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# African American/Black Undergraduate Students: Perceptions of Their Experiences Attending an Upper Midwest University

Deola Y. Johnson

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AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS  
OF THEIR EXPERIENCES ATTENDING AN UPPER MIDWEST UNIVERSITY

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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2010

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This dissertation, submitted by Deola Y. Johnson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Joseph D. Benoit  
Dean of the Graduate School

December 15, 2010  
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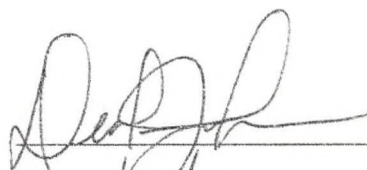
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To My Beloved Mother

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions held by African American/“black” undergraduate students of their experiences attending a predominately white institution (PWI) of higher education in the Upper Midwest. Participants consisted of a sample of six African American/black juniors during the 2009-2010 academic school year. Social Identity Development Theory and Critical Race Theory were used as a guide in designing interview questions. Participants were interviewed and the audio recorded interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for codes, categories, and themes.

Four themes emerged from analysis of the data. Theme One: When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation. Students who actively engaged in social activities at an Upper Midwest university did not report feelings of social withdrawal and loneliness. Theme Two: Women felt more connected to their surroundings than men and appeared happier than men. Female participants expressed overall satisfaction with being students at an Upper Midwest university. They reported greater feelings of social acceptance than their male counterparts, and women were more motivated to interact with their peers than male participants in this study. Theme Three: Teachers who were perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Predominately “white” institutions (PWIs) of higher education recruit students of color in order to increase racial diversity and create a more culturally competent atmosphere on campus. Most students of color who attend PWIs seek to become academically and socially integrated without losing their self-identity, and they are hopeful that their experiences at a PWI will have a positive impact on their overall sense of belonging. Research supports the idea that campus diversity may also improve the recruitment and retention rates of students of color at PWIs (Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Ware, 2006).

#### Historical Perspective

For most of the United States’ history, it was unlawful for people of color, specifically “blacks,” to be formally educated, and students of color were excluded from predominately white institutions of higher education. During the 1960s, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) served as “beacons” of higher education for blacks and other students of color, and served as a “key access point for African Americans who sought to achieve political and social mobility through educational attainment” (Harper, 2007, p. 103). The Higher Education Act of 1965 defined an

HBCU as “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). While *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) of Topeka, Kansas dismissed the proposition of “separate but equal,” this Supreme Court ruling was limited to primary and secondary schools. *Hawkins v. Board of Control* (1956) was the first case to introduce the issue of desegregation among institutions of higher education in the United States.

The Civil Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, created an array of programs designed to recruit and retain minority students to predominately white institutions. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, HBCUs throughout the country were struggling to recruit blacks and other students of color due to the aggressive efforts of predominately white institutions eagerly trying to attract academically talented students of color as well (Harper, 2007).

For scores of families of color encumbered by bigotry, discrimination, and poverty, the establishment of HBCUs has served as a means to a better way of life. During the 1960s, HBCUs were the most accessible form of higher education for students of color. Numerous blacks left the segregated south to explore educational freedom throughout diverse regions of the United States, and a “large out-migration from the South and the recruitment [of blacks] by primarily White Northern and Western colleges” (Jaffe, Adams, & Meyers, 1968, p. 16) stunted the growth of black colleges and universities. Although there were an abundant number of blacks who decided to stay in the South (where the vast majority of HBCUs have been located) to

attend black colleges, these schools were aware of the problem of poor preparation of their entrants and offered special courses of remedial work (Jaffe et al., 1968).

It was extremely difficult for HBCUs to compete with predominately white institutions of higher learning to retain black enrollment. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, white institutions experienced a 40 percent growth in black enrollment while enrollment numbers at HBCUs gradually declined during this period (Harper, 2007). At the time of this study, undergraduate students of color represented 32% of students at predominately white institutions; blacks (13%), Hispanics (11%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (7%), and American Indians (1%; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2009).

Students of color may face various issues that may prevent some from pursuing a degree in higher education, such as lack of financial, social, and academic support at predominately white institutions, and these factors may contribute to higher attrition rates and a decline in graduation rates for students of color at predominately white institutions of higher learning (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Ward, 2006; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997).

Many students of color are drawn to predominately white institutions because numerous HBCUs are struggling to maintain and solicit financial support. Increased costs and insufficient funds have burdened HBCU institutions already struggling with fewer resources than their predominately white counterparts (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). PWIs are significantly more abundant in numbers than HBCUs, which makes them more accessible (Matthews, 2008), and athletic programs at PWIs attract many



students of color due to higher rates of recognition and recruitment by professional athletic teams (Jones & McMillan, 1996).

There are 105 HBCUs in 19 states in the country, and enrollment in these institutions have varied from less than 1,000 to about 8,000 students (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1992). The majority of HBCUs have relied heavily upon state funding. According to Harper (2007):

... for every federal dollar that is provided to public HBCUs, states pay 50 cents, while traditional white institutions receive five to seven dollars for each federal dollar [and] recent data indicates that less than 2 percent of the more than 140 billion in federal grants for science and engineering were awarded to HBCUs.  
(p. 115)

Even though this vivid disparity in financial support has contributed to an abundance of problems that plague HBCUs in the twenty-first century, Ehrenberg and Rothstein (1993) asserted that African American/black students at HBCUs consistently outperform African American/black students at white institutions, and HBCUs also better prepare their students to compete in the professional world. However, many predominately white institutions of higher education are proud to declare the diversity of their student population, and the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of racial/ethnic minority students. Such claims of diversity are common at universities. For example, as cited in Nealy (2008), Dr. Charles F. Harrington, provost and vice chancellor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, emphatically stated, "Our commitment to diversity is not just rhetoric. You can see it on our campus, in our

students, in our faculty, and in our curriculum and in our staff' (p. 30). Because African American/black students at PWIs may be faced with various issues and challenges in their pursuit of higher education (e.g., the lack of financial, social, and academic support), this study has sought to gain an understanding of perceptions African American/black undergraduate students have held of their experiences attending a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest.

#### Pilot Study

In the spring semester of 2009, I conducted a pilot study in Educational Foundations and Research 520, an Advanced Qualitative Research Methods class at an Upper Midwest university. I interviewed undergraduate and graduate students of color regarding their common experiences, personal struggles, and institutional barriers related to higher education at an Upper Midwest university. Initially, I struggled selecting a qualitative methodology for this pilot study, because I was not sure which approach would best suit my research interest. As I studied five qualitative approaches (see Creswell, 2007), I knew that phenomenology would support the goal of "describing the essence of the experience" (p. 79) as it related to higher education for students of color at the Upper Midwest University in my study. As someone who is definitely not immune to the impact that race, socio-economic class, and gender have on marginalized groups within the higher educational system, I was cognizant of the fact that I could not assume that my study participants' interactions at a predominately white institution were common to my own experiences.

Although I did not have a specific number of participants in advance, I wanted to find meaning or discover more about the experiences of racial/ethnic groups from a cultural and social aspect which necessitated 4 to 10 participants (Creswell, 2005). I recruited participants for the study by asking individuals to participate and used informal contacts and other participants to suggest people who might be appropriate to contact. I also sought participants through a multicultural center (which provides support services for Hispanic American, African American, and Asian American students) and the American Indian Student Services (which provides services for Native American students). Both of these centers are located on the campus of the Upper Midwest University in my study, and participants were 18 and older.

From my interviews with participants, my pilot study revealed four particular themes with respect to experiences of students of color on an Upper Midwest university's campus. These themes included a desire for university administration to recruit more students of color, frustrations related to their treatment by some white students, a belief that it is critical for the Upper Midwest University faculty to be more racially diverse, and a concern regarding the limited availability of financial assistance.

#### *Recruitment of Students of Color*

All pilot study participants conveyed their belief that it is important for the Upper Midwest University's administration, faculty, and students to be more representative of the numerous racial and ethnic groups which populate the United States. Through all interviews, participants were emphatic that under-representation was a fact of life on campus. The phrase "we *are* underrepresented here at [the state the

university was located in]" was commonly expressed word-for-word. One student referred to this in another way through the statement, "I just want to see myself." This participant was referring to the desire to feel as though his racial background was represented within the larger community on campus. For these students, failure to see their group represented resulted in feelings of isolation, marginalization, and social exclusion.

#### *Perceived Racial Stereotyping*

This concern regarding race relations on an Upper Midwest university's campus relates to the next theme that emerged in the pilot study, deriving from participants' common experience of racial stereotyping. One participant attributed his experience of racial stereotyping to the "fear of the unknown" on the part of some white students. Participants felt that white students as a whole were afraid to talk to them. One individual stated, "whites see blacks and automatically see us as harmful." This perceived presumption by some white students has continued to increase the racial divide between whites and other ethnic groups because of the false fear that has paralyzed some white students from interacting with students of color.

#### *Recruitment of Racially-Diverse Faculty*

Participants thought that the Upper Midwest University lacked awareness in its quest to recruit racially diverse faculty members. When specifically asked about their thoughts on the scarcity of racially diverse faculty on campus, one participant felt that there was a disconnect between him and the faculty. "We need professors who understand us. Professors who do not have any multicultural awareness is not good for

us.” This student was expressing the desire that faculty should be cognizant of the issues students of color face as they relate to multiculturalism from both an academic and social perspective. Faculty who are not culturally competent are not proficient in embracing racial differences within the classroom setting.

#### *Availability of Financial Assistance*

Insufficient financial aid was fervently reported by all participants. One student articulated, “The only barrier I can think of right now is my financial aid.” Securing enough financial assistance from year to year has been a constant struggle that the participants worried about while pursuing their degrees at the Upper Midwest University in this study. Several ethnic groups have been considered disenfranchised in the United States, and among these groups (i.e. African American, Native American, and Hispanic), populations are confronted with income inequality (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). A disproportionate number of students of color are not able to receive or even ask for financial support from other family members, because of the difficult challenge to maintain economic sufficiency within their own household. One participant emphasized, “A lot of minorities have struggled and turned out to be the best, and if they are to survive here, they need finances, or they will not make it.” This participant was referring to the economic and financial hardships that numerous racial minority students are born into because of the uneven distribution of status and wealth by the plutocratic population who have power to determine socio-economic conditions within our society.

The results of the pilot study led me to investigate theories related to the findings that provided a conceptual framework for a more thorough investigation. Using the conceptual framework subsequently helped me identify broad questions to guide interviews for my dissertation research study.

