Greek letter organization, in part because he was looking for those close connections and while he found them there, he thinks he is missing out on some of the support his peers are getting from their Black organizations.

4.2   THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL LOAD OF ATTENDING A PWI AS A STUDENT OF COLOR

As important as relationships with faculty, staff and especially their peers are for students, they are not enough to overcome the broader challenges students face within the campus environment in which they interact with others. While students can feel valued and safe within their specific spaces or groups on campus, or feel validated by some professors and staff, the overall environment that they inhabit is one in which they are constantly making compromises to be included. This affects their perception of the climate and causes students to realize they cannot rely on finding acceptance on a broader scale. That is why students find such strength and a sense of belonging within their student organizations. For most students, their sense of belonging is intimately tied to their involvement in student organizations as they feel as though they belong there, but belong less as part of the broader campus community.

Being a student of color in a "White space" can take a toll on students' mental and emotional state. Brandon states it directly when he mentions:

I wish I would have known how challenging it is to navigate, I mean I knew I wasn't going to an HBCU but I wish I knew how hard it would be to navigate in like a White crowd. How mentally straining it would be.

Students understood when entering Pitt that they would be entering a predominantly White environment but students seemed surprised at how much that kind of environment would affect them psychologically, and how that influences their overall perception of the campus environment. Others described it as a "culture shock" when they realized that they were often the only student of color in a lecture hall of 300 students. They knew they would be a minority but were surprised to see how much of a minority on campus. Students described the first few months of school as a transition in which they were searching for their communities on campus; some, like Evan and Jeremy found it early on in student groups for underrepresented students, while others, like Evelyn, took a little longer to connect with the Black student organizations that eventually became their support network.

Students reported many challenges in handling this aspect of college. When asked what she wished she would have known before starting at Pitt Kristiana reported, "How important it is to take care of yourself, to not get dragged into the college mentality." She references the "college mentality" as being the pressure that many students feel within the competitive environment at Pitt. For students of color, they also feel the added pressure of needing to succeed to "prove" that they belong here or "just have to do better" than their peers. Within an already competitive environment, particularly in the STEM fields, the mental and emotional struggles of school can be quite a challenge. This again, is why students seem to seek out student organizations where they can find the kind of collectivist orientation that is lacking within the broader campus environment.

Another student, Amber, also in a STEM field, referenced the intense stress she feels as a student, especially a scholarship student required to maintain a 3.0 GPA. Amber talked about how she felt she needed to study all day every Saturday, causing her to miss some professional development opportunities which many of her peers attended, because she feared that the school would change their decision to give her a scholarship. She worried that she wasn't good enough and she would lose her funding, "I felt like the admissions people would like re-decide if they wanted me or not." Every term she was working with her professors, attending tutoring, going to extra review sessions, doing everything she thought she needed to do to be the student that she thought she was supposed to be. Amber dreaded returning to campus at the start of each term knowing the stress that she would face particularly from having to prove herself within her academic coursework.

Students studying in the STEM fields also spoke about the differences they see in their classes for their major and other general education requirements they may be taking which are outside of their STEM major. Charis is a double major in Microbiology and Africana Studies. She commented that "in the Africana department, I definitely felt more welcomed and comfortable" but within her Biology classes she felt "pushed aside." Charis did not have many friends within her major as she "never felt accepted there." Despite this, Charis is a very successful student and has navigated her experience well, however, she attributes her ability to get through her tough courses to being able to have spaces on campus where she can get away from the stress of her classes and in particular, have relationships with other African American students in other STEM fields (especially more advanced students who acted as mentors) to help her through.

Of the 17 students interviewed, 11 are majoring in a STEM field. Of the 11 students that specifically mentioned the stress and mental load of their college experience, nine of those students are STEM majors. Also of interest, even though only seven males were interviewed for this study (and all of them are STEM majors) six of those male students commented on the mental and emotional load of being a student at Pitt, a higher rate than female students. Though hard to draw any substantial conclusions with such a small sample size, this may indicate the intense pressure that African American male students in particular face on campus. Roger refers to it as having to "defy" the negative stereotypes people may have of him as a Black male even though he just wants to be seen as an individual who has value in his own right. Brandon also commented on the pressures associated with being a minority on campus saying:

> We are a representation of our whole race to a lot of people. So, that brings its added pressure that you feel anywhere you go, anytime you speak out in a predominantly White event or what have you that you are kind of taking on a bigger challenge than a lot of our counterparts ought to.

4.2.1 Racial micro-aggressions

Part of the reason students of color face increased mental and emotional stress at a PWI is due to the racial micro-aggressions that all but one of the students interviewed mentioned as having to deal with many times throughout their career. Students described incidents such as being asked what sport they played on several separate occasions as others assume they are here on an athletic scholarship. In reality, many of the students interviewed have academic scholarships – though their peers, or even faculty, sometimes found this hard to believe. Brandon describes it as a time that "really showed us the pre-conceived notions some people have about our status here

at Pitt – knowing that people out there think that we couldn't possibly be Neuroscience majors on the pre-med track; in some ways, it really discouraged us." Teo mentioned this happening to him as well. Despite only being 5'3" and a self-proclaimed "scrawny guy," his peers often asked what position he played on the basketball team.

Another common story involves group projects. Students mentioned that in groups, their voices are not heard as clearly as a peer – they may provide an answer to the group but the group will go in another direction and in the end, the student was right. When faced with this situation, as Kristiana commented she did frequently, she reported to "just do my own thing" so as not to let the group keep her from doing well or learning the content. She doesn't consider herself to be a shy person and she is dedicated to her course of study so she reported that she always tried to steer the group in the right direction but ultimately, she was looking out for herself. Kristiana claimed to complete group projects on her own just to make sure she learned what she needed to know regardless of what role she was supposed to play. She viewed those students as holding her back and she would not let that happen so she often took on a larger work load.

Krista told similar stories, specific to laboratory environments, of no one wanting to partner with her or, when they do, not listening to her ideas or strategies even though most of the time she is on the right track. However, Krista claimed that could be partially due to her race but it could also be gender. As a Chemical Engineering major there are few women in her courses. Now that she is in her senior year, the females tend to stick together in their own groups and avoid having to partner with males at all. In these groups, she feels her voice is heard and respected more so than when she was in groups with all or mostly males.

Other examples of micro-aggressions students have faced on campus include people crossing the street when they see them coming (mentioned only by male students), assumptions

that Black males must be athletes, comments from peers that the only reason they are here is because the school needed to fill a "quota," and assumptions that students couldn't be successful as a STEM major. Each student reacts to these situations differently. For some, they make an attempt to "correct the ignorance" when faced with situations in which someone may have made assumptions about who they are because of the color of their skin. Brandon describes this as "picking away at the problem one by one," a slow process that individual students take on with others. For example, when students came out to support an event, a speaker sponsored by the Republican student group on campus, Brandon found himself attempting conversations with people explaining why some of the terms the speaker used were offensive to him. When students assumed he played basketball and was here on an athletic scholarship, Brandon explained that he actually was here on an academic scholarship and is planning to attend medical school. But with the small population of underrepresented students on campus, Brandon believes it will take a lot to really see any differences in how students see each other.

Jeremy describes this a little differently though with the same end goal: showing others that they are more than the color of their skin and have value in this space. While Brandon seems to take the approach of having conversations with individuals and addressing the issues, Jeremy takes it as a reason to push himself harder and show others how great he can be:

> It just makes me go harder, it just makes me want to do better. For me, people discriminating against me or think that I'm not this or that, now I just have to stomp on you, for lack of a better term. What that means is that now I'm just going to shine in your face and remind you that I'm great, our people are great, there's no reason for you to be prejudiced.

Both students note that the process is hard partially because there are so few African American students on campus that it means if they want things to change they take on more of the burden to confront issues when they arise. While the typical representation of successful engineers remains White males, Jeremy may be only one example of a successful African American engineer that a student sees. While there may be many instances of racial micro-aggressions on campus, Brandon may only witness and then confront a few of them. Students recognize that the climate could be more inclusive and therefore take on the burden of changing it themselves, believing it is part of their responsibility as an African American student in this environment to do so.

