# JCAPS

# "THIS IS BIGGER THAN ME:" WHY BLACK WOMEN CREATE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS ON PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUSES

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*Using the Applied Critical Leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) framework to operationalize leadership and to celebrate the ways in which Black women Vice Presidents of Student Affairs (VPSAs) acquire institutional access to create real change, this study sought to identify what motivates Black Women to engage in creating supporting environments on their predominantly White campuses. Twelve semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with six participants from varying post-secondary institutions. Through qualitative data analysis, the theme This is Bigger Than Me emerged to validate participants' understandings of their own identities when it comes to creating welcoming environments for racially minoritized students.*

> *"The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge of the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group; such contact between pupils and between teacher and pupil on the basis of perfect social equality will increase this sympathy and knowledge."*
> -W.E.B. Du Bois

Higher education institutions are viewed as being strong advocates for diversity and equity through the development of research, curricular and co-curricular programs, initiatives, student recruitment and retention efforts, and policies. Although these kinds of initiatives may aim to diversify the student body, challenges related to feelings of seclusion, academic isolation, and overall lack of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience among racially minoritized students (RMS) have been reported— particularly at elite, selective, research-intensive predominantly White institutions (Reynolds, Sneva, & Beechler, 2010). These challenges raise important questions surrounding retention and student development on these predominantly White campuses.

Before COVID-19 swept the nation, colleges and universities around the United States were enrolling a growing number of racially minoritized students. Since then, COVID-19 has continued to highlight the preexisting structural inequities that disproportionately impact families and students from racially minoritized backgrounds. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment is crucial when universities continue to place recruitment and retention at the top of their list of most pressing issues. "Students of color now make up 45% of the undergraduate population, compared with less than 30% two decades ago" (Brown, 2019). Despite these changing student demographics, "faculty and administrators at predominantly White institutions lack awareness of the special emotional challenges that racially minoritized students face" (González-Prendes & Thomas, 2011; Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2015; Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011-2012; McCorkle, 2012 as cited in Robertson & Dundes, 2017, p. 1). The effects of the pandemic are not playing out equitably, and institutions must take into consideration the myriad of inequities racially minoritized students are faced with to recruit and retain this vulnerable population.

With the increase of RMS and the constant change of demographics in higher education, the experiences of RMS continue to remain relevant, particularly as they relate to campus racial climate. Student affairs administrators, particularly Vice Presidents of Student Affairs (VPSAs), have a significant responsibility to provide a campus

culture that creates, cultivates, and nurtures students' sense of belonging in and outside of the classroom. I argue that their role is important in creating a culturally engaging environment that is inclusive of diverse students through their departmental policies, interactions with students, and co-curricular programming. This study situates VPSAs at the center of analysis to gain better insight into how the field of student affairs plays a critical role in the development and growth of undergraduate students outside of the classroom.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted to examine how Black women VPSAs' understandings of their identity contribute to their motivation for creating an inclusive environment for racially minoritized students. To clarify the relationship between key concepts, a conceptual model was developed. The model is centered around Black women VPSAs due to several influences their position has on key concepts presented in the study. Positioned above the Black women VPSAs directly influencing their work is the theoretical framework. In this particular study, the Applied Critical Leadership (Santamaría& Santamaría, 2012) framework situates the Black women VPSAs at the forefront to confront and transform educational spaces. The VPSAs consider the social context of their educational communies (PWIs) to enact change based on their identities.