#### Conceptual Framework

Social scientists gain access to the knowledge of the world around them through genuine efforts to understand other people's world views. Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that "concepts and theories are *constructed* by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves" (p. 10). As a person who identifies as African American and black interchangeably, I am interested in learning more about various perspectives and possible dynamics that focus on promoting academic success and social integration for students of color in higher education. It is critical that I give other African American/black students an opportunity to speak about their own experiences based upon their own paradigms that influence how they view academic and social integration at a predominately white institution. As a qualitative researcher who is also a part of a racial/ethnic minority group, I took on the "mindset of a learner, not an expert" (Glesne, 2006, p. 94), because academic and social experiences vary for racial/ethnic minorities. Therefore, my own knowledge could not overshadow the voices of others. Qualitative researchers must endeavor to further their knowledge of the world around us, and be able to articulate for those who cannot speak

for themselves. From these philosophical assumptions, my conceptual framework consisted of the *Social Identity Development Theory* and the *Critical Race Theory*.

Understanding my own conceptual framework was vital to my research. The purpose of doing my research was to increase knowledge in the literature concerning experiences of students of color at a predominantly white institution of higher learning. I wanted to ascertain how students of color viewed themselves within the context of academic and social acculturation at an Upper Midwest university, a predominately white institution of higher education.

*Social Identity Development Theory* asserts that an individual's psychosocial identity is significant in how people view themselves internally and externally (socially). The personal identity refers to one's physical traits and behaviors and the social identity refers to one's membership or role in society (Vygotsky, 1978). This can include race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and class. The *Social Identity Development Theory* seeks to gain a broader understanding of various dimensions of identity development.

*Critical Race Theory* examines race relations in the United States and how these interactions influence curricula, school testing, and classroom dynamics (Horkheimer, 1982). This theory emphatically challenges hierarchal systems to alleviate their domination within underrepresented or marginalized groups of people to allow social, economic, and educational equality for all human beings.

### Need for the Study

In an effort to move forward in my investigation of students of color on an Upper Midwest university campus, I felt that it was important to make my research questions more open-ended. That is, instead of looking for struggles and barriers, I wished to look at all experiences, both positive and negative, that students of color might have encountered while enrolled at a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest. Despite the overall findings in my pilot study, some graduate students in the pilot study conveyed positive experiences as students at an Upper Midwest university. Implications that were provided in the pilot study may have contributed to an increase in more positive experiences and a greater sense of belonging for students of color at PWIs. Results or implications from the pilot study have encouraged students of color to become involved in student organizations and social events, and also, have created an environment that has fostered positive faculty and peer relationships in this current study.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions African American/black undergraduate students held of their experiences attending a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest. Insight was gained during the study to increase knowledge concerning the nature of higher education for students of color at an Upper Midwest university and other predominately white institutions to better prepare faculty, staff, and administration to work with students of color.



### Research Question

I was interested in learning more about the perceptions African American/black undergraduate students held of their experiences while attending an Upper Midwest university more so than students of color in general, because I identify as an African American/black who has also attended predominately white institutions in the Midwest. The guiding research question was, “What are the perceptions African American/black undergraduate students held of their experiences while attending one predominately white institution in the Midwest?” This qualitative research question was open-ended and supported the guiding questions that were asked in individual interviews.

### Delimitations

1. Participants recruited for this study were six undergraduate students (juniors) attending one Upper Midwest university during the 2009-2010 academic school year.
2. Participants recruited for this study were 18 years of age and older.

### Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study, the following terms were defined. These terms are used interchangeably throughout my dissertation.

African-Americans or blacks – members of a racial group having brown to black skin, especially one of African descent. In addition, this term also alludes to an ethnicity constructed of geography, history, and culture.

Whites – members of a racial group having light skin, especially people of European origin.

Students of Color or Racial/Ethnic Minority Students – American Indian or Native American, black or African American, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanic or Latino(a) students who attend historically black colleges and universities or predominately white institutions of higher education.

HBCUs – Historically Black Colleges and Universities

PWIs - Predominately White Institutions

UMU - Upper Midwest University (pseudonym for the university selected for this study).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The United States continues to become more diversified in terms of racial/ethnic minority groups, and the “browning of America” warrants a challenge to the higher education system in which campus climates must be conducive and reflective of the needs of students of color (Jones et al., 2002). Topics that emerged from a study of various authors’ works concerning experiences of students of color at PWIs are as follows: the attrition and retention rates of students of color at PWIs, the importance of institutional climate at PWIs, academic and social integration of racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs, faculty of color at PWIs, and preparation for college and financial concerns. Each of these topics will be reviewed in the remainder of this chapter.

#### Attrition and Retention Rates of Students of Color

Retention rates of racial minority students at predominately white institutions are influenced by various factors. Past research has shown that campus climate is vital to student retention (Crump, Recupero, & Roy, 1992). Students who perceive a campus as being hostile or contentious are not as inclined to complete their degree of study. Jacoby (1991) found that students of color were less likely to remain at a predominately white institution if they believed the campus atmosphere was unfriendly.

Retention programs contribute largely to student success. Such programs encourage racial minority students to enroll in courses in which they learn about available university resources. Students who have enrolled in such courses reported greater knowledge about their university and social networks than students who did not (Robbins & Smith, 1993).

Jones and colleagues (2002) conducted a study in which they interviewed 35 racial/ethnic minority students who attended a predominately white institution. Their study examined students' perspectives of campus climate, school resources, and quality of student service programs. One of their findings revealed that all racial/ethnic minority groups of students "were pleased with the services provided by the cross-cultural centers" (p. 20) at the predominately white institution they attended. Student service programs, in particular cross-cultural and multicultural centers, are vital entities that offer academic and social support, as well as a sense of belonging. Cultural centers are pivotal in providing safe havens for racial/ethnic minority students who attend predominately white institutions of higher education (Jones et al., 2002).

Another finding of the Jones et al. (2002) study was students' perceptions concerning a lack of campus-wide commitment and responsibility on issues of diversity. For example, many American Indian students reported feelings of discrimination and alienation, and questioned cultural support from their white counterparts. However, a majority of the focus group participants revealed that they did not seek support from other ethnic minority groups due to fear of rejection. Thus, Jones and colleagues found separatism between ethnic/racial minority groups as well, and this led to a decreased

likelihood of a united social support system amongst students of color at predominately white institutions. Furthermore, many African-American students disclosed their lack of active participation in campus-wide events and organizations that did not pertain to ethnic-specific themes.

Rivas-Drake and Mooney (2009) examined the role perceived minority status had on academic experiences of Latino students who have gained entry into elite institutions of higher education. Many participants had at least one parent who was an immigrant to the United States. Rivas-Drake and Mooney used data that was derived from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman to explore the extent to which perceived minority status had influenced individual Latino students' academic and extracurricular engagement in college. National Longitudinal Survey data included feedback from 890 Latino participants attending 28 elite colleges and universities in the United States. The researchers found that time spent on academic engagement decreased between students' freshman and junior years; however, it is important to note that the students indicated their minority status was not related to the decline in their academic engagement. They also reported that their decrease in extracurricular activities was not a direct correlation with their minority status. Instead, Rivas-Drake and Mooney argued that students exhibited three mindsets or mind orientation tendencies, that of assimilation, accommodation, or resistance, and that these orientations or ways of thinking were what mattered for college engagement to take place; however, these orientations were not dependent upon a student's generation status or national origin.

Mentoring programs have contributed to greater retention rates among racial minority students at predominately white universities. Minority students in mentoring programs are more likely to remain in school and graduate than racial minority students who are not involved in mentoring programs (Dale & Zych, 1996). McCormack (1995) has also encouraged predominately white universities to examine retention predictors within racial groups since personal experiences differ individually. These findings suggest a desire on the part of racial minority students to feel a part of the larger community on a college/university campus, and academic and social support systems for racial minority students at predominately white universities may assist in higher retention rates, as well as decreased feelings of isolation, marginalization, and social exclusion.

In their efforts to focus on retention rates among Latino(a) students in their attainment of baccalaureate degrees, Oseguera and colleagues (2009) examined various approaches that have been effective at retaining students and have the potential to increase retention rates for Latino(a) populations in higher education. The researchers addressed educational journeys Latino(a) students face through their individual dispositions and their social contexts that impact their educational outcomes. Overemphasizing standardized academic measures for Latino(a) students could adversely affect them psychologically, and negative self-concepts may influence Latino(a) students who attend PWIs to withdraw from the university. Many students of color have poor college preparation and do not receive adequate college counseling, and pre and post standardized measures “hold a great deal of social weight and often

determine what educational opportunities students will be exposed to throughout their educational careers” (Oseguera et al., 2009, p. 33). Latino(a) students who attend predominately white institutions that incorporate and sponsor cultural events and educational activities facilitating structured intergroup dialogue, may inspire Latino(a) students to continue to pursue their baccalaureate degree even though they may encounter some challenges (Oseguera et al.).

#### Academic and Social Integration

Students of color need to have a strong sense of belonging while attending predominately white institutions of higher education, which may increase their social and academic integration while promoting a more positive self-concept. Hobson-Horton and Owens (2004) researched ways to recruit and retain African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Latino(a), and Native Americans at a southeastern university. The authors investigated factors that influence attrition and retention rates in the College of Education’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction at this particular campus. Two focus groups were established; the first focus group consisted of African American senior-level students who were currently student teaching. The second focus group was comprised of six students who were teacher education majors; these students were African American as well. The two focus groups explored the experiences of students of color at this predominately white institution, and why these students chose to major in teacher education.

Some recruits conveyed that sometimes they did not feel welcomed on campus and did not have positive interactions with white students. However, all participants

felt that faculty who assisted them with academic advising and positively interacted with them were factors that influenced their decision to remain at the university and attain their baccalaureate degree in teacher education. Furthermore, students in both focus groups “believed that the university catered to the requests of White students” (Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004, p. 97) and institutional policies favored white students. For example, participants in the first focus group disclosed that cultural events that students of color held on campus had to have campus security, but white students did not have to allocate funds to pay for campus security (Hobson-Horton & Owens).

Participants in both focus groups desired to be educators because of the need for teachers in our society. The majority of the recruits stated that a mentoring program at the college would also be beneficial to help retain students of color, and that financial assistance should be available for all students who must pass the Praxis examination for teacher education, a costly requirement for teaching students (Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004). Implications from their research suggested that the perceptions and opinions of students of color should be considered if predominately white institutions are truly committed to improving retention rates for students of color, and steps must be taken to ensure that all students feel academically and socially integrated at predominately white institutions.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) researched college transition experiences and effects of campus climate on Latino college students’ sense of belonging at various institutions of higher education. Their study examined 493 Hispanic students’ responses to the



National Survey of Hispanic Students to determine if a connection existed between one's sense of belonging and institutional climate. Responses revealed that Hispanic students who participated in organizations in high school were more likely to participate in organizations throughout college, and that Latino(a) students who sought involvement in religious groups, community organizations, student government, and sports teams had a greater sense of belonging while attending a PWI and other various institutions of higher education than those students who were not involved in any activities. Their research also revealed that membership in racial-ethnic minority student organizations may also mediate the effect of adverse climates because of an inner social support network.