Despite feeling a need to correct for ignorance when found, overall most students do feel a sort of compassion or understanding of the students committing these offenses. Students frequently commented that they believe that the reason students hold certain beliefs or see their behavior as nothing other than acceptable is due to their background and upbringing. For this reason, students often spoke of these instances acknowledging that the individual student who may have offended them or assumed them to fit some sort of stereotype was not necessarily hateful or racist but rather a product of their previous environments. Three students mentioned experiences in which they were told they were the first African American student another student had ever met. They then felt more empathy for the offender and had more patience and desire to talk with them about their misconceptions and help them to learn about their culture and background. This work, however, is taxing. Kristiana describes it as "exhausting" to always feel like you have to educate others about your culture:

> I feel like it's more exhausting for me than anything like, 'Oh, okay, well, let me go out and show them what it is like to be black, let me help you learn my culture.' It's just like

a lot of work I just don't feel like doing all the time. I feel like black people and like people of color are always expected to adapt to the White world… It's exhausting, like I have other things to do.

On top of the already competitive academics, this makes the college journey more difficult for students of color. Allison, while she often willingly takes on this role, sometimes wishes people would "just read" so she didn't have to do the work for them:

I've taken more of the approach of like patiently explaining things to people a lot. Which is fine for me at some points but then when you think about it, like all the times it's like 'wow.' Why can't people just read so then I don't have to do it? I think that's why I find like my closest friends on staff are black. I don't have to explain anything they just get it.

These responses show support for the CECE model denoting culturally relevant knowledge as being an aspect of overall cultural relevance. Students feeling like they have to consistently be explaining who they are and why they belong here takes away from the sense that they are seen as relevant and valuable within the broader community. As students mentioned, student organizations, and especially Black student organizations, are where they feel most connected to Pitt and a community on campus. When referencing the broader campus, few students mentioned any sort of sense of belonging and those that did referenced only a few times or events in which they have felt connected to the overall campus such as sporting events, concerts or community service projects. When having to explain themselves and their culture within White spaces, students felt less like they belonged in those spaces, though some believe the only way to change that is to be patient and educate those around them. It would make sense then that if such instances of micro-aggressions and the need for correcting ignorance was lower, students may feel a greater sense of belonging to the campus outside of their student groups.

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For others, instead of addressing any micro-aggressions, they choose to ignore them in order to preserve their energy for other pursuits and be able to focus on reaching their own goals. Though they recognize the problems, they do not choose to educate others as some of their peers do. This is a self-preservation technique. When asked his thoughts on some of the micro-aggressions he experienced, Kevin responded, "I have a direction in my life where I want to go and that stuff will keep me behind." When such incidents occur some students, like Kevin, move on trying not to let it get to them, feeling as if they now have to work harder, be stronger to prove their worth in this environment. More than half of the students interviewed, 10 of the 17, mentioned the need to "block out" some of the negative situations and micro-aggressions they have experienced. They recognize the incidents as they occur but they just put it out of their minds and try to forget so as not to dwell on it. Teo and Alyssa referenced trying not to let it get to them or distract them from their own pursuits. Even students who mention sometimes taking on the responsibility of educating others when misconceptions occur, like Brandon, claim the need to block out some situations at times when they need to protect themselves or preserve their energy. This puts a strain on students of color that their White counterparts do not have to bear. Brandon describes it as:

> I just kind of, you block them out. I mean you can't - that's the thing as James Baldwin says, "to be black and socially conscious in America is to be in a constant stage of rage" but sometimes you just have to take out the consciousness part of that equation so that you're not just mad all the time, so you can function in this society which doesn't accommodate you for being mad. You're not rewarded for that. You're rewarded for doing your job and getting the grades. So, sometimes you sideline some issues which is an unfortunate by product all this - another part of the systematic oppression.

Brandon spoke of blocking out problems in order to be able to "function" in this environment. It takes too much mental energy to think about or react to all of the micro-aggressions he is faced with in his daily life so blocking out some of these situations is the only way he can be successful.

4.2.2   Changing behavior in order to avoid micro-aggressions

Some students, about half of those interviewed ($n = 8$) mentioned the need to change parts of their persona or act in a certain way in order to avoid finding themselves in potentially negative situations in the first place. James attributes his mostly good experience with others to being a friendly person, always having a smile on his face. He also reported ignoring or blocking out micro-aggressions as they occur but he believes he experiences less of them due to how he presents himself within the broader campus environment. James' support network is all Black; having this familiar network provides him with a kind of armor with which he can then navigate the rest of the campus environment when he is not surrounded by his Black peers. He can put on the persona of a happy, friendly guy to those he meets even when faced with situations that make him uncomfortable or not valued, only because he has a space that he can retreat to where he doesn't have to make compromises to his identity.

Allison attributes experiencing fewer micro-aggressions than some of her peers to not allowing people to have the chance to interact with her; she walks quickly everywhere she goes and doesn't go to events unless they are with people she knows. After having an uncomfortable experience in his first year, Allison avoids going out to parties and especially going anywhere that she thinks she will be the only person of color. At a party she attended in her first semester, with her White roommate, Allison talked about how everyone yelled at her when a certain song

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came on that they expected her to know; they crowded around her and wanted her to do the dance associated with the song for them but Allison did not know the song, or the dance. She felt like just because she is Black, they expected her to know, and like, this kind of music. She asked her roommate to leave soon after that and did not attend any party without first asking what kind of people would be there as she never wanted to put herself in that situation again. Because she now avoids these kinds of situations to begin with, Allison thinks her experiences of racial micro-aggressions is probably less than some of her peers who do still put themselves in situations like that.

Kristiana believes it is because she is willing to talk to others and understand their perspective that she thinks the best of their intentions and others then don't target her with their potential prejudices. Krista has similar beliefs as to why her negative experiences around race are limited:

I think I'm sort of an isolated case just because like people say I have a bubbly personality, I'm always smiling and so, in that respect it's very easy for me to connect and vibe with a lot of different people whatever backgrounds, and I'm really patient about my opinions even if they differ.

These students sound forgiving of their peers, willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and believe their intentions are good despite how it might make them feel in the moment. While students like Krista, James and Kristiana think their friendliness prevents them from facing more instances of racial tension, Brandon describes his day to day existence as almost a constant show of the kind of person he thinks he needs to be in order to avoid being thought of as an "angry Black man." Brandon makes a conscious effort to present himself in a way that will avoid people

seeing him in a negative light and then points out that this is something that his non-black peers do not have to do in their daily life to the same extent that he does:

> Then even just walking around and having to go through great lengths to even make sure that you're not doing anything that could be perceived as like hostile or aggressive just because you look a certain way and things that you know just other people don't have to worry about. It's like another added layer on top of the strenuous workload that we're taking on which is comparable to our non-black peers…I feel myself that I have to compromise a lot, a lot of just speaking of heritage, identity – a lot to exist successfully and keep that low key profile that people like me often find out they have to keep at a place like Pitt and that's not really belonging that's just being, like co-existing maybe but belonging is something else and that's something that I find within the communities that I've mentioned but with Pitt at large not so much. I guess that gives my rationale for retreating back to those spaces.

It is clear from student stories that in addition to the stress of rigorous academic coursework that every college student, particularly those in the STEM fields, faces, students of color are also tasked with the psychological effects of being targets of racial micro-aggressions in various contexts on campus whether in the classroom, at campus events, or interacting with peers. Students of color may react differently to these situations, educating offenders if they have the energy and desire to do so, blocking out the situations entirely as to protect themselves, or even altering their behavior to avoid becoming targets in the first place. All of these situations make the college experience that much harder for students to navigate successfully despite the strong relationships and support network students may have in place.

4.3   COMPLEX EXPERIENCES OF CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Students described micro-aggressions occurring in multiple contexts on campus including classrooms, residence halls, libraries and parties. In all references of micro-aggressions, the offenders were White. This contributed to students only feeling like they belonged or even so far as to consider themselves to be "safe" (from verbal, not physical aggression) when they were within their student groups which for most students was nearly all Black. This highlights a complex issue that students struggle with on a daily basis around experiences of cross-cultural engagement. Due to their small numbers, students of color are required to interact with people of different backgrounds every day. They do not have a choice to avoid instances of cross-cultural interactions, unlike their White peers who could more easily avoid interacting with anyone of a different background if they chose. This increases the likelihood of having to face micro-aggressions from their peers.