The ACL model was used to explain how these women address issues of social justice, educational equity, and educational change through their intersecting identities and past experiences. Moreover, I argue that Black women VPSAs' social identities allow them to see alternative perspectives that aid in disrupting social barriers that hinder student belonging. In the model, positioned around Black women VPSAs, are PWIs, RMS, and student affairs offices. These three contexts are directly influenced by Black women VPSAs. In addition to Black women VPSAs directly influencing these three contexts, the contexts show a relation with one another. For example, the model shows the relationship between PWIs and RMS on one side, and on the other, it demonstrates the relationship between RMS and student affairs offices. According to O'Keeffe (2013), student affairs offices such as women's centers, multicultural services, counseling services, Greek life, and campus activities (sometimes referred to as student development) can also contribute to the sense of belonging and retention rates for RMS. Using both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, I view Black women VPSAs as having a direct impact on PWIs, student affairs offices, and RMS through their leadership practices and intersecting racial and gendered identities. The factors represented in the model individually and collectively contribute to the understanding of the direct influence Black women VPSAs have on various aspects of the campus climate.

**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Framework*
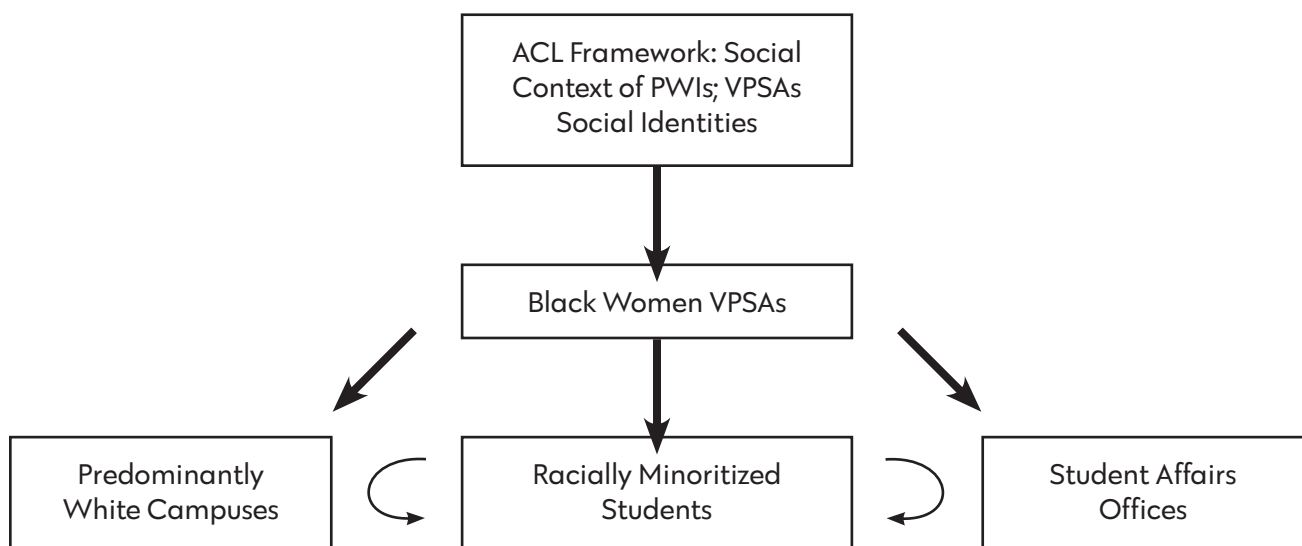
# LITERATURE REVIEW

**The Importance of Black Women in Leadership**

Few research studies have focused on Black Women administrators and the ways in which they lead. Rather, studies have focused on the underrepresentation (Flowers, 2003; Harper, 2005; and Townsend, 2021), isolation (Patitu, 2003; Gregory, 2001; and Willis, et al., 2019), and marginalization (Bazner, 2021; Lloyd-Jones, 2014; and Mitchell, et al., 2014) of Black Women in higher education. Limited research also discusses the experiences of Black Women administrators at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), while rarely highlighting their experiences in a positive light at predominantly White institutions. For the purpose of this study, the literature review will discuss the relationships Black Women administrators create with racially minoritized students to provide an alternative narrative to the existing literature surrounding Black Women administrators and their experiences in higher education. It is often cited in research that racially minoritized students, many of whom are the first in their family to attend a college or university, typically struggle with academic performance and higher attrition rates than other students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, Green and Wright, 2017; Jackson, et al., 2013; and Kinzie, et al., 2008). Thus, it is important to explore what types of relationships promote success among such students.