Tinto's (1993) theoretical model on voluntary student departure from postsecondary institutions has asserted that the importance of social and academic integration determines one's commitment to remain at or leave a university. Students of color, in particular, who make an effort to join social organizations and get involved with various campus activities, tend to feel a part of the larger campus community at predominately white institutions. Slightly disagreeing with Tinto's assumptions, Fox (1986) asserted that academic integration is more important to retention than social involvement. Students of color who participate in class discussions and converse with faculty and other students about course material are more likely to remain at a university and obtain their baccalaureate degree because of a stronger sense of belonging. Zea and colleagues (1997) concluded that students who are not willing to integrate themselves are "expected to experience decreased commitment to the

institution and to educational goals and they may perceive the university as making less of an investment in them” (p. 150). Thus, social and academic involvement of racial minority students at PWIs may “provide a more complete picture of why and how [positive] changes come about in students’ perceived minority status over time” (Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009, p. 650).

#### Financial Resources

Financial aid and affordability is another contributing factor to low retention rates of many students of color, in particular, those who come from lower-income families. The lack of financial resources and scarcity of income poses a barrier to higher education, and knowledge about how to apply and receive financial aid is critical to affordability decisions for many students of color and their families. McDonough and Calderone (2006) interviewed 63 counselors working in urban secondary schools to assess their awareness of financial concerns and college costs for African American and Latina(o) high school students. Some participants also agreed to do focus groups to discuss how they presented college information to various high school juniors, seniors, and parents/caregivers. Three out of twenty high schools in which the researchers conducted their assessment, had high percentage rates of college attendance among graduates.

McDonough and Calderone (2006) found high school counselors play a critical role in advising students and parents/caregivers so high school juniors and seniors have adequate time to understand college entrance requirements and prepare for college. Their findings indicated that although all the counselors stated that they discussed

financial aid and college cost information with students and parents/caregivers, many parents/caregivers still needed clarification concerning grants and loans because they found “a lot of the language confusing” (p. 1714). Only six schools described, in detail, other measures to assist parents and students with questions they might have concerning affordability of higher education. These other measures included alumni panels, presentations from local financial aid officers, and free workshops to assist students and parents or caregivers in learning how to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Clearly, there is a need for many students of color to understand college cost and to obtain information concerning financial aid for higher education, and high school counselors must have relevant information available and be willing to meet with students and their parents/caregivers to assess their needs for college affordability.

#### Scarcity of Faculty of Color

To strive to understand experiences of students of color at the Upper Midwest University (UMU), a PWI of higher education, a person should study the recruitment of racially diverse faculty. This can be considered another factor that may influence experiences and retention rates of students of color at PWIs. Stanley (2006) stated there is a “lack of critical mass of faculty of color in higher education” (p. 702) and according to statistical data, non-white faculty represents 16% of full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions of higher education (American Council on Education, 2005). Hu-DeHart (2000) declared that predominately white institutions do not prepare their campus culture to welcome non-white faculty; thus the critical need is to engage

students with faculty who come from various racial/ethnic minority groups in and outside of the United States and to enhance racial sensitivity within the teaching and learning process. Students of color may feel a greater sense of belonging, if they are taught by professors who are of their same ethnic minority group. When there is an increase in racially diverse faculty at a PWI, students of color tend to apply and enroll at those predominately white universities at higher rates (Cross & Slater, 1999).

In contrast to Cross and Slater's (1999) findings, Brayboy (2003) discussed the concept of implementing diversity at predominately white institutions of higher education and asserted the need for white faculty to also make a commitment to teach diversity courses and to mentor students of color. From his interviews with racial minority faculty who teach at predominately white institutions, Brayboy found that many were overwhelmed with their work with having to deal with diversity issues in and outside of their classroom, while also being expected to submit publications to scholarly journals each year. Brayboy cited one faculty of color who commented:

I can't come to work without someone asking me a question about race or diversity and following it up with a request for me to serve on another committee, or sit in on a meeting, or talk to a student. It's ridiculous, because they [white faculty] can do some of this work" (p. 75).

Another racial minority faculty member conveyed her perceptions of being a "token voice of color" (p. 81), because she had always been associated with discussions or issues that pertained to diversity. Many faculty of color have felt that most white faculty have not been responsible for diversity, and that they (faculty of color) alone are

seen as representations of PWIs' commitment to diversity, and ultimately, they have been the ones left implementing diversity (Brayboy).

Brayboy's (2003) findings could lead to another strategy for increasing retention rates of racial minority students at predominately white universities. Students of color may perceive a better sense of belonging and a positive campus climate at predominately white institutions when white faculty also exemplify a commitment to diversity by teaching multicultural courses. The message at predominately white institutions appears to be that only faculty of color are able to teach diversity courses. However, by "sharing in the work of instituting diversity, White faculty illustrate the importance and salience of [diversity] courses for the departments and its students" (Brayboy, p. 84). Brayboy's findings suggest the need for all faculty to be aware of issues students of color face as students attempt to relate to multiculturalism from both an academic and social perspective. Regardless of one's race or ethnicity, faculty at PWIs should be culturally competent and proficient in establishing and embracing racial differences within the classroom in order to support and retain students of color and a racially diverse faculty.

Delgado-Romero and Hernandez (2002) studied factors that contribute to cultural competence in faculty who agree to be advisors to Hispanic student organizations. Hispanic student enrollment at PWIs has been steadily increasing, but many Hispanic students claim to have difficulties integrating socially, culturally, and academically at PWIs of higher education. Delgado-Romero and Hernandez suggested that Hispanic students consider joining student organizations, because student

organizations provide a “supportive social outlet” (p. 144) for many students of color to help them thrive and succeed in college. From their experience of advising Hispanic students at a predominately white institution, Delgado-Romero and Hernandez asserted that a faculty advisor “has referent power as a member of the college or university, and thereby can either facilitate or impede the growth and the development of both Hispanic student groups and individual students” (p. 145). Thus, it is critical that faculty advisors to student organizations, in particular, Hispanic student organizations, are enriched in the awareness, knowledge, and skills so necessary to advise students competently and with cultural sensitivity which, in turn, will increase social integration and encourage higher retention and graduation rates (Delgado-Romero & Hernandez).

The importance of one’s culture and racial/ethnic heritage should be celebrated, embraced, and positively reinforced to empower and enrich the lives of all students who attend PWIs. For example, Delgado-Romero & Hernandez (2002) found that the terminology that students of color use to represent and define themselves should be appropriately used by faculty advisors as well, and those faculty advisors must be cognizant of the cultural and psychological issues that may be associated with being a student of color such as identity development and assimilation.

Another important aspect of cultural competency for faculty advisors to consider is the reality that PWIs have very few Hispanic faculty who could serve as role models for Hispanic students. Furthermore, Hispanic faculty who are seeking tenure or promotion may feel too overwhelmed to advise student organizations because this type of service is not reflective of the decision-making process for tenure. Their decision to

be faculty advisors to Hispanic student organizations, as well as to serve as mentors, could result in burnout and failure (Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002). Delgado-Romero and Hernandez strongly urged suitable non-Hispanic faculty to also be advisors and allies to Hispanic student organizations to help combat possible feelings of isolation that some Hispanic students may feel while attending PWIs.

#### Instructional Development and Low Expectations of Faculty

At a predominately white institution of higher education in the Midwest region of the United States, Chesler (1997) examined perceptions students of color had in regard to faculty behavior in which he conducted a series of 15 focus groups that were composed of three to eight students of various racial/ethnic minority groups (i.e., African-American, Latino/a, Asian-Americans, and/or Native Americans). Chesler sought to “provide clear evidence of the need for faculty instructional development” (p. 1) as it related to white faculty who stated that they genuinely cared about the welfare and achievement of students of color, but were often unaware that their efforts were problematic for students of color. Culture is a vital function to consider as it relates to responsive pedagogy in higher education. Ware (2006) asserted that a disconnect between culture of students and a school’s culture creates a potential for misunderstanding of actions and misinterpretation of communication between teacher and student.

In Chesler’s (1997) study, students reported that faculty did not expect them to perform well in class, and this did not encourage them or affirm their abilities. One student stated, “I wasn’t doing well in the course,” and the professor said, “Oh, well,

drop the course. There's nothing I can do for you and there's nothing you can do" (p. 2). Some students of color also reported that "they felt estranged and even excluded by assumptions made by the faculty about students in general that just did not apply to them" (p. 2). Others declared that students of color were not all alike and expressed great discomfort when they were "lumped together" (p. 2), because there are individual differences within all racial/ethnic minority groups.

Saddlemire (1996) examined the experiences of African-American, Asian-Pacific American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American students, and their perceptions of student services at a predominately white institution. He concluded that predominately white institutions admitted cultural outsiders with relatively little thought given or action taken to accommodate the "stranger" (pp. 684-691). In an earlier study, Taylor (1989) found similar results and noted that the unchanging nature of most predominately white institutions conveyed to some that white institutions were superior to HBCUs, and that racial minority students had to conform to the institutional standards of PWIs rather than to the needs of an ethnically diverse student body.

#### College Preparation

Percentage rates of the number of students attending college continue to increase for many racial/ethnic minority groups. Educational initiatives that are federally funded have been created to improve college entry for disenfranchised minority youth. To combat poor preparation for college, Upward Bound, a federally funded summer program designed to give first generation racial minority high school students an opportunity to prepare for their transition to higher education, has helped to decrease the



achievement gap and to improve access to postsecondary education for students of color (Ward, 2006). Racial/ethnic minority students who may need additional academic as well as financial assistance may qualify for certain services while enrolled in college. Federally funded programs such as TRIO, an acronym that refers to specific college assistance programs which help currently enrolled economically disadvantaged or first generation college students, provide academic support by offering tutoring and tuition waivers for students who meet eligibility requirements. Unfortunately, a large number of students of color may not meet certain eligibility requirements and are denied academic and financial support. The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) program was introduced under the Clinton administration. This educational initiative prepares seventh-graders through high school low-income racial minority students for high achieving academic performance (Ward, 2006).

The GEAR UP program provides students and their parents/caregivers with relevant information about college selection, financial aid, and college scholarships, in hopes that access to higher education will be successfully achieved. Grants through the GEAR UP program encourage students of color to strengthen their academic skills so that higher education is a realistic option (Ward, 2006). College preparation that begins in middle school for many students of color may increase retention rates of minority students at PWIs of higher education, especially if racial/ethnic minority students feel prepared and have adequate financial resources to fund their baccalaureate degree.

Choy (2001) found that even after first generation urban college students were admitted to an institution of higher learning, financial needs and poor college preparation persisted throughout most of their college career. In a 2008 study, Reid and Moore investigated how well prepared first generation urban college students were for postsecondary education. Thirteen students who were concurrently enrolled in a four year university, and who graduated from the same urban high school, were surveyed. The majority of students recruited were African American with the exception of two immigrants from Ghana and Haiti. Through the use of a biographical questionnaire and individual interviews (in which recruits discussed their college preparation experience), two participants informed researchers that they had perceived they were well prepared for postsecondary education because of their high school experience. Three of the 13 participants conveyed that although they felt more ready for college than most their urban peers, they lagged behind other college students in progress towards attaining their degree. Seven participants disclosed that they were poorly prepared for college. Only one recruit was not able to answer the question, but claimed "that she, along with most of her college friends, were struggling with the college-level work" (p. 246).