Another component of cultural relevance within the CECE model focuses on cross-cultural engagement. Specifically, Museus et al. (2017) define meaningful cross-cultural engagement as involving "students' levels of participation in discussions about solving real social and political problems with peers from diverse backgrounds" but as the researchers point out, this is a complex component of the model (p. 192). While some research suggests that positive cross-cultural interactions are positively associated with higher levels of sense of belonging among students, they are also associated with perceptions of a more hostile campus environment (Nunez, 2009). Nunez (2009) describes results from a study surveying Latino students that show "positive diversity experiences do not always relate to an increased sense of belonging and perception that the campus climate supports diverse students" (p. 58). In theory, having such meaningful experiences with diverse peers will improve a student's perception of

cultural relevance on campus and then indirectly impact a student's sense of belonging, academic disposition and/or academic performance. Twelve students reported positive associations between cross-cultural engagement and a sense of belonging or a feeling of connection to a bigger community on campus after a particular interaction with a peer from a different racial or ethnic background. As students explained further, however, while these experiences are meaningful and they feel as if they have benefitted from positive experiences of cross-cultural engagement, their stories confirm similar complexities around experiences of cross-cultural engagement and their subsequent perception of the campus environment.

Nearly all students referenced the lack of students of color on campus which contributes to the challenges of handling racial micro-aggressions and finding "safe" spaces on campus where they feel culturally validated. Students like Roger mentioned how being the only student of color in many contexts on campus contributed to a lack of a sense of belonging and therefore instilled a strong desire to see more diversity on campus:

I wish there were more of my peers that look like me. In the class setting it can be pretty isolating going all day and being the only Black kid in every single one of my classes…I looked around the lecture hall of 100 people and I'm the only Black kid.

Although, almost half ($n = 8$) of the students think the best thing the University could do to improve the overall climate would be to increase diversity, students noted the complexities involved in cross-cultural engagement which they expect to see more of as a result of increased diversity. Kristiana said, "I would want it [the campus] to be more integrated and diverse but I also understand how hard that is." Students easily spoke of times when they were able to have meaningful interactions with someone who is racially or ethnically different from themselves, noting the kind of engagement the CECE model claims to be beneficial to students feeling a

greater sense of belonging on campus, and all students found that they benefitted positively from those experiences. Some of the benefits students recalled were being able to learn something new about another culture or bond over their similarities despite different backgrounds. Several students mentioned that those experiences did help them to feel more like they belonged at Pitt when they could see themselves in more types of students on campus. Jeremy emphasized the importance of these kinds of interactions as a piece of his holistic college education:

> It's very important because you kind of come to college for education but you also come to college to get exposed to the world around you as well. I've been exposed to different cultures here on campus, different ethnicities, and different groups…We understand where the commonalities are in our viewpoints and we understand that the world is different for everybody. Everybody's experiences here on campus are going to be different. That adds to my sense of belonging here at the University.

For most students, these experiences came when they explicitly sought them out, for example taking part in a retreat sponsored by the University Center for International Studies or being a part of Model United Nations. For others, they came about through the course of their experiences in interactions with a lab partner, classmate, random meeting in the library or an assigned roommate. Interestingly though, nearly all students recalled interactions with other minority students when asked to talk about a meaningful interaction that they had; only two students referenced interactions with White students.

Alyssa recalled an experience during a women's leadership conference in which she was able to meet women from many different backgrounds, some African American but many others as well. She recalled:

It taught me a lot about working with other people, especially people who don't think like me. It's taught me a lot about patience and listening, instead of listening to respond. It's taught me a lot about looking at the other side of the coin.

It was one of the first times that she felt like she was comfortable in a more diverse setting, gaining the understanding that "I don't always have to be in a group of girls that look like me to understand or have similar experiences." This experience has given her a desire to branch out into the broader Pitt community and expand upon the network she has formed within "Black Pitt." The interaction helped her see a stronger connection with Pitt as a whole by being able to see herself in diverse others.

While all students recalled similar positive cross-cultural interactions, not all interactions are positive. One of the students referencing an interaction with White students, Layla, explained a situation where the cross-cultural engagement she experienced only reinforced a message to her that she was different, that no one else in the room was like her. This incident occurred during a class discussion when the majority of the students in the class were arguing one stance and she attempted to counter with another perspective from her own personal experience. The professor of this particular course is one with which she actually has a very good relationship with, he has encouraged her to pursue a PhD in the field and is now working with him in an independent study course. During this class session, the professor noted Layla's non-verbal reaction to her classmates' comments and he encouraged her to share her thoughts, knowing that she may provide some different insight into the discussion.

Layla provided her view which did differ from what students had voiced up to that point. Her peers did not listen to her thoughts on the issue, continuing to argue their stance despite it essentially sounding like an attack to Layla personally. Layla remembers this as "a big identity

moment," one in which she realized "I'm definitely different from everyone in this room." After that, she did not speak up in class and kept her interactions to a minimum. This occurred in a course in which the professor was deliberately attempting to structure a positive cross-cultural discussion within the room and while it may have made her fellow students think, for Layla, it was a traumatic experience. This particular experience only reinforced to Layla the message that she does not have much in common with the broader student population and does not belong there. For a student like Layla, who already felt a lack of sense of belonging on campus, it only made that message even more clear, another instance which did not provide "status affirmation":

> I've never really felt like I belonged here because nothing has been easy and also nothing
> has been status affirming. I've always just been a struggling student and I don't like how
> that feels. So, as an academic institution, I don't feel like I belong to it, even though I've
> had great professors and advisors who have helped me.

Layla's experience highlights some of the difficulties that underrepresented students may face within cross-cultural interactions; despite the value that students found in interacting with diverse peers and the instances of meaningful interactions they have had, broadly, students frequently spoke about the difficulty of interacting with peers as a minority on campus. There are risks to their sense of belonging and willingness to engage after negative experiences of cross-cultural engagement.

4.3.1   Segregated campus environments

Despite the risks associated with cross-cultural engagement for students of color, students understand that they learn and grow most when they are put into uncomfortable situations. However, as Brandon points out, as a student of color they have no choice but to constantly be

put in situations where they are required to interact with students of different backgrounds for the simple reason that there are so few of them on campus: "I feel like leaving your comfort zone is where individuals develop the most. It's just a shame like it's a necessary evil or something, instead of something I can opt to do." White students do not have to constantly be in a space where their culture is underrepresented and this places an unfair burden on students of color. For underrepresented students, cross-cultural interactions are not a neutral experience, as Layla's example clearly demonstrates.

Kristiana made a point to recognize the important ways people can grow when they are put in situations that may be uncomfortable for them, however, for her, that is only possible due to her ability to retreat back to her "comfort zone." When asked what she would have liked to have known about college before starting, Kristiana responded:

> Don't be afraid to join different things, get out of your comfort zone but also I feel like it's important to have a comfort zone in college as well, because it's okay to have a place where you can go and like breathe and be with friends and stuff that's like your safety net and then go out, venture and like explore new things but definitely have that comfort zone.

Kristiana also highlights the importance of student organizations, especially Black student organizations, where students find their "comfort zones." Such organizations allow students to have a "safe" space on campus where they do not have to interact with their White peers or others of different backgrounds. She described it as:

> I do think that like these safe spaces or like places where you can come and breathe and relax is a good thing because I do feel like the way I act like, if I'm in like RISE [Black

student organization] or something versus if I have to go to my class and I'm like in a White area or White space.

Subsequently, students see the campus as segregated because of how students naturally gravitate towards those like them. Krista commented: "I definitely feel like the campus is segregated in a way, so, that there's sort of like belonging to Pitt as a whole and then you're just sort of belonging to the Black community of Pitt." While having these safe spaces is certainly valued and is necessary to provide relief from the stressors they feel as underrepresented students, they also recognize the need to create a more inclusive environment, one in which students can interact across racial and ethnic lines more easily but without wanting to give up or endanger the places they can go to escape having to interact with more diverse students. These safe spaces are what provide African American students a sense of community on campus that they do not yet feel with the campus as a whole. Interestingly though, they do seem to want to have a stronger connection to the broader campus but are hesitant to stray too far from their comfort zones where they can relax and be themselves.