The college experiences of RMS are influenced by a variety of factors such as academic support (Sherman, Giles, Williams-Green, 1994; Flowers, 2004; and Hoyt, 2021), financial support (Townsend, 1994), and social support (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). The interactions between students and university personnel influence student experiences, thus, students, particularly racially minoritized students rely on faculty and staff for socioemotional support such as understanding and sympathy (Davis, 1991). Davis (1991) states, "On historically White campuses, Black students have fewer significant others with whom to form meaningful interpersonal relationships." Davis (1991) goes on to argue basic social needs (such as esteem or approval) are gratified through interaction with faculty and staff who identify themselves as caring and supportive.

Hirt and colleagues (2006) conducted a study that examined the work of student affairs administrators at HBCUs. Although not a part of their initial curiosity, Hirt and colleagues found that participants in their study were committed to giving back through the racial uplift of their students. Administrators in the study discussed the importance of racial uplift because it allowed them to create relationships with students and empower students from racially minoritized backgrounds. Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, and Strayhorn (2008) also found that Black Women administrators engaged in a system of othermothering, a cross-familial pattern of care that is often found in the Black community. This study examined relationships between administrators and students at one HBCU, demonstrating the significance of facilitating student belonging and retention. Less is known about the nature of relationships between Black Women administrators and racially minoritized students at PWIs. Although examining the relationships between Black Women administrators and RMS was an indirect variable of the study, it is important to provide a foundation to then discuss why Black Women administrators engage in the work they do.

I argue that Black Women hold the knowledge and potentially the experiences to be capable of working with racially minoritized students because they deeply understand their students' situations and needs inside and outside of the classroom. Participants drew on intersecting identities, past experiences, and understandings of diverse groups to enact change with equity as the basis of their leadership. Through a Critical Race Theory lens, individuals who practice ACL use stories of people of color to explore identity. As others have documented, there is added value in the stories and narrative accounts educational leaders of color, women in particular, share about the ways in which they lead, which are qualitatively different from historically mainstream leadership practices (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Jean-Marie, 2010; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Applied Critical Leadership (ACL) is a "strengths-based model of leadership practice where educational leaders consider the social context of their educational communities and empower individual members of these communities based on educational leaders' identities as perceived through critical race theory (CRT) or another

critical lens" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, p. 5). The Applied Critical Leadership theory framework provides a means to consider multiple perspectives that encompass the intersectionality of the participants. Applied Critical Leadership employs three different stages (transformative leadership, critical multiculturalism, and Critical Race Theory; CRT). The theoretical model draws upon positive attributes of a leader's identity to ask: "In what ways does my identity enhance my ability to see alternate perspectives and practice effective leadership" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, p. 8). Addressing questions like the one above provides a foundation for a different leadership approach in terms of addressing issues of social justice, educational equity, and educational change.

Leaders who employ the ACL model use CRT at the critical multiculturalism and transformative leadership phase to explore their identity with an emphasis on race. CRT examines race and racism across dominant cultures by examining how these dominant cultures perpetuate systematic racism. Individuals who practice CRT attempt to understand how these spaces are affected by cultural perceptions of race, as well as how to represent themselves in these spaces.

Tichy and Ulrich (2008) define transformational leadership as "bringing about fundamental changes in the organization's basic political and cultural systems" (p. 1). Leaders who adopt a transformational leadership framework create new practices from old ones that challenge the organization's current structures. McDowell and Fang (2007) refer to critical multiculturalism as a "perspective that values diversity and acknowledges the politics of cultural differences and social location" (p. 551). Critical multiculturalism draws from multicultural, critical, and feminist discourses to support racial, ethnic, and cultural equity in relation to identity politics and social location (McDowell & Fang, 2007). In this phase of ACL, the language, culture, and experiences of leaders explicitly impact praxis.

For this study, the ACL framework is used to operationalize leadership in a way that challenges