Although a few of the first generation urban college students in Reid and Moore's (2008) study reported having a higher grade point average (GPA) in college than in high school, most of the participants stated that their academic performance was currently lower in college, especially for those who needed strong academic skills in math and science for their desired majors. Some of their observations were: Most participants' academic struggles in high school continued in college; both the public

school system and post-secondary education must work together to better prepare first generation urban students for college entry; and high school counselors must have a knowledge base that will assist students in choosing college courses that will prepare them for careers after their post-secondary education.

Another important recommendation from the Reid and Moore (2008) study was post-secondary educators must be aware that many first generation urban college students need support and guidance, because they are in “uncharted territory that no one in their family has experienced” (p. 259). Reid and Moore suggested that writing centers, tutoring labs, and counseling centers are needed. Additionally, they suggested that a mentorship program that would connect first generation urban students with upper class first generation urban students might also prove rewarding and advantageous to help encourage these students to remain at post-secondary institutions and attain their baccalaureate degree.

Calaff (2008) also examined how well Latino(a) immigrant high school students were academically prepared for college. The students and parents who consented to participate in Calaff’s research were interviewed about college preparation. Calaff’s study focused on one particular high school in the western region of the United States, known for its high academic achievement. Students at this high school have been required to take college preparatory classes and pass state exams in order to attain their high school diploma. Latino(a) immigrant students who have not been proficient in English have also been required to take English as a second language course, in addition to their regular English class. Furthermore, a “double block” (p. 101) system was

established for students who struggled in math and science, and this western high school also had up-to-date technological resources that assisted students with school work before, during, and after school hours. The students and parents who were participants of this study informed the researcher that they felt prepared for college and believed that that they could succeed academically. Calaff's findings also suggested that high schools that support cultural differences among students and create a teaching atmosphere of respect, nurture, and acceptance may prepare more students of color for college entry.

In a similar study, Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2006) declared that the availability of funds to meet tuition and other college expenses influenced the decision-making process for racial minority students who were trying to decide whether or not to pursue postsecondary education. Financial assistance was "significantly related to student factors and outcomes such as academic achievement, educational commitments, student engagement, and persistence to graduation" (p. 1636). In order to increase retention rates of students of color, predominately white institutions must provide adequate financial resources to help sustain racial/ethnic minority groups who are seeking degree attainment. Various sources of financial assistance such as grants, loans, and work study, allow many racial/ethnic minority students to attend college without being worried or overwhelmed with college tuition and expenses. Adequate financial assistance alleviates the need for many racial/ethnic minority students to attend a college close to their hometown to help lower tuition costs, or enter the labor force

because they perceive that college is not an attainable goal due to their socio-economic status (Nora et al.).

Although there has continued to be a steady increase among Native Americans who attend postsecondary institutions, retention rates remain low, and the drop-out rates are higher for Native Americans than for any other racial minority group (Hoffman, Jackson, & Smith, 2005). In their study, Hoffman and colleagues (2005) explored the barriers that many Native Americans face as they consider career options. From their interviews with 29 Native American students, who were attending secondary schools on their reservations, researchers found that many middle and high school students indicated that some of their potential barriers to attending a postsecondary institution and making successful career transitions were academic difficulties, money, limited range of possible careers, and family and peer pressure. However, students who already had siblings who attended college or had familial support only perceived potential financial concerns as their most glaring barrier to higher education. It is also important to note that some of the interviewees did not perceive any aforementioned limitations to postsecondary education and many who identified any barriers to higher education also identified simple methods for overcoming those barriers.

#### Racial Identity and Psychological Adjustment

Prelow, Mosher, and Bowman (2006) suggested that being subjected to racial discrimination may adversely impact African American college students' psychological adjustment and perceived social support as students enrolled at predominately white institutions. Racial/ethnic minority groups continue to be plagued by discriminatory

behaviors. It is critical for PWIs to embrace multiculturalism in the classroom and to treat students of color with respect and to show a willingness to learn more about cultural differences.

In Helms' (1995) *Black Racial Identity Theory*, she asserted that racial classifications are socially constructed concepts that reflect "different conditions of domination and oppression" (p. 181). Helms suggested that all members of a socio-racial group experience some form of a racial identity developmental process, and each racial grouping holds a certain status within society, but status differs "between racial groups due to the power differences that have existed, and continue to exist, among socioracial groups in U.S. society" (p. 183). Certain racial groups are marginalized and have to adapt to an environment in which the distribution of resources are influenced by a hierarchical system that does not favor their racial group membership (Helms).

Cross' (1991) development model on black racial identity described the process in which blacks make a psychological connection between their race and how they perceive themselves. He asserted that racial identity has a direct correlation with one's self-esteem and self-perception. Cross constructed the *Black Racial Identity Development Model* using a total of four key stages (i.e., Pre-Encounter Stage, Encounter Stage, Immersion-Emersion Stage, and the Internalization Stage) to analyze how African-Americans begin and end their process of self-actualization. Many blacks (and white people, too), either consciously or subconsciously, have learned many negative stereotypes surrounding the word, black. For example, a *blacklist* is a list of disliked persons, the color *black* is associated with grief and mourning, *black magic* is

an evil form of magic, *black* (dark) comedy deals with depressing and serious issues. the *black* sheep of a family is one who is considered to be wayward and goes against familiar morals, a *black* cat is considered to be bad luck, and the *black* market is used to denote the trade of illegal goods and services. The idea that black is bad is ingrained into our psyche. Thus, faculty at predominately white institutions, to be culturally competent, need to be aware of these undercurrents or unconscious tendencies in our society and readily address them by making changes (positive or negative) in their classroom environment to minimize issues of racial dissonance and maximize interracial acceptance.

A growing body of research would suggest that feelings of isolation and withdrawal may decrease among students of color if more racially diverse faculty taught at predominately white institutions; however, Brayboy (2003) disagreed with this assumption and encouraged all faculty members to be culturally competent, and to include multiculturalism in their curricula, regardless of one's race or ethnicity. According to Vygotsky's (1978) *Social Identity Development Theory*, when students of color have positive interactions with faculty and peers at PWIs, their social identity may increase along with a greater sense of belonging. Students of color at PWIs may then be more willing to actively participate in campus events and organizations as well as establish stronger social networks. It is equally important for faculty at PWIs to be knowledgeable about *Critical Race Theory* (Horkheimer, 1982), and how race and race relations influence every aspect of people's lives. PWIs must be aware that a hierarchal system still exists in which certain racial/ethnic groups are marginalized more than

others, and that this marginalization can be found within social interactions and within educational systems. PWIs must also have a better understanding of race and its role in society, and make every effort to include a multicultural focus in and outside of the classroom.

Although many students of color attend institutions of higher education, retention and graduation rates have steadily remained low, while attrition rates have increased (Crump et al., 1992; Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002; Hu-DeHart, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jacoby, 1991; Tinto, 1993). PWIs must be conducive to greater acceptance and tolerance among races and reflective of the needs of students of color, and students of color must also be willing to engage in campus-wide events to increase their sense of belonging at predominately white institutions (Jones et al., 2002).

As PWIs of higher education actively recruit students of color, it is important that they be keenly aware of the poor college and financial preparation many of these students have had. Furthermore, these institutions must also strive to offer support services for these students, as they transition from high school to college to ensure academic success (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Oseguera et al., 2009). A greater sense of belonging as well as academic and social integration may also positively impact retention rates among students of color at predominately white institutions. Other important offerings could be a friendly campus climate, culturally competent faculty, mentorship programs, and student organizations (Crump et al., 1992; Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002; Hu-DeHart, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jacoby, 1991; Tinto, 1993).



## Summary

The literature clearly underscores the need for students of color to be better prepared to attend predominantly white institutions. Studies suggest that these students are often not prepared to attend college and have little understanding of factors that make college affordable (e.g., grants and loans). The application process may also be a mystery to them. Furthermore, students of color often arrive on the campuses of PWIs needing assistance to succeed academically and socially. Many do not feel a part of white culture and have little understanding of how to achieve a sense of belonging.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of perceptions African American/black undergraduate students held of their experiences attending a predominately white institution (PWI) of higher education in the Upper Midwest. It was hoped that through this research insight may be gained into how black students experience college life and the nature of higher education for African American/black undergraduate students at one Upper Midwest university and other predominately white institutions of higher education. Such insight may better prepare faculty, staff, and administration to work with students of color.

Phenomenological research is an approach that may assist in delineating and interpreting the experiences of racial minority students at an Upper Midwest university, while attending the institution. Creswell (2007) defined phenomenological research as “an approach that focuses on the essence or structure of an experience” (p. 157). There are various ways of understanding and construing lived experiences, and the assumption in phenomenological research is that reality is based upon each individual’s interpretation regarding the same experience. The intent is to describe and analyze an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen., 2010, p. 471).

Phenomenology examines human experience through a series of questions, and the researcher usually interviews between five and twenty-five participants (Creswell, 2007). Although interview data are typical sources of data for phenomenological research, other data sources can include music, observations, journals, novels, and films (van Manen, 1990). “The key questions involve exploring what has been experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts affected or influenced those experiences” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 472). Researchers will examine and explore their own experiences as they relate to a topic of interest in order to assess and consider their own biases and assumptions. It is also vital for researchers to actively listen and encourage interviewees to elaborate on their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Through the use of data collection and analysis, the meaning of a phenomenon is explored through the eyes of individuals, and themes are identified and developed from the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Context is an important concept in data collection when using phenomenological research, since participants are sought out because their experiences are essential to the study.

#### Procedures

##### *Topic Selection/Researcher's Bias*

As stated earlier, I am a member of a racial/ethnic minority group (African-American/black) and my experiences as an underrepresented racial minority at predominately white institutions have been overwhelmingly positive. However, I am not blind to the impact that race and socio-economic status have on marginalized groups, even within the higher education system. I have been subjected to racial/ethnic

minority stereotypes and issues around social integration and a sense of belonging at PWIs. While attending one PWI in the Upper Midwest, several white students chanted racial slurs at me such as “Your kind don’t belong here,” and I was frequently asked by white peers if I was accepted to the university because of athletics. Through this study, I wanted to learn about the experiences of African American/black undergraduate students who attend predominately white institutions of higher education, and I was very cognizant that experiences, both positive and negative, will vary within racial/ethnic minority groups and individually. Because many African American/black undergraduate students are faced with various issues that may prevent some from pursuing a degree in higher education (e.g., the lack of financial, social, and academic support), this study has the potential to increase knowledge concerning the nature of the conditions and/or barriers to higher education, creating new approaches to improving opportunities for marginalized groups to gain higher learning degrees at predominately white institutions.