This occurs naturally in any context; people gravitate towards others who can share in similar backgrounds and experiences. Students believe that Pitt is no different from the rest of society, or any other PWI for that matter. Asian students hang out with other Asians; Indian students socialize with other Indian students; and Black students tend to group themselves with other Black students. Of the students interviewed, 11 consider their support network of peers to be majority Black with only three considering their peer support network to be diverse (though even those students commented that their closest friends were Black). Three students reported their network to be majority White. One of those students, Chloe, is both African American and White and did not identify with the Black organizations or even many Black students on campus.

Roger joined a mostly White fraternity in his junior year after not having found "Black Pitt" before that. Teo, who knows of only one other African American student in his major who is behind him in coursework and in general considers himself to "do his own thing," does not tie himself tightly with any one set of people and has very few, if any, close friends on campus.

For Alyssa, creating a strong foundation through two different Black student organizations allows her to take on more within the broader, more diverse community: "Now that I've established a connection with Black Pitt I'm definitely going to branch out." Students recognize the need to keep those relationships within the Black community as an important part of their support network but also, that they need to learn how to work with a much more diverse population to be successful both in and outside of the University. Krista explains the importance of having a support network within "Black Pitt" but how that is not enough to help students navigate the broader campus where interactions across racial lines is required to be successful:

> The Black community is a great support system for you, but people who have supported different things I have wanted to do or implement on campus have also been outside of the Black community and being in a predominately White institution you're going to need people outside of your race to sort of better help you get in touch with different people and network and things like that.

Jeremy explains that it is these events or interactions within their segregated environments that allow students to feel a sense of belonging on campus that they otherwise would not feel within the integrated campus environment:

> Those events were like all of my people come out and be together. We feel like we belong here in that space. When there's a space, all of us feel like we can just celebrate being black in our blackness. That is kind of when we feel like we belong here at the

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university. Then when we have to go out, and like intermingle with everything else, it's

like, I don't really belong here, I don't really have a place here it's just me.

Despite the complexities involved in cross-cultural engagement, students do want to see a more inclusive campus environment that allows different groups to interact in ways that encourage learning across cultures. Evan described this kind of space as a place where students with different viewpoints can actually discuss those differences rather than just sticking to their own sub-groups on campus and never be able to have discussions about the issues that seem to divide them.

4.3.2 Community service can encourage positive cross-cultural engagement

Though overall, students responded that they perceive the campus to be highly segregated, many students referenced community service events as experiences on campus in which they did see the campus as more inclusive and less divided. For a few students, community service plays an integral role in their sense of belonging on campus, particularly as it helps them to bridge that gap they mention between feeling as if they belong just to a specific group and belonging to the broader campus community. This confirms the position of the CECE model that community service can influence a student's sense of belonging on campus. Nine of the 17 students interviewed explained that community service helps them to feel connected to the broader campus community and even the Pittsburgh city communities as well.

Service opportunities provided structured, positive ways for students to interact with their peers and their community to create a sense of belonging not just with those they are serving with but the community beyond the University as well. Although, similar to experiences of cross-cultural engagement, research on how community service relates to positive associations

with sense of belonging is mixed. For the students in this study, however, all those that mentioned community service or volunteer work associated such experiences with positive perceptions of their campus environments and for some, like Chloe, they are some of the only times they see the campus coming together as an inclusive community.

Chloe described a service project with hundreds of students all coming together for a common goal. They filled up a ballroom to pack boxes of food to ship to a food pantry. Students came in groups or as individuals for various amounts of time but the entire event lasted several hours. Chloe recalled this as a time when she could visually see a diverse group of students working together and having fun – she notes this is different than what she typically sees on campus and appreciates the opportunity to experience the diversity in the room. She commented that she sees the campus as segregated but such events allow her to see "diversity on a visual level" which she sees as a positive experience. Charis made a similar observation during Pitt Make a Difference Day, a campus wide day of service: "I feel like that makes me feel part of the campus community when everyone comes together." For others, like Allison and Alexis, the connection that community service within the broader Pittsburgh community provides is invaluable to their experience and has influenced the choices they are making in their majors/careers.

While students have a need to create safe spaces within segregated campus groups, they do appreciate and value opportunities to have positive interactions with different racial or ethnic groups. However, these interactions can be complicated and are not without risk to a student's sense of belonging to the broader campus community. Students talked about the need to find a balance between their segregated groups that they could create a strong foundation within and the need to engage with the broader campus.

4.4   CONCLUSION

African American students face unique challenges in a predominantly White environment. Developing strong relationships with faculty and staff on campus is important for student success but are not enough for students to be able to successfully navigate the campus environment. Students make attempts to structure their environments through relationships with their peers and within student organizations, especially Black organizations. These relationships help students to handle the mental and emotional strain of being a student of color at a PWI.

When looking at these student stories through the lens of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model it can be proposed that relationships are significant to a student's ability to see the campus as culturally relevant. Students found cultural familiarity, cultural validation and culturally relevant knowledge within Black student organizations while finding humanized environments, proactive philosophies and holistic support from some faculty and many staff on campus. What seems to be lacking on this campus for students is limited collectivist orientation; students are competitive, especially in STEM fields and this adds a greater pressure to African American students who feel the added pressure of needing to "prove" a negative stereotype wrong.

In addition, students reported complex issues with experiences of cross-cultural engagement. Despite seeing some of the benefits, since underrepresented students are frequently the only representative from their race in a given environment, cross-cultural interactions can become taxing with students feeling the need to educate others about their culture. The frequency of racial micro-aggressions and the mental and emotional toll that it places on students of color in a predominantly White environment cannot be overlooked. The following chapter discusses

the implications this research has for higher education practitioners and future research on the student experience of campus climate at Pitt.

5.0   DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of African American students' perceptions of campus climate at the University of Pittsburgh. While not possible to fully understand every student's perspective, the data from student interviews does provide general insight into how students perceive the campus climate and how that climate affects them. This chapter summarizes the key findings from this study and answers the research question, demonstrating how students structure a culturally engaging environment based on their perceptions of the broader campus climate. These perspectives also provide us with a reflection of the broader institutional culture which influences student perceptions.

5.1   STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS CLIMATE

African American students at the University of Pittsburgh have to structure their own, personalized culturally engaging campus environment because it does not exist for them in the broader community context. This shapes their perceptions of the campus climate. While overall, students have enjoyed their experience at Pitt and have taken advantage of and appreciate all of the opportunities available to them, they do not see the campus as a place that they can truly be themselves in all contexts. Jeremy captured many of the students' sentiments when he said, "Pitt needs to be more inclusive." African American students are a minority on campus by a

substantial amount and this is obvious whenever they interact in spaces on campus, unless those spaces are specifically designed for African American students. In order to navigate this environment and be successful, students have taken several kinds of actions to ensure the most favorable climate for themselves.

5.1.1 Relationships as sources of cultural relevancy and responsiveness

The relationships that students form with faculty, staff and peers influences the perception of climate in many ways and students utilize relationships to fulfill their need for cultural responsiveness on campus. Students step foot on campus and quickly begin to notice their status as underrepresented – when they are the only student of color on their floor in their residence hall, or in their lecture of 200 students. They struggle seeing themselves as belonging here with few representations of their culture in their faculty or leadership across campus. As African American students begin to form relationships with people on campus, they gravitate towards those that show genuine interest in who they are as a whole person or peers who can share in their cultural background. These relationships provide them with the reinforcement that they do belong here, and people do genuinely care about their success, not just to help their "diversity numbers" but to help them as individual people with inherent value.

Students relate most closely with professors and staff who demonstrate a true curiosity in them as people, not just as students trying to pass a class. Staff most often provide an even greater sense of caring for students than professors can due to their unique positions in being part of a student's entire college career rather than just a class or two. The important things that students find in these kinds of relationships represent the role that cultural responsiveness plays for students at an institutional level. Relationships with representatives of the institution can

provide students with a sense of holistic support when students are supported by a faculty or staff member that they truly trust and would be comfortable sharing important or difficult problems. Students need to have a connection to the University like this in order to find the appropriate support when challenges arise. Several students in this study mentioned the role a trusted faculty or staff played when they faced academic, financial or personal problems during their schooling. Without these connections to the institution, students may not have found the appropriate resources to be successful or felt as though there was someone on campus that cared about whether they were able to be successful. This could result in students failing to finish a degree or remain at the institution.