#### *Study Setting*

The Upper Midwest University (UMU) is located in a Midwestern metropolitan area that has a population of approximately 67,000 residents. The UMU is a predominately white institution of higher education in which students of color are underrepresented. According to the Upper Midwest University’s 2009-2010 Student Body Profile, African Americans/blacks represent 1.51% of the student population. Interviews were restricted to the school environment to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants.

### *Protection of Study Participants*

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the UMU. Participants were informed of potential risks and benefits to themselves, and a consent form explained the purpose of the study, if they chose to participate (Appendix A). After written consent was acquired, interviewees also received a copy of the consent form with the assurance that they could end their participation at any time during the course of the research study. Identities of interviewed students were masked through the use of fictitious names.

### *Selection of Participants*

Participants recruited for this study were drawn from a population of undergraduate students who were juniors at the Upper Midwest University during the 2009-2010 academic school year. Students who were not 18 years of age and older were not invited to participate in this study as interviewees. Since the majority of incoming freshmen were still transitioning from high school to college and were not as acquainted with the university, African American/black students who were freshmen at the Upper Midwest University were also not included in this research.

Participants were sought through a multicultural center on the Upper Midwest University campus. Recruitment of participants also derived from the use of informal contacts and from other participants who suggested people who were appropriate to contact. Eleven African American/black undergraduate students were contacted and six agreed to participate in this study. All participants were juniors at the Upper Midwest University; three of the participants were male and three were female. At the time of

the study, Wayne was a political science major, Lynnette was a nursing major, Jacob was a geology major, Courtney was a political science major, and Maya majored in music. Robert had been given special permission to have an individualized major in multicultural studies.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Phenomenology is different from other qualitative approaches in that a “subjective experience is at the center of the inquiry” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 472). When incorporating phenomenology in research, interviewers should adhere to systematic steps in the data analysis procedure and to guidelines for assembling textual and structural descriptions of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Abiding by these systematic steps may lead to a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon or increase the development of practices and policies (Moustakas, 1994).

Convenience sampling was utilized in this study and willing participants were selected as they met criteria. Polkinghorne (1989) identified that sample size in phenomenological work usually ranges from 5 to 25 people. Through convenience sampling, six individuals were identified; three women and three men. These participants were encouraged to do one audio-recorded interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and written permission to audiotape interviews was sought, so I could accurately transcribe interviews and maintain an intact original copy of the interviews for future reference (Seidman, 1998).

After initial interviews, if further clarity was needed, additional interviews were sought to expand knowledge content of the data or until saturation or no new patterns or

themes occurred in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.143). Field notes were taken during each interview and were reviewed after each session. Interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

### *Bracketing*

Phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain lived experiences. It is essential for the researcher to dismiss personal assumptions, pre-conceived notions, and hypotheses as research participants interpret their own experiences and perceptions based on a phenomenon in order to give it meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The concept of bracketing (Husserl, 1970) involves the researcher making a conscious effort to set aside personal biases, as much as possible, while conducting interviews in order to consider a “fresh perspective based on data collected from persons who have experienced the phenomenon” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 473). As I stated earlier, I identify as an African American/black who has also attended PWIs in the Upper Midwest. Therefore, I had to make a conscious effort to set aside my own experiences and assumptions in order to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of each individual research participant during the interview process. I also asked research participants “what” and “how” questions to find out what their experiences meant to them. Phenomenological research does not seek explanations of lived experiences, so I did not ask research participants “why” questions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Sandberg, 2005). Again, interview questions can be seen in Appendix B.

Phenomenological research conveys possible relationships within data analysis through memos and diagrams, and this encourages the researcher to focus and to truly reflect upon the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Corbin and Strauss stated:

Writing memos should begin with the first analytic session and continue throughout the analytic process.... Doing memos and diagrams should never be viewed as chores, or tasks to be agonized over.... Rather, memos and diagrams begin as rather rudimentary representations of thought and grow in complexity, density, clarity, and accuracy as the research progresses (p. 118).

In phenomenological research, collecting and analyzing data is a critical process that should accurately describe viewpoints or experiences of participants. As I wrote memos and created diagrams to investigate the experiences of African American/black undergraduate students at the Upper Midwest University, I also took into account the “social, historical, and economic conditions influencing the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 67), once patterns and themes emerged.

#### *Horizontalization, Textual Description, and Structural Description*

During the interview process, I tried to treat all statements from each individual research participant as equally important. This is called horizontalization according to Moustakas (1994). I also asked follow-up questions if I needed a research participant to clarify a statement or to elaborate on what they meant by their statements. Themes were derived from groupings of statements having similar meanings (Moustakas, 1994). I then wrote up a summary describing themes, highlighting what students actually experienced through textual description. Structural description clarified and expounded



on the context that influenced research participants' experiences, how the phenomenon was experienced, and in what conditions and situations (Ary et al., 2010, p. 472).

Qualitative researchers must seek to explore the context of statements, thoughts, and personal perceptions, as they relate to the analysis of collected data from their participants. Questions such as "What led this participant to engage in a particular or specified course of action?" and "What is the essence of the participant's experience?" are critical to understanding the process through which interviewees respond to various "conditions through their actions, interactions, and emotions" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 230). Through the use of open-ended questions, participants were asked to express their thoughts and feelings concerning their experiences at the Upper Midwest University.

#### *Composite Description*

Learning to listen well to others' stories and interpret and retell the accounts is part of a qualitative researcher's trade (Glesne, 2006, p. 46). Field notes are also used in the interviewing process to record body language and facial expressions of interviewees, environmental descriptions, and a researcher's thoughts relevant to emerging themes or patterns in data (Moustakas, 1994). After all interviews were completed, I gathered all the textual descriptions of individual participants and grouped them into one whole or collective textual description (Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers know what they know by genuine efforts to understand other people's worldviews. For many qualitative researchers, critical to their research agenda is developing theories based upon analysis of collected data, through the "process of

linking categories around a core category and refining and trimming the resulting theoretical construction” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263). Categories that derive from analysis of data helps a researcher to connect or “thread together” (p. 264) all collected data to develop a possible framework or theory that will add more validity to a study.

In this study, essential concepts were identified as codes. Coding is a process where a researcher identifies text segments in data and assigns each text segment a code, a word or phrase that describes that segment of text (Creswell, 2005). Interpreting a person’s story accurately and ethically is critical, and Glesne (2006) suggests the “enlistment of others to provide feedback to share the interpretive process with research respondents as a form of member checking” (p. 167). Therefore, recordings were transcribed verbatim and after all possible themes and patterns emerged through the process of categorizing and coding, I continued to read relevant literature and discussed emerging patterns and themes with my doctoral advisor.

The main issue in qualitative research is validity: how much can a qualitative researcher be trusted, especially when there is not numerical data to backup findings. Validity “refers primarily to accounts [and] not to data or methods,” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 283), and it is vital that researchers are as accurate in their accounts as possible. Qualitative researchers can legitimately draw conclusions about a particular topic or subject based upon collected data from their interviewees without making assumptions about what they thought, witnessed, or heard. Including the interviewees throughout the entire research process is necessary to maintain validity. Two peers from my qualitative research course and doctoral committee members were asked to carry out

validity checks and make suggestions for improvements. Lastly, as a student of color, I was aware of my own biases during this entire study. I shared a few common experiences with my participants; however, it was vital that I eliminated my biases through bracketing so that my assumptions or beliefs did not intrude into the data collection or analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 80).

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS WITH RESPECT TO THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of perceptions African American/black undergraduate students hold of their experiences attending a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest. Participants were recruited and interviewed during the spring and summer of 2010. In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented.

Collected data and data analysis resulted in 225 initial codes. Significant statements of transcripts from these 225 initial codes were then reduced to 22 repeatable codes (i.e. statements or quotes that were expressed by more than one research participant). From these 22 codes, three categories emerged: social networking experiences, characteristics of culturally competent teachers, and reasons for choosing this Upper Midwest university. Themes were developed to capture the multifaceted elements of each category. Four themes emerged:

1. When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected to their surroundings and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation.
2. Women felt more connected to their surroundings and appeared happier than men.

3. Teachers who were perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part of a group.
4. When there were personal connections to the Upper Midwest University, students had more positive experiences.

Codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Analysis.

CODES	CATEGORIES	THEMES
No place for me Never been invited Isolation and exclusion Could be more involved Few friends here Feel uncomfortable In a sorority Good support group Have friends Involved in black student association Friends in a fraternity	Social Networking Experiences	When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected to their surroundings and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation.  Women felt more connected to their surroundings and appeared happier than men.
Nice Understanding Welcoming demeanor Treated students the same Respectful Effective communication Welcomed atmosphere	Characteristics of Culturally Competent Teachers	Teachers who were perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part of a group.
Cousin went to UMU Heard so many good things from friends UMU was my brother's interest; it sparked my interest. Met someone in Sacramento who went to school here	Reasons for Choosing UMU	When there were personal connections to UMU, students had more positive experiences.

The following excerpts from participant narratives support the four themes that emerged from data gathered in this study.

#### Theme One

When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected to their surroundings and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation. Lynnette stated:

I joined a sorority the end of the fall semester, my freshman year. So I've been doing it for the three years that I've been here so far... [and] that's definitely been my support system especially since my parents are stationed in Chicago. My sorority is definitely my security blanket as you would call it.

Courtney also discussed her involvement in a sorority and in student government.

Courtney stated:

Currently, I'm in a sorority which is probably one of the best decisions I've made because it's a huge support system. The girls that I have met in my house have always been there.... I feel like they're the ones who have really supported me. Since they know me so well, they have always pushed me to do more. I'm also in student government.... Student government is my number one passion, but being Greek and trying to help out the Greek community is another thing so I feel like the relationships I've established within [these] two groups have really set, have really helped me decide what I want to do in the future as well. They've been really helpful because before I had no idea what I wanted to do

when I came here and then I joined a sorority thinking it will be okay. Then I fell in love with it and then student government came along.

Maya also expressed her involvement in social activities. She explained:

My support groups are these three girls from choir. It's me (African American), my friend who's Native American, there's a Southern Caucasian girl and then a Caucasian girl from here. We do everything together and go to things around campus. My group of friends is kinda all over the place, because I consider myself a networker type of friend. I think my support from them is understanding, you know, and their willingness to try and understand. So it's nice to have them.

When asked if she was a member of an organization on campus, Maya replied, "No, not yet. I want to join the rugby team and I'm going to be in the hall government next year for my dorm."

Wayne discussed his involvement in social activities as follows:

In terms of organizations, I'm not really involved in anything except Black Student Association, in which I will soon be in a leadership position. I've got friends in the fraternity, and next semester, I am going to join fully. I wish that I could be involved more, but my academic demands don't allow me to. I guess I could make more of an effort to join and to be a part of more things on campus. I'm just glad to have people here at [UMU] that I can talk and hang out with and that my friends are pretty diverse.