In addition to that, faculty and staff relationships show proactive philosophies and the kind of humanized environments students described as being helpful to their success. Staff in particular are often strong representations of humanized environments. Most often students interacted with staff within student organizations or as supervisors that they worked with over the course of many terms. These staff members were able to take the time to develop deep and meaningful relationships with students. Often, they support students not just through academics but through almost every aspect of a student's life while at school; students even refer to them as "family."

Faculty support students in this way as well though more often students saw faculty representing characteristics of proactive philosophies when going above and beyond what may be expected from a typical professor-student relationship. Being seen by a faculty member as "more than just another face in the crowd" on a college campus helps students to feel a sense of belonging within the academic environment (Hoffman et al., 2002). These kinds of professors took the time to get to know the student, learning about their interests and goals. This helped

them to provide appropriate connections to the resources and opportunities that would be relevant for the student and support them in reaching their goals or helping them to discover new areas of interest based on the potential a faculty member saw in them. For some students, like Amber, this meant helping to secure funding for study abroad experiences she didn't think she could afford. For Layla, it meant being invited to take part in an independent study to work one on one with a professor exploring a topic of her interest. These kinds of opportunities only arose when faculty took the time to learn about their students.

Though many students were able to talk about positive experiences with faculty, few faculty members filled a true mentorship role for students. One of the exceptions to this was a faculty member in the School of Social Work who also served as the student's advisor. Due to the nature of this relationship, the faculty member had more time built into their interactions with the student as an advisor, particularly individual meetings in which they could discuss the student's professional goals, than most faculty have opportunities for. This faculty member played an integral role in the student's development. Only two students studying in the STEM fields mentioned a STEM faculty member that they would consider to be a mentor who showed genuine interest in supporting their development as a student. This may be a result of the expectations of faculty within a Research I institution. Faculty have many demands on their time and within large lecture classes it is difficult to connect with each student in a meaningful way. Research shows that faculty who take on the role of mentoring students outside the classroom view this as an "extra-role" that they play; investing in these kinds of efforts takes time from faculty that they see as outside their typical responsibilities and not all faculty have the ability to make such commitments within their day to day demands and formal responsibilities (DeAngelo, Mason, & Winters, 2016). Based on student interviews, however, even a few simple questions

inquiring about a student makes an impact in how that student perceives their experience within that class and several interactions like this in a department can influence their perception of that department. These interactions collectively influence how students feel about their place on campus.

5.1.2   Sources of collectivist orientation

Relationships with faculty and staff can provide students with helpful connections to the institution through characteristics of cultural responsiveness, but the one aspect of cultural responsiveness not found in these relationships was a sense of collectivist orientation. The lack of a sense of collectivist orientation greatly influenced students' perceptions of campus climate. Students interviewed felt pressure to succeed not just because the environment is academically rigorous and competitive but because they felt the additional burden of stereotype threat; if they failed, they believed they would be seen as a failure due to their race or ethnicity. This contributes to the intense amount of stress they feel to be successful. To find a greater sense of collectivist orientation students turned to their peers, most often peers who looked like them and were part of ethnic student organizations on campus. These organizations provided a sense of teamwork and collective success that is lacking in the broader campus community where they are subject to stereotype threat and racial micro-aggressions.

Student organizations and peer networks also provided students with a sense of cultural relevancy that they did not perceive to exist within the broader campus environment. Being able to connect with students of a similar background provided familiarity and connections with people they could share in culturally relevant knowledge. In these spaces they did not need to educate someone else about their culture, change how they presented themselves to fit in or

justify the fact that they belong here on an academic scholarship rather than an athletic one. They can be surrounded by other high-achieving Black students with similar aspirations who can provide support in their journey to reaching their own goals. These organizations are in a sense a response to the campus environment. When students do not find what they need within the broader campus, they create their own spaces on campus which fulfill their needs for cultural relevancy and responsiveness. As noted in the historical data, the Black Action Society was created in the 1960's as a response to institutional racism. The fact that this student group is still an important component of many Black students' experiences at Pitt denotes the role it continues to play in supporting Black students within a predominantly White institution.

Several students mentioned a lack of diversity training on campus for both students and faculty. From their perspective, if more people on campus had a better understanding of some of the issues and even just a better understanding of their culture and background, some of the frequent micro-aggressions they experience would decrease. Allison acknowledged that she sees improvements on campus in regard to more conversations and training around diversity issues but believes it "needs to be more comprehensive, not just one day or two hours, it needs to be an ongoing thing." For change to really take root, trainings and conversations around race need to be a part of the culture of the institution over a longer period of time, not just a once a year or every few years training.

5.1.3 Desire to have an inclusive, integrated environment while protecting segregated spaces

A contributing factor to the reason students sought out these student groups was to avoid some of the negative and complex experiences students may have in situations of cross-cultural

engagement. Students faced many types of racial micro-aggressions during their day-to-day interactions on campus ranging from no one wanting to partner with them in labs to assuming they were at Pitt on athletic, not academic, scholarships. Students reacted to these situations differently. Some felt the need to educate the offender in order to help them understand more about their culture and why such actions are offensive. Others altered their behavior entirely when within "White spaces" to avoid any negative interactions that may come up when they are the only person of color in the room. Research tells us that such negative experiences put a kind of cognitive strain on students of color that actually limits their cognitive skill development in higher education (Roksa et al., 2017).

The psychological toll this puts on students makes it harder for them to focus on their academics in the same way their White peers can. These experiences overall lead many students to require the kind of safe spaces they found within ethnic student organizations to be able to limit at least in some ways the amount of negative experiences they have. Research suggests these organizations are helpful in creating a healthy racial campus climate but can also have an impact beyond the college years in a variety of civic outcomes highlighting the importance of addressing issues of diversity not just for the current student population but for society at large (Bowman et al., 2015).

That does not mean that all experiences of cross-cultural engagement are negative. When students engaged with other students of different backgrounds they did often see positive results from those interactions which helped them to feel like there are commonalities between them, they can learn from another culture and they can feel like they are a greater part of the campus community. One of the ways students mentioned feeling this most profoundly is through community service, another tenet of the CECE model. When students engaged in community

service with diverse students it provided them with a sense of collectivist orientation typically lacking for students of color within the broader campus environment. At these times, all students could come together for a common goal and work together in service to another.

Overall, students perceive the campus to consist of segregated environments. The lack of sense of belonging to the campus leads African American students to find places of acceptance within the smaller niches of Pitt, most often with students like themselves. This is acknowledged by most students even though at the same time this fact is lamented. Students need their separate spaces, but they want the campus to be less segregated. This is a common foundation for student perceptions of climate. With this view, students understand they are not broadly accepted or appreciated for who they are within all spaces on campus. Their relationships with various people from the institution and their peers can sometimes provide them with the positive, culturally affirming messages they need to hear but for some students, there are a lot of negative messages that are needed to counteract. As much as possible, students try to structure their experiences in ways to protect themselves from the possible negative experiences they may have on campus and find characteristics of a culturally engaging campus only in those places that they choose and create to embody those aspects.

Part of the cultural relevancy mentioned previously involves a sense of cultural familiarity which includes being able to interact with people of similar backgrounds. As of now, Black student organizations are the main source of cultural familiarity on campus. One way to build more cultural familiarity on campus is to enroll a more diverse student body so students are able to see and interact with students from similar backgrounds whom they do not necessarily need to "educate" about their culture. The change that half of students specifically mentioned that they hope to see on campus involves increasing the diversity of the student body; they

believe increasing diversity should be a priority for the institution and is the first step in creating a better environment for underrepresented students like them.