Robert explained his lack of involvement in social activities in this way:

When I walk around the campus, I feel like there is no place for me. I have never been invited to hang out at a frat house. Right here on University Avenue, many of the frat houses are on University Avenue, which I find ironic because a university should include everybody. The frat houses are a part of [UMU], but yet, you never see no one except white people hanging around the frat houses laughing and having fun. Why is that? Why am I excluded? The multicultural center is a place that understands [my] struggle.

Jacob offered the following:

I'm a part of the National Geology Honor Society. That's pretty much the social group that I am a part of. I know that there is a lot of stuff going on at school all the time.... I could be involved more....

#### Theme Two

Women felt more connected to their surroundings and appeared happier than men. Courtney explained her connections as follows:

I've been able to get involved with what I want to get involved in and feel welcomed.... I guess I've never been hindered. I've always had opportunities and I've always pursued them. I've never had, like, obstacles in my way.

Lynnette shared her story in these words:

A lot of people that I went to high school with left for college and were there for half of the first semester and transferred back home to the community college because they didn't like it. I don't have any problems and I don't want to leave. You know, I plan on hopefully doing my grad school here. Not at one point



have I felt like I don't belong or I shouldn't be here. You know, I feel like I fit in with everyone else. I have never, not one day regretted the choice to come here....

Maya described her experiences:

I've always come from the background of having me and maybe two other African American people in a class. So, it's not entirely different you know, but you do have to adjust.... It drives me, in a way, to excel you know because I can break stereotypes.... I've also been available, too, in class. If someone is gone and they need notes, I give them the notes and that sticks out to people as well; like they didn't expect me to be so nice.

Male participants expressed more feelings of inferiority and exclusion. Robert explained his feelings about the university as a system this way:

The system that is here, that is put in place, and not just academic but the educational system period is designed to continue to oppress us. Don't buck the system; don't go against the system.... I must use the system that has been put in place that is according to their purpose and not in my interest. I am glad that we have a multicultural center on campus because it gives me a chance to be among my own people – other people who also witness isolation and exclusion here.

Jacob stated why he felt socially isolated on campus:

I would just like to have more black friends because I don't think that I would feel so alone. It's nice to have friends who look like you and who can relate to

some of the things that you are feeling. I have a few friends here, but that's understandable because there's a few black people here. I have a couple of white friends, too, but I really only have a few friends.... [UMU] is welcoming. I've met a lot of people that, I mean, I've never met a racist person around here, at least not to my face. So, it's all about people meeting you and trying to understand where you're from and who you are.

Wayne expressed his feelings of distrust on campus:

I really feel uncomfortable here.... I also think, I don't know...it's a feeling that I have about this place. People have a tendency to smile in your face, but it's not real and I don't really like it. I like for people to be who they are you know. The smiles are subliminal. I don't like fake people. I just do what I have to do to get out of this place.... I wouldn't recommend anyone to come to this school. No recommendations from me at all. It's my opinion based upon how I have been treated here at [UMU] for the most part. I am really uncomfortable here because the smiles are fake.

### Theme Three

Teachers who were perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part of a group. Maya indicated that she felt a greater sense of belonging in classrooms where the instructor was culturally competent. Her perception of culturally competent teachers is as follows:

I am more willing to attend a class when the teacher is nice, respectful, and is honest.... Saying I don't know is perfectly okay in my book.... Teachers need

to have some kind of racial conscience and understand what's going on and be competent in some way to at least be able to open that dialogue without feeling too uncomfortable. Teachers should be open to hearing what each side has to say and be respectful. Even if a teacher agrees or disagrees, he or she should speak out about students making blanket statements about other races. Teachers need to be unbiased. Like I said before, saying I don't know is okay and that's a part of that competence. You're not incompetent because you said you don't know. Incompetence is when you let your ignorance lead your discussions. There is a difference between being ignorant and being naïve, and a lot of people and teachers have it mixed up.

Wayne shared his view of how professors might be more culturally competent:

Professors shouldn't be afraid of saying something because it might offend someone. It's important for professors to learn from their students and to show respect and to admit their ignorance. I'm not looking for a professor to know everything about cultural diversity, but they need to know something. They need to know how to interact with students who are different from them and to smile often in class. When professors are afraid or uncomfortable interacting with students who do not look like them, I think that's a problem. Certainly they're not competent. Yes, I'm different in terms of skin color, but at the end of the day, I'm still a student. That's what I have in common with the rest of my classmates; I'm a student.

Lynnette expressed her thoughts concerning culturally competent teachers in this way:

I think it's not [about] separating or pointing out ... to not separate cultures....  
It's more about how you can incorporate [everyone] at once.... Teachers  
shouldn't have to go out of their way to help me because I'm black—even  
culturally diverse teachers.... Teachers need to consistently treat everybody the  
same and be nice to everybody.... We are all in the same classroom.

Jacob gave these suggestions for teachers seeking to be culturally competent:

Teachers should have students introduce themselves to each other. Tell a little  
bit about where you are from and for me, that kinda puts everybody at ease.  
Teachers should also know where each student is at, what kind of experiences  
students have had, help students learn the information because all students  
should be carried along together. No one should feel lost. Teachers should also  
not make blanket statements about other people's cultures. Teach respect and  
acceptance in your class, and be nice. If teachers hear offensive and  
stereotypical comments, they should address them. Let students know that it's  
not okay to generalize groups of people or to be mean or hateful. I don't care  
what your course is or what you teach, try to incorporate respect and tolerance  
for others and differences in general. Sneak it in if you have to, but do it. Do it  
as much as you can and as often as you can. Encourage students to learn from  
each other, not just getting together for a group project, but to actually take the  
time to talk with someone who is different from them.

Courtney discussed the notion of culturally competent teachers as well:

Well [cultural competence is] obviously being able to address all sides of a culturally diverse issue such as religion. Even though we have particular classes that aim towards studying a certain thing, you should still be able to incorporate how other issues or topics relate to what it is you're teaching. Like when it comes to religion like a Catholicism class, like, you can talk all about Catholicism but how does it relate to being Lutheran or Baptist. Or I feel like a lot of professors, because they're so narrow-minded in what they're teaching, they forget to address all the outside factors too and how they relate so I feel, like, to become more culturally competent, you have to be educated on not just what you want to be educated on but how everything relates to what you know.... I feel like we need to stress more on diversity.

Robert elaborated on the views expressed by others concerning culturally competent teachers. He spoke about the need for faculty members to speak the "language" of students of color:

First of all, let me tell you... the language I use versus academic language are two different things. Academic language is a second language to me. This is language that is foreign to me. I am able to use and to understand bits and pieces of the language, but this is a second language to me because of my disadvantaged background.... I need somebody in academics who can speak my language, my first language which is an understanding of disadvantaged backgrounds.... Teachers need to learn to speak more than one language so that all of their students can understand their expectations.... To be more culturally

competent, teachers must understand that this is a process... Communication, effective communication, is a must. Therefore, teachers must teach in a language that can be translated by all of the students in the classroom. Outside of Europeans, when other cultures are left behind, we are the ones who aren't interested. We are especially disinterested when teachers are teaching materials that we can't relate to. The ones who can relate will get it. We are all human even though some would like to think that we are descendents of monkeys. If teachers are not teaching about humanity, they should throw the rest of that stuff in the garbage and burn it. Whatever the reason is, and I don't know why nature or God made us different with different cultures, but it seems to me that we need to learn from each other and each other's accomplishments. Teachers here really need to learn about others and to not teach material based on biased media or other sources that only perpetuate stereotypes about "others." Also, teachers need to include other cultures' accomplishments to society and mankind in general. I am so tired of hearing about European culture. I know more about that culture than I do about myself. Contributions were made beyond the Western Hemisphere. People all over the world gave something to society. Teachers need to teach more than just European culture. Again, it's also about learning to speak other languages so that they can reach all students.

#### Theme Four

When there were personal connections to the Upper Midwest University, students had more positive experiences. Students who did not have personal

connections to the Upper Midwest University shared their experiences. Wayne stated, “[UMU] is cheap.... Finances, nothing more.... Finances, that’s it. If I had to do this all over again, I wouldn’t have come here.” Robert characterized his college choice in these words:

Opportunity, educational opportunity.... Let me tell you something. This is something that is still hard for me to talk about, and I don’t talk about it much because it still bothers me. One of my brothers was shot 27 times and was found in an abandoned house with kittens living inside him. I am still very angry about this, and if I think about it too long or too often, I want to find the people who did this and kill them myself. I’m from LA, and I met someone in Sacramento who went to school at [UMU]. A lot of people in California encouraged me to clear my head because I was very vengeful and still am if I think about it too long. Anyway, I had a choice to either move to Arizona because my sister lives out there or come to [UMU]. Living here works for me. It’s quiet and peaceful; nothing like where I am from. Although [UMU] gets a “Z” [(to indicate that UMU’s grade on racial and cultural diversity is far worse than an “F”)] from me in terms of racial and cultural diversity, the area, like I said, is quiet and peaceful for the most part.... I made the choice to come here and my main focus is the educational opportunity.... I don’t like [UMU].... I’m only here for the educational opportunity.

Students who had more positive experiences due to personal connections to the Upper Midwest University shared their experiences. Jacob shared how he came to the Upper Midwest University in this way:

Um, I actually had a cousin that went to [UMU] and he actually went through the Geology Department too. So, that was a huge influence on my decision to come here when I applied.... I also like to travel and experience new places and [UMU] is definitely a new experience for me. For someone who is aspiring to be a petroleum geologist, from all the schools that I could have chosen from, [UMU] has significant oil which is still booming, a lot of drilling is still going on here. So, all of this led to my decision to come here. [UMU] has been good so far...

Maya described her decision to come to UMU in this way:

My brother, during his junior and sophomore years in high school, he was looking at his options, and [UMU] had a football camp ... and while we were coming through to pick him up, we went through the campus and got a look at it, and we were like, wow, this is nice, and it's somewhat closer to home, so I told my brother that I was looking at [UMU] to transfer to since I didn't like my school in Colorado. I looked at the music program, and I liked the size of it. It's big enough where everybody can do something different in the program. Musically, the program is extremely diverse. They want you to have a finger in everything so that you can go into workforce more musically enhanced. So, I love that about here. I also feel in love with the campus during the summer.



Originally, [UMU] was my brother's interest, and then it sparked my interest, and it's an added bonus to have him here.

Lynnette shared the story of her college selection as follows:

My dad's godsister and her twin did the whole college thing and she called me when I was in junior high school, towards the end of my junior year and said, "So what college are you going to?" I had no idea.... I think that I was on the phone with her every night for two, three weeks. Figuring out the atmosphere I wanted to be in, the size of the school that I wanted to be in, you know? And then what major I wanted to be in and once we found that, she found, I don't know what website she went to, but she found a list of schools ranked 1 to 100 and [UMU] was in the top five for nursing schools in the U.S. And so, you know, I started looking at their website and doing the research on them, and the more and more I looked at it, the more and more I liked it. So, I applied and got in and then my mom, my dad, and brother came the spring break of my junior year and looked at the campus, and I loved it, and haven't turned back or made a different decision since. I think I applied to seven different schools and got into all and still didn't change my mind at all. I wanted to come here.

Finally, Courtney summarized her thoughts about how she selected a college:

I wanted to stay close to home because my mom and my grandparents still live in [ a town near UMU], but I didn't want to be close enough where they could come creep on me all the time. I didn't want to go to [a PWI institution within same state] and I didn't want to go [to the western part of same state], west

seemed really boring. It was basically the location and family.... I didn't know anybody here when I came here. Only one person from my high school came to this school with me who happened to be my boyfriend, but we broke up before we even came to school so I came here knowing no one. I never toured [UMU] before I came here, I just applied to [UMU] and I got in. I didn't apply anywhere else because I just wanted to go here. And I heard so many good things about [UMU], and it seemed like something was telling me inside that this was the place that I wanted to go to and I don't know what it was. I didn't question it; I was just like okay, I'm going.

#### Discussion of Findings With Respect to the Literature

In this section, the four themes identified through an analysis of the data are discussed with respect to the literature. Again, the four themes I found were:

1. When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected to their surroundings and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation.
2. Women felt more connected to their surroundings and appeared happier than men.
3. Teachers who were perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part of a group.
4. When there were personal connections to the Upper Midwest University, students had more positive experiences.

### *Theme One*

When students were involved in social activities, they felt more connected to their surroundings and were less likely to experience feelings of isolation. The African American/black undergraduate students who participated in this study discussed their level of involvement in social activities. Participants who actively engaged in various campus organizations and attended social events at the UMU expressed a greater sense of belonging and reported more positive connections with peers. Participants who did not attend social events on campus and were not a part of any organization at the UMU reported more feelings of isolation and did not have many friends at the UMU. Hobson-Horton and Owens (2004) suggested that feelings of isolation may decrease for students of color at PWIs if they participate in social organizations. This may lead to a stronger sense of belonging.

Tinto (1993) asserted that a student's commitment to remain at or leave a university is largely based upon their motivation to join social organizations. Students of color who are not willing to put forth an effort to actively participate in campus activities may experience a decreased commitment to the university and to their educational goals (Zea et al., 1997). One student expressed his need to attend social events due to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Another student in this study did not feel connected to the university and shared that he did not attend many campus events and did not actively engage in campus organizations.

### *Theme Two*

Women felt more connected to their surroundings and appeared happier than men. The female interviewees described more positive social interactions than male interviewees and expressed feelings of satisfaction and contentment with peers and student organizations. Male interviewees in this study discussed their desire to have more friends at the UMU, reported more feelings of isolation and loneliness, and discussed their struggles to be socially accepted as black male students at the UMU due to perceived stereotypes that white students and white faculty had regarding black men in general. According to Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), African American/black male students at PWIs use a variety of coping strategies to help them combat stereotypes about their race and gender through social psychological stress responses such as anger, resistance, escapism, and physical avoidance. African American/black men are often perceived as argumentative, troublesome, and hypersensitive, regardless of how much discrimination they encounter (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), which may lead to more feelings of social and academic withdrawal and resentment as students at PWIs.

Male participants in this study discussed their lack of motivation to make friends and to engage in social activities. Women in this study were more willing to socialize with their peers and actively participate in campus events and social organizations. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) expressed the need for more research and scholarly attention to be given to African American/black male college students at PWIs and “race-by-gender oppression” (p. 558), as it relates to their social and academic integration.

### *Theme Three*

Teachers who are perceived to be culturally competent in the classroom tended to make students feel part of a group. Five out of the six participants agreed that the teachers who they have had were culturally sensitive, and this led to positive feelings of being part of a group. These participants reported that teachers, who were respectful to them and valued their self-worth, increased their sense of belonging at the UMU. Fox (1986) refuted the correlation between social integration and a greater sense of belonging for students of color at PWIs. Rather, he considered academic integration as a stronger indicator to enhanced feelings of inclusion than social integration. Although it was not in the scope of this study to distinguish between white faculty and African American/black faculty at the UMU with regard to being culturally competent, Hu-DeHart (2000) discussed the need for PWIs to prepare their campus climate to recruit and retain racially diverse faculty to increase a sense of belonging and feelings of being part of a group among students of color in and outside of the classroom. Cross and Slater (1999) also suggested that students of color may feel a greater sense of belonging to a group at PWIs, if they are taught by teachers who are members of their same racial or ethnic group. Brayboy (2003) emphasized the importance of helping students feel part of a group despite racial and ethnic differences among teachers at PWIs, and refuted the notion that only racially diverse faculty are capable of making students of color feel part of a group. Rather, Brayboy encouraged the need for white faculty to also teach diversity courses and to mentor students of color to help them feel part of a group and to have a greater sense of belonging at PWIs.

Often, it was difficult for interviewees to discern the difference between culturally competent teachers and teachers who they perceived to be nice. Research participants in this study regarded teachers who were friendly, unbiased, and willing to learn about others as being culturally competent. Hobson-Horton and Owens' (2004) study revealed that students of color felt faculty who were supportive and positively interacted with them were influenced their decision to either remain at or leave a university. One student in the present study did not perceive any of the teachers that he had as culturally competent and believed that the Upper Midwest University failed in its mission to provide culturally competent teachers who were supportive and also aware of the diverse needs of blacks and students of color in general.

#### *Theme Four*

When there were personal connections to UMU, students had more positive experiences. Interviewees, whose family members and friends attended or graduated from UMU, expressed more positive experiences as students at UMU. Participants with these connections were more apt to discuss an overall sense of satisfaction as students at the UMU and were more motivated to engage in campus organizations and events. Positive influences from family members who had previously attended and/or graduated from the UMU were a significant factor in how participants perceived their experiences as students at the UMU, a predominately white institution of higher education. Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggested that many black students seek support from other family members more so than what the campus community and other institutional resources have to offer. This may lead to higher rates of recruitment and retention.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of perceptions African American/black undergraduate students hold of their experiences attending a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest. *Social Identity Development* described by Vygotsky (1978) and *Critical Race Theory* described by Horkheimer (1982) were used as a guide in designing interview questions. An historical overview of the study and of African American/black undergraduate students attending predominately white institutions of higher education was provided in Chapters I and II. This was a phenomenological study, and the methodology was described in Chapter III. Six African American/black undergraduate students from an Upper Midwest university were interviewed. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and along with field notes were then analyzed for codes, categories, and themes.

In Chapter IV, the four themes that emerged from analysis of the data were presented with support from the participant interviews, and the themes were discussed with reference to the literature. In this section, a summary of the findings is presented. The summary is followed by conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

*Theme One:*

*When Students Were Involved in Social Activities, They Felt More Connected to Their Surroundings and Were Less Likely to Experience Feelings of Isolation*

The African American/black undergraduate students who participated in this study discussed their level of involvement in social activities. Participants who actively engaged in various campus organizations and attended social events at the UMU expressed a greater sense of belonging and reported more positive connections with peers. Participants who did not attend social events on campus and were not a part of any organization at the UMU reported more feelings of isolation and did not have many friends at the UMU. Hobson-Horton and Owens' (2004) study suggested that feelings of isolation may decrease for students of color at PWIs, if they participate in social organizations which may then lead to a stronger sense of belonging. Fox (1986) refuted the correlation between social integration and a greater sense of belonging for students of color at PWIs. Rather, he considered academic integration as a stronger indicator of enhanced feelings of inclusion than social integration. Tinto (1993) asserted that a student's commitment to remain at or leave a university is largely based upon their motivation to join social organizations. Students of color who are not willing to put forth an effort to actively participate in campus activities may experience a decreased commitment to the university and to their educational goals (Zea et al., 1997).

*Theme Two:*

*Women Felt More Connected to Their Surroundings and Appeared Happier Than Men*

The female interviewees described more positive social interactions and expressed more feelings of satisfaction and contentment with peers and student organizations than male interviewees. Male participants in this study discussed their



desire to have more friends at the UMU, reported more feelings of isolation and loneliness, and discussed their struggles to be socially accepted as black male students at the UMU due to perceived stereotypes that white students and white faculty had regarding black men. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) suggested that African American/black male students at PWIs experienced more feelings of “racial battle fatigue” (p. 552) than African American/black female students and other students of color in general. Some male interviewees were very frustrated and discouraged by their experience at UMU and had strong recommendations for faculty improvement.

According to Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), African American/black male students at PWIs use a variety of coping strategies to help them combat stereotypes about their race and gender through social psychological stress responses such as anger, resistance, escapism, and physical avoidance. Male interviewees in this study often discussed feelings of anger, physical avoidance, and resentment toward white students and white faculty due to their perceptions of constantly fighting against perceived stereotypes such as the “dangerous and violent black man” and not being intelligent enough to actually attend a PWi. African American/black men are often perceived as argumentative, troublesome, and hypersensitive regardless of how much discrimination they encounter (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), which may lead to more feelings of social and academic withdrawal and resentment as students at PWIs. Male participants in this study discussed their lack of motivation to make friends and to actively engage in social activities due to perceptions by peers that they are too argumentative and are hypersensitive about perceived racial discrimination on campus at the UMU. Smith,

Allen, and Danley (2007) expressed the need for more research and scholarly attention to be given to African American/black male college students at PWIs, and specifically, "race-by-gender oppression" (p. 558) as it relates to their social and academic integration.

*Theme Three:  
Teachers Who Are Perceived to be Culturally Competent in the  
Classroom Tended to Make Students Feel Part of a Group*

Five out of six participants agreed that teachers they have had were culturally sensitive, and this led to positive feelings of being part of a group. These participants reported that teachers, who were respectful to them and valued their self-worth, increased their sense of belonging at the UMU. Although participants did not distinguish between white faculty and African American/black faculty at the UMU with regard to being culturally competent, Hu-DeHart (2000) discussed the need for PWIs to prepare their campus climate to recruit and retain racially diverse faculty to increase a sense of belonging and feelings of being part of a group in and outside of the classroom. Cross and Slater (1999) also suggested that students of color may feel a greater sense of belonging to a group at PWIs if they are taught by teachers who are members of their same racial or ethnic group. Brayboy (2003) emphasized the importance of helping students feel part of a group, despite racial and ethnic differences among teachers at PWIs. He refuted the notion that only racially diverse faculties are capable of making students of color feel part of a group. Rather, Brayboy encouraged the need for white faculty to also teach diversity courses and to mentor students of color to help them feel part of a group and to have a greater sense of belonging at PWIs.

Often, it was difficult for interviewees to discern the difference between culturally competent teachers and teachers who they perceived to be nice. Hobson-Horton & Owens' (2004) study revealed that students of color felt that faculty who were supportive and positively interacted with them were factors that influenced their decision to either remain at or leave a university.