Despite their challenges in navigating experiences of cross-cultural engagement, students were generally positive about their experiences at the University of Pittsburgh and do not regret their decision to enroll. This may be due in part because students expected to find this kind of environment at a PWI. They understood on a certain level that they would be a minority on campus and with that would come some challenges in navigating the environment. Some students felt this as a greater culture shock than others but once they found their support systems they were all successful in finding a place that they felt valued and accepted on campus even if they did not necessarily feel connected to campus as a whole.

5.2   CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the key findings of this research and answered the research question. African American students face unique challenges at a PWI. While research tells us that campus climate is an important factor in student success there is still much to learn about how climate influences eventual educational attainment. Students at the University of Pittsburgh find some aspects of a culturally engaging campus to be lacking within the broader campus climate and therefore take steps to structure these environments through their peer relationships and organizational affiliations. Relationships play a key role in how students perceive the environment and while students view it as generally positive, considerations need to be made in regards to creating a more diverse campus that provides more opportunities for quality

experiences of cross-cultural engagement, works to reduce racial micro-aggressions and promotes an overall culture that supports greater collectivist orientation.

In order to address closing the gap in attainment between White and African American students, taking a deeper look into the student experiences of climate, especially within the context of particular institutions, is the first step in being able to make real changes to the environment which will encourage a more culturally engaging campus. While this research begins to tell that story, much more needs to be learned about the campus climate to make the kind of decisions that will support a more inclusive environment for all students.

6.0   IMPLICATIONS

This chapter outlines the implications the findings from this study have for practitioners in higher education. With a deeper understanding of the African American student experience at the University of Pittsburgh, practitioners can have better information with which to make decisions that will affect student perceptions of campus climate. Thinking about climate through the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model may be a useful tool in determining what areas are most important to address for underrepresented students on campus. Suggestions for practitioners within the institution on how to improve campus climate for underrepresented students are then addressed, focusing on increasing diversity and therefore opportunities for cross cultural engagement in addition to ways of fostering an environment that values collectivist orientations over individual competition. Finally, implications are shared for future research to learn more about how we, as practitioners, can influence the campus environment and improve the student experience and ultimately improve their likelihood of success.

6.1   IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Understanding that students are structuring their own, personalized culturally engaging environment, more could be done by institutions to provide a greater sense of a culturally engaging campus that supports student success. As a first step, considering the themes found in

this study will be important for individuals to keep in mind when making decisions about designing new programs or policies, or making changes to current practices: how students structure their relationships on campus (where they do and do not find sources of cultural responsiveness or relevancy) the mental and emotional load of being a student of color at a predominantly white institution and the complex experiences with cross-cultural engagement. Other possible implications for practice to work toward better supporting African American students at this institution are discussed below.

6.1.1   Increase structural diversity

Bowman (2013) highlights the important role that a racially diverse campus plays in promoting educational outcomes for students; with a racially diverse campus, opportunities for cross-cultural engagement, and therefore student growth in intellectual engagement, psychological well-being and leadership skills, is more frequent. Campuses that are moderately diverse do not see as much of a gain in these educational outcomes as campuses that are more highly diverse (Bowman, 2013). This may be due to the phenomenon that students referenced in their interviews – with so few students of color on campus cross-cultural engagement experiences place an unfair burden on them in that they have to participate in such experiences as part of their daily lives, whereas their White peers do not. This also highlights the reason so many students felt so strongly about the need for Black organizations on campus, even if diversity were to increase. These organizations deserve continued support regardless of the changes that are made within the broader campus environment.

In theory, greater diversity in the undergraduate student population would allow for more cross-cultural interactions; however, as previously mentioned, such experiences are not always

without cost to minority students. Ideally, increased diversity within the faculty would be important and appreciated, but students interviewed emphasized how much they gain from being able to interact with peers of similar backgrounds. Increasing diversity within the undergraduate student population may therefore provide students with a greater opportunity to see change than through the faculty.

If the composition of the student body changed enough that all students were able to interact with students that looked like them *and* those that were different on a daily basis this burden would be lessened for students of color and provide more frequent cross-cultural engagement for other students as well. White students on a predominantly White campus may not necessarily have to interact across cultures unless they voluntarily choose to do so, and being the majority on campus, race is not something they consider as part of their everyday experiences the way it is for students of color (Chavous, 2005). By increasing diversity on campus, White students are more likely to interact with more diverse peers than on a campus in which those interactions would only happen voluntarily. Students would then be required to build cultural competence to positively engage in such experiences which the University should help to facilitate in order to promote the success of such engagement.

Bowman (2013) provides suggestions for ways institutions can achieve a more diverse student body which first involves utilizing practices which increase the admissions for students of diverse backgrounds such as recruiting from high schools with higher populations of traditionally underrepresented student groups, providing greater financial assistance or scholarships, or using race conscious admissions processes. This would certainly be a task that the university takes on at a high level, working with different recruiting strategies and

admissions procedures for new students, but an important one if we are to see greater changes in the campus environment for underrepresented students.

The University has had success previously in recruiting a more diverse student body. Following the computer room sit-in in 1968, the University committed to enrolling a more diverse population of students. In order to achieve this, a school-community partnership was established in which schools and community organizations identified prospective Black students to attend the University (*Proposal for Project "A",* 1969). Along with a team of students from the Black Action Society (BAS), University admissions staff worked with these prospective students to recruit them to enroll. Once here, BAS students were intimately involved in the orientation and support of these new students to ensure their success. This was done with an understanding that students would be most successful if they established strong relationships with African American students who were already able to successfully navigate Pitt (*Proposal for Project "A",* 1969). This same principle holds true today as is shown in this study but also in higher education literature. Students are most successful when they have a supportive network of peers and institutional agents (Fischer, 2010; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus et al., 2008; Nuñez, 2009). Perhaps looking back on those policies that worked in recruiting more diverse cohorts would be beneficial to helping the institution recruit with success now.

With greater structural diversity in place, more frequent cross-cultural engagement is possible. Pike and Kuh (2006) found that cross-cultural interactions were "more strongly related to structural diversity than any other institutional characteristic" (p. 443). This research indicates that the first, and perhaps most effective step, an institution can take to improve educational outcomes for all students is to enroll a highly diverse student body, but the reason outcomes are

improved is due to the more frequent cross-cultural interactions that take place with a more diverse student population. Most students associated an increase in diversity with an increase in the ability of the African American student population to be able to positively interact with the broader campus community while putting less burden to do so on individual students as there would be more of them to take on the task. But Pike and Kuh (2006) also note that while the concept of increasing diversity may be simple, it cannot stop there. Some attention needs to be given to the quality of these cross-cultural interactions as well.

6.1.2 Promote cross-cultural engagement while providing safe spaces

Increasing structural diversity is an important first step in promoting a more inclusive campus environment, but the quality of cross-cultural engagement is just as important to seeing greater educational outcomes as the frequency, if not more so (Gurin et al., 2002; Nuñez, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2014; Roksa et al., 2017). However, as Layla's experience with her professor in a sociology course demonstrates, even the most well intentioned individuals can facilitate an interaction across cultures that has negative results for some students. Certainly, it is impossible to ensure that all interactions can be positive for all students involved, but steps can be taken to make positive interactions more likely. Providing the necessary training to the individuals presenting and promoting such experiences should be required in addition to continued professional development as they begin working through these experiences with students.

It is important to remember that it is both the students and the institution that shape campus climate. In order to improve experiences with cross-cultural engagement more of the work of "educating" or "correcting ignorance," as students interviewed sometimes referred to it, needs to be done from the institutional position. Asking students to always take on the role of

defending their place on campus is a lot to ask of students who are here to get an education and pursue their professional and academic goals. Asking students to be a "representative of their race" may result in their peers learning about their cultural background but the targeted student may feel singled out and therefore have a negative response to the experience. As previously discussed, this also places an unfair mental and emotional burden on students of color. Instead of being able to completely focus on their academic and professional goals, Black students deal with the other challenges that come from being an underrepresented student in a predominantly White institution.