*Theme Four:  
When There Were Personal Connections to the Upper Midwest University,  
Students Had More Positive Experiences*

Interviewees whose family members and friends attended and/or graduated from the UMU expressed more positive experiences as students at the UMU. Participants with these connections were more apt to discuss an overall sense of satisfaction as students at the UMU and were more motivated to engage in campus organizations and events. Positive influences from family members who had previously attended and/or graduated from the UMU was a significant factor in how participants perceived their experiences as students at the UMU, a predominately white institution of higher education. Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggested that many black students, more so than white students, seek support from other family members rather than taking advantage of what the campus community and other institutional resources have to offer, and this may lead to higher rates of recruitment and retention.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of perceptions African American/black undergraduate students hold of their experiences attending a predominately white institution of higher education in the Upper Midwest. The

participants were a convenience sample of undergraduate students from one university in the Upper Midwest. Although 11 undergraduates from this one university were invited to participate, only six African American/black undergraduate students agreed to participate in this study and all of them were juniors. Three of the participants were women and three were men. The findings of this study may be similar only to the experiences of African American/black undergraduate students in this geographical area, and may, in fact, be dissimilar to those at other midwestern universities. Furthermore, I have used caution in generalizing the results from this study, such as the marked gender contrasts, because of my small sample.

The term culturally competent was not clarified in this study; therefore, none of the participants truly understood what “culturally competent teaching” meant during the interviews. Three participants perceived teachers who were nice, respectful, and unbiased as culturally competent. If someone was to further this study, it would be critical for the researcher to define the term “culturally competent” for participants before engaging in this interview process.

### Conclusions

African American/black undergraduate students vary in terms of their experiences as students of color attending predominately white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. For some study participants, personal connections to the university and active involvement in social activities and events played a critical role in how they perceived their experiences while attending the UMU. African American/black undergraduate students, who were motivated to make friends and interact with their

peers, who were culturally and racially diverse, reported more positive experiences and a stronger sense of belonging. Study participants who expressed little or no motivation to make more friends and to interact with other students on campus were more likely to voice feelings of isolation and expressed more negative experiences as students at the UMU.

Students who were involved in social activities and events such as sororities, student government, and academic clubs also reported more positive experiences at the UMU. Study participants who were not engaged in social activities on campus expressed their views concerning the UMU's lack of interest and investment in keeping students of color happy and seemed to blame the UMU for not offering enough extracurricular activities, especially for racial/ethnic minority groups, even though these students discussed their lack of interest in attending any of the social events that the UMU had to offer. This led to increased feelings of isolation and social withdrawal. Both positive and negative feelings that were expressed were frequently reported in other studies.

Female study participants had more positive experiences as students at the UMU than men. Although female study participants discussed the need for the UMU to recruit more students of color, all of them were satisfied with their decision to attend the UMU and two female participants discussed the possibility of pursuing an advanced degree at the UMU upon completion of their undergraduate studies. Two out of three male participants were not satisfied with their experiences at the UMU, had a very negative view of the UMU, and reported more feelings of mistrust of administration,

faculty, and students in general. They also expressed more feelings of isolation and social withdrawal.

African American/black undergraduate students in the study favorably viewed teachers who made them feel part of a group and perceived these teachers to be culturally competent. Their perspectives about culturally competent teachers often were defined as teachers who were nice to them. This was definitely a limitation of the study due to how students perceived “culturally competency.” As the researcher, I did not adequately explain the term “culturally competent” to the study participants. Therefore, three of the participants viewed teachers who were nice as being culturally competent.

Although the reasons for attending the UMU varied, students who had personal connections to the university, such as family members and friends who attended and/or graduated from the UMU, reported more positive experiences as students at UMU. This led to increased enthusiasm about attending the UMU if family members and friends spoke favorably about their experiences at the UMU.

Several study participants pointed out that finances were also critical to their decision to attend UMU, even though this was not a recurring aspect. Therefore, it was not an identified theme in this study. Students, who received scholarships and other forms of financial aid from UMU, alluded to more positive experiences as well as those who desired to attend UMU to be closer to home.

## Recommendations

### *Recommendations for PWIs*

The first recommendation is for African American/black undergraduate students to connect with faculty in a mentoring program during their freshman year at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Although faculty connect with students in an academic advising role, assisting African American/black undergraduate students with school transitions through academic and social support, may increase feelings of inclusion. Some study participants expressed their lack of motivation to be involved in social activities and events and reported more feelings of loneliness and social withdrawal. Perhaps a faculty-student mentoring program would encourage more African American/black undergraduate students to discuss their feelings and overall experiences as students at a PWI. This open dialogue may lead to increased feelings of trust and more motivation to socially engage.

A second recommendation is for the establishment of an email ListServe for disenfranchised students to anonymously disclose their feelings of perceived loneliness, social withdrawal, and lack of friends in a supportive online environment. *Supporting Peers in Laid-Back Listening* (SPILL; n.d.) is an online website that currently allows students from colleges and universities across the United States to share and express personal thoughts and feelings on a variety of topics such as racism, suicidal thoughts, sexual orientation, familial problems, and academic issues. SPILL also connects students with other students from across the United States who have been through similar situations who will provide anonymous support and encouragement

([www.studentspill.com](http://www.studentspill.com)). This type of listserv would perhaps be beneficial for students of color to connect with other students of color who are attending PWIs in order to have an online support system.

A third recommendation is for PWIs to increase multicultural curricula in the classroom to enrich the educational experiences of all students and to have safe and open dialogue about differences. This may lead to increased feelings of being part of a group, a greater sense of belonging, and may cultivate more positive social interactions among racial and ethnic groups. Some study participants reported that they did not interact with peers outside of the classroom and had very few friends. It must not be assumed that diversity and multicultural dialogue are taking place outside of the classroom among students; therefore, a commitment to multicultural curricula and open dialogue about differences are critical to the growth and development of students (Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002). This may lead to decreased feelings of mistrust and social withdrawal, and may encourage African American/black undergraduate students to be more willing to make friends and to be a part of peer groups.

Lastly, it is imperative for PWIs to make an institutional commitment to develop and increase student and faculty awareness concerning diversity and inclusion. Most African American/blacks who attend PWIs seek to become academically and socially integrated and are hopeful that their experiences at a PWI will have a positive impact on their overall sense of belonging. It is my hope that this study will increase knowledge concerning the nature of higher education for African Americans/blacks at the Upper



Midwest University and other PWIs, to better prepare faculty, staff, and administration to work with African Americans/blacks and other students of color.

*Recommendations for Further Study and Research*

Further research is needed regarding gender differences among African American/black undergraduate male and female students and their experiences while attending PWIs. In this study, there were stark differences between the experiences of female and male participants attending an Upper Midwest institution. Although this study included only a small sample of students, the female participants were satisfied with the events and organizations that the UMU had to offer, and they expressed an overall sense of belonging. The female participants also shared that they were satisfied with their peer and social groups and actively engaged in campus-wide events. The male participants expressed that they did not have many friends and did not attend or participate in many social events or organizations at the UMU. Current studies have focused on the experiences of African American/black undergraduate students at PWIs as a whole, without making distinctions between men's and women's perceptions and feelings regarding their sense of belonging.

Another recommendation for further study is how African American/black students and other students of color perceive cultural competency, and how this can inform culturally competent teaching strategies at PWIs. Research participants in this study discussed how teachers who were perceived to be nice and/or humorous and who assisted them with their academic work were culturally competent. Therefore, perceptions of culturally competent teaching strategies should be explored to help guide

and develop policies in regard to cultural competency that would include voices and lived experiences of students of color.

#### Closing Statement

In an effort to increase recruitment and retention rates and a greater sense of belonging for African American/black students at PWIs, a joint responsibility must exist between faculty, staff, and administration and African American/black students. Faculty, staff, and administration must be willing to create a campus environment that is conducive to embracing and celebrating racial and ethnic differences in and outside of the classroom, and African American/black students must also be willing to interact with peers and to actively engage and participate in social organizations and events, in order to decrease their feelings of social withdrawal and loneliness.

## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

TITLE: The experiences of African-American/Black undergraduate students at the

RESEARCHER: Deola Y. Johnson

DEPARTMENT: College of Education and Human Development

#### STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in research investigating and examining the experiences of African-American/Black undergraduate students at the . This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This research study seeks to examine the undergraduate experiences of African-American/Black students at the . Insight may be gained to increase the knowledge concerning the nature of higher education for students of color to better prepare them for higher education degrees at predominately White institutions. The researcher will use this information for future publications.

#### HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately four to 10 undergraduate students will take part in this study at the

#### WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you participate in this study, you will be interviewed about your undergraduate experiences at the . These interviews will last between 30 to 60 minutes. You may be requested to do a follow-up interview and your participation may last up to two hours in total, but this may vary.

You will be asked if voice recordings can be made of your interview(s). Your identity will be masked and fictitious names will be used. Field notes and any audio recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet when not in use. Consent forms will be kept separate from field notes, audio recordings and transcribed audio recordings. You may still participate without being recorded, and you can skip any questions you do not want to answer.

Participation is on a voluntary basis. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

Institutional Review Board  
Approved on MAR 9 2010  
Expires on MAR 8 2011

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

**WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?**

Any information that could identify you will be altered or removed. Information learned from this study will be used in future publications. Interviews, notes, and any audio recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet when not in use. In the event that data will be destroyed, it will be shredded beyond recognition.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS?**

I anticipate no more than minimal risks to the participants in this study. Other normal risks include the time spent interviewing. There is a small risk that you may become emotionally upset in answering questions due to your knowledge and experiences of being an African-American/Black student at . Referrals to the Counseling Center will be available if you become emotionally upset. However, no money is available from the study to pay for mental health or counseling services.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS?**

This qualitative research study will increase knowledge concerning the undergraduate experiences of African-American/Black students at , and create new approaches to improve opportunities for marginalized racial groups to gain higher learning degrees. Recommendations for classroom curricula and practices, as well as culturally competent teaching will also be made. No direct benefit is guaranteed to you from participating in this study.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

**CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?**

If you have questions about this research in the future, please contact the researcher, Deola Johnson, at (701) 777-2669 or by E-mail ([deola.johnson@und.nodak.edu](mailto:deola.johnson@und.nodak.edu)). If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

**Institutional Review Board**  
Approved on     MAR 9 2010      
Expires on     MAR 8 2011    

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person/Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Institutional Review Board  
Approved on MAR 9 2010  
Expires on MAR 8 2011

3

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. With which racial/ethnic minority group do you identify?
2. Discuss some of your academic experiences at Upper Midwest University (UMU).
3. Discuss the social support you have experienced at UMU.
4. Describe the environment that you have experienced at UMU in terms of racial and cultural diversity.
5. Tell me about the most culturally competent teacher you have had at UMU.
6. What do you consider culturally competent teaching strategies?

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