Instead, the institution itself could be more specific about the kind of values and expectations it has for its' students. Ensuring faculty and staff have the skills and strategies to address racial micro-aggressions as they see them would be helpful. In this way, institutional agents can be seen as individuals who value our underrepresented student population and will promote their success. It would also take that responsibility away from the student, allowing them to focus on their own academics and personal growth. Promoting events or activities that allow students to have meaningful cross-cultural experiences in a way that is accessible for all students may also be an area to explore. This may mean bringing in outside speakers that can address and facilitate discussions around cultural differences without requiring underrepresented students on campus to put themselves in a vulnerable position in a predominantly White space. Increasing opportunities for service learning may be another avenue to explore as that was mentioned by many students and much research as a way for diverse students to work together towards common goals. Teo mentioned possibilities for monthly service opportunities, similar to Pitt Make a Difference Day, which involved the whole campus as a way for students to come together and "feel good about themselves" in the midst of their academic stress.

Improving experiences of cross-cultural engagement does not negate the need for students to have safe spaces on campus, however, especially in the form of Black student organizations. Research supports ethnic student organizations as being some of the instigators of cross-cultural engagement and a benefit to promoting more integration on campus despite looking like segregating the campus (Bowman et al., 2015). Because the University has such a strong group of Black organizations on campus that are an important component of African American students' experiences, leveraging those organizations to support meaningful cross-cultural engagement may be a good option to get students involved in the shaping of these cross-cultural experiences in authentic, non-threatening ways. Utilizing the resources the institution already has and the leadership of students within these organizations that want to be a part of making the campus more inclusive may be the best opportunity for seeing the greatest change. Allowing students to have an integral role in shaping these experiences and opportunities when they volunteer to, not because they have to as the only African American student in the room, could be the first step in fostering better intergroup relations on campus. These student groups are providing much support for the students within it and we, as practitioners, could learn from what makes those organizations so beneficial and integral to their success.

6.1.3 Create an environment with greater collectivist orientation

Finally, understanding the intense pressure African American students face at this institution, determining ways to improve the campus climate to include a greater sense of collectivist orientation may support a more inclusive climate for all students, but especially African American students facing the added pressures of stereotype threat. When analyzing the data through the lens of CECE this area seemed to be specifically lacking for most students. This is an

issue of institutional culture as a whole. The environment broadly is competitive with over half of incoming students in the School of Arts and Sciences declaring they wish to pursue medicine. First year courses are rigorous and are widely known as "weed-out" classes. It seems as if every student feels tremendous pressure to be better than their peers from their first day on campus.

Providing greater support for all students on campus and encouraging an environment where students work together to help one another succeed may improve perceptions of collectivist orientation. Some work is already being done in this area with flipped classrooms that encourage teamwork rather than individual success. Faculty and staff, as the main sources of cultural responsiveness for students, play a powerful role in student experiences and could contribute to establishing a greater sense of collectivist orientation in many ways. By being available to students and taking the time to get to know them, their goals and aspirations, faculty and staff could greatly influence how competitive students view their environment to be. A professor acknowledging a student's goals and desire to be successful may lead them to provide information about resources to further develop those interests. This can signal to the student that the faculty member sees their potential for success and can support a student's sense of belonging on campus. A staff member that notices a student is acting differently perhaps due to challenges with their financial situation or in their personal life can let students know that someone is willing to support them through such a challenge regardless of how it may relate to their academics. Interactions that students have at every level of the institution could help students feel as if people are here to help them succeed and believe that they can succeed.

Despite an overall lack of collectivist orientation in the campus environment, students interviewed spoke of the orientation of their peer groups or student organizations to be quite different. They found value in these groups in part due to the fact that they felt a sense of

collectivist orientation there that they did not feel within the broader campus community. Knowing that this contributes to reasons students choose to self-segregate if the broader campus culture could be improved to support an environment that values teamwork and mutual success, the pressure African American students face could be lessened. By improving the overall climate students may seek out support like this from more places on campus than just these student organizations, improving opportunities for cross-cultural engagement as well. In addition, an environment with a sense of collectivist orientation is one which would help all students be successful, not just underrepresented student groups, and therefore is in the school's best interest to do so.

Collectivist orientation is at the core of the campus environment. By creating a culture in which all students have a greater sense of teamwork and mutual success, the separations between groups may lessen and students will see their peers as partners in their journey rather than competition. In order to address this issue, broad changes across the institution are necessary. Rankin and Reason (2005) call for a kind of transformative leadership that calls on every part of the institution in which "majority/privileged assumptions are replaced by assumptions of diverse cultures and relationships, and these new assumptions govern the design and implementation of any activity, program, or service of the institution" (p. 59). Before undertaking such a task, further research into the broader institutional culture may be necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how this could be done. Implications for this research are discussed later in this chapter.

This type of change needs to start within the values of institutional agents. This may mean a shift in how we think about faculty achieving tenure, for example. Promoting mentoring as an important component of a professor's role on campus and also providing an incentive for

mentoring could give faculty the time needed to better address student needs. It would be a message that it is a valuable and important aspect of the professor's role. With the many responsibilities of faculty and staff, structures may need to be put in place that allow these individuals to take on more responsibility for the culture we create. Such changes in structures must come from institutional leadership and needs to gain broad support in order to be successful. Infrastructure that supports faculty mentoring and recognition for faculty that take on this role for undergraduate students may better support more beneficial faculty-student relationships (DeAngelo et al., 2016). Transformational change is difficult but the work is important. Greater gains in educational attainment for all students may come when supporting students in ways that they need, by providing a culturally engaging campus, is made a priority at all levels.

This kind of transformational change will not come quickly. As Allison said when thinking about how to improve campus climate, "it's hard to change people"; students, faculty and staff enter the campus environment with a wide variety of experiences and perspectives, changing those assumptions they bring with them is difficult. That is why such transformative leadership to begin to make such changes at every level of the institution is necessary. Even with more students of color on campus and more frequent cross-cultural engagement, changing the culture of the institution as a whole is difficult work, because at the core of it are people and the belief systems they hold.

6.2   THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

These results show support for the CECE model as providing an appropriate framework from which to examine the student experience. While many of the aspects of a culturally engaging campus were heard within student responses it is still unclear exactly *how* these aspects of the model influence perceptions of climate. For example, cross-cultural engagement can provide positive and negative experiences for students of color. It must be acknowledged that the context of these interactions matters and can have varying effects on students in many different ways (Denson & Chang, 2008). Likewise, community service can influence student's perceptions of their environment but the type of service and who that service is performed with makes a difference.

One of the strengths of the CECE model is that it is a valid framework for measuring cultural responsiveness and cultural relevance for both students of color and White students (Museus et al., 2016). As it is focused on overall culture within the institution it also takes into consideration the role that the institution plays in developing this culture alongside the student population. In order to more fully understand the current climate involving all players within this environment is important to understanding how to improve. This framework cannot be applied at only the student level. Faculty and staff influence the culture of the institution as well and evaluating curriculum for cultural relevancy, diversity programming for appropriate representation of diverse cultures, or experiences of cross-cultural engagement that allow for students to work on complex problem solving with students of different backgrounds. The framework provides opportunities to tie the student perspective to institutional response and practice in a way that will be meaningful in enacting appropriate change.

This certainly still is not a perfect model and more needs to be understood regarding how the aspects of a culturally engaging campus influence the particular individual influences of sense of belonging, academic disposition and eventual academic performance. While students did mention at times how negative experiences influenced a greater sense of motivation or academic disposition to prove themselves in this environment most often students referenced aspects of a culturally engaging environment as influencing a sense of belonging on campus. Others mentioned the people they saw as sources of cultural responsiveness as being important to their academic performance. Obviously, it is a complex system and each student may response differently in similar situations but using this model as a basis to begin conversations in higher education about supporting students to graduate by promoting a more culturally engaging campus is a good place to start.

6.3   IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is just a first step in understanding student perceptions of campus climate. Much is still left to learn about how student experiences influence perceptions of climate and sense of belonging on campus. First, noting the important role that staff seemed to play in promoting a sense of cultural responsiveness on campus more research should be conducted to understand the role of staff in higher education. As Fischer (2010) also highlights, understanding the important role that staff plays in the student experience is an area that may have much influence on students' perceptions of campus climate and eventual success but has been neglected by much of the research in higher education. The role of faculty in students' perceptions of climate has been well researched but as this study demonstrates, students seem to have much more meaningful

relationships with staff that greatly influence their student experience than with faculty. More research needs to be conducted in this area to better understand this phenomenon and the ways in which these relationships can be capitalized upon to promote student success.

Specifically understanding the role of staff within Black student organizations may provide further insight into how these organizations provide students with the sources of cultural relevancy and responsiveness that they do not find within the broader campus environment. Staff advisors to these organizations are important leaders in shaping the culture and structure of those organizations in ways that students find beneficial. Research that looks at these organizations and their staff leadership may tell us even more about what makes these organizations so effective in supporting student success. What we learn from that would be helpful in making decisions about potential new programs to support a greater number of students or how to better support current programs as the institution becomes increasingly more diverse.

Second, faculty can be strong supporters for students, especially when faced with academic challenges or questions regarding their chosen field of study as students in this study attested to. Faculty need to understand the role that they play in the student experience. By first understanding how faculty currently see their role and then developing programming which specifically addresses gaps in their understanding as it relates to student perceptions we can help to build opportunities for faculty to become better advocates for their students and mentors in more than just their coursework. Learning more about the faculty perceptions is important before making any broad changes. Faculty do have much on their plate; large lectures to teach, research to conduct, committees to sit on and funding to secure. Asking them to take on more or be more available to students must be done with much care and first a strong understanding of where they are coming from.

Research that looks into what is preventing faculty from being able to take on a more mentorship type role for students, particularly those in the STEM fields, is essential to determine what the institution may be able to change about the overall culture or structure that could better support faculty taking on a greater role in developing a more inclusive campus climate. Understanding faculty members' current role and responsibilities is a necessary first step; however, as mentioned earlier, looking at routes to tenure may be one line of inquiry to research in order to determine if restructuring the route to tenure would better support faculty mentorship and therefore faculty playing a more integral role as a source of cultural responsiveness for students. Institutional structures may be influencing their perceptions of their role.

Research could also be undertaken to determine what works for positive cross-cultural engagement programming on campus and how could it be improved within this particular context. There is much already written in the literature about the positive effects of such experiences but more in depth studies into how those experiences are facilitated for students may provide the necessary details for practitioners to determine how to institute such programs on their own campuses. The first step here may be to research similar institutions who have different diversity programming for students and learning how it works on those campuses to determine what may be applicable in this context. Further research into the specific cross-cultural interactions students have had on this campus would also help to better understand the current context of student experiences at Pitt.

6.4 CONCLUSION

This study obtained data regarding the experience of African American undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh. These experiences show that there are characteristics of the institutional culture that influence how students structure their environment on campus. Utilizing the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments framework provides a model to better understand the areas within cultural relevancy and cultural responsiveness that students feel lacking within the broader campus environment. This can help us, as practitioners, to think about how we can better foster positive cross-cultural engagement between student groups and an overall greater sense of collectivist orientation. Bringing in a more diverse student population may be the first step in promoting both of these potential initiatives. Such institutional culture change, however, must also involve leadership within the institution.

While this study helps us to understand the student experience, more research needs to be conducted in order to understand how the institution influences and shapes the student experience. Focusing on staff and student organizations, where students currently feel the greatest sources of cultural relevancy and responsiveness, may help to better understand how to provide students with the kinds of support they need to be successful. Looking to other, similar institutions that are already successful in this area could be beneficial in this endeavor. By better understanding the role each part of the University plays in creating or preventing an inclusive environment, practitioners may better be able to learn how to support more students in their pursuit of higher education and close the achievement gap for underrepresented students.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear Student,

I am contacting you on behalf of Mary Napoli, a graduate student with the University of Pittsburgh School of Education and a Pitt staff member. Mary is conducting a research study entitled, "Perceptions of Campus Climate by African American Students at a Predominantly White Institution." This research study is being conducted under the supervision of Michael Gunzenhauser, PhD. Mary is looking for junior or senior African American students at the University to participate in this study by taking part in an in-person or telephone interview lasting between 30-60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and include open-ended questions asking about your experience on campus both in and outside of the classroom

There are no expected negative consequences to participating in this study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and all information will be kept on a University of Pittsburgh server behind the University of Pittsburgh firewall. There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this research study, however, research may be used to influence potential decisions which may affect campus climate.

Thirty students are being asked to participate in this research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you decide to participate in this research study, any information you would provide during the interview or throughout the course of the research study would not impact your standing at the University of Pittsburgh.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please contact Mary Napoli at napoli@as.pitt.edu to coordinate an on-site or telephone interview. Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

NAME OF GATEKEEPER

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Screening Questions: (verified within email to schedule interview)

What is your academic year?

Have you been enrolled at Pitt since your first year?

What is your racial/ethnic identity?

Protocol:
1. Tell me how you first decided to attend Pitt?
   a. Where did you expect to find your fit (i.e. what part of the institution reflected your areas of interest that you felt would help you to feel "at home" here such as a particular academic area of interest, research opportunities, extracurricular activities, student organizations, etc.)?
   b. Upon completing your first year, what about the campus environment surprised you?
   c. How would you describe your overall experience in just a few words?
   d. Tell me about something that has been an enjoyable part of your college experience thus far.

2. Please describe your relationship with faculty on campus.
   a. What are some examples of positive interactions with faculty?
   b. What are some examples of negative interactions with faculty?
   c. Neutral interactions with faculty?
   d. How have your accomplishments been recognized by faculty?
   e. Tell me what your class participation looks like.

3. How would you describe your relationship with staff (professionals on campus, not faculty – possibly advisors, supervisors in an on campus job, club sponsors, student affairs staff, residence life staff, etc.) on campus?

a. In what contexts have you interacted with staff?
b. What are some examples of positive interactions with staff?
c. What are some examples of negative interactions with staff?

4. Who has been influential to your success on campus?
    a. Who has taken an interest in your development as a student?
    b. What kinds of resources have you utilized to support your academic success and personal/professional development?
    c. What student organizations are you involved in? How do they impact your experience?

5. What does it mean to you to "belong"?
    a. What makes you feel like a part of the campus community?
    b. What events have made you feel like you are a part of the community? (only if not mentioned specifically in 5.a.)
    c. What events have made you feel excluded from the campus community?
    d. Describe a time when you have had a meaningful interaction with someone racially or ethnically different from you.
        i. How did this interaction effect your sense of belonging to the campus community?

6. How have people treated you on campus?
    a. What kind of support system did you have upon entering college?
    b. How has that changed in the last few years since being in college?
    c. Describe the network of peers that you have formed relationships with.
        i. Prompt for distant "friendships" such as study groups, floor mates, lab partners, etc.
        ii. Prompt for a description of a "close" friend group if it hasn't been mentioned in a previous answer.
        iii. How would you describe the racial or ethnic background of the peers you mentioned as part of your network on campus?
            1. How does this compare to the racial or ethnic background of your peer group in high school?

At this time we are going to talk about some of the negative experiences you may have had while attending this institution such as situations of bias, harassment or discrimination. I want to remind you that everything you say in this interview will be kept confidential.

7. Please describe a time when you were a target of prejudice.
    a. What is your opinion of how the incident was handled by professionals at the institution (if they were aware)?
    b. What effect did this incident have on you?
    c. How frequent would you say such incidents are on campus?

8. Please describe a time when you have felt as if you were in a hostile or unpleasant situation due to repeated verbal or physical conduct.

a. What is your opinion of how the incident was handled by professionals at the institution (if they were aware)?
b. What effect did this incident have on you?
c. How frequent would you say such incidents are on campus?

9. Please describe a time when you felt you were treated less favorably than a peer due to your race or ethnic identity.
    a. What is your opinion of how the incident was handled by professionals at the institution (if they were aware)?
    b. What effect did this incident have on you?
    c. How frequent would you say such incidents are on campus?

10. Now that we have discussed some of these incidents, how do you think these experiences contributed to your overall sense of the campus environment?
    a. If you could make changes to the environment, what would you change?

11. What advice would you provide to a fellow student planning to attend this institution?
    a. What do you wish you would have known about the college experience before beginning your college career?

Background Questions:

Are you considered a part-time or full-time student?

What is your academic major(s)?

What is your gender?

How many years (if any) did you live on campus?

Did either of your parents graduate from college?

Where did you graduate from high school (city/town)?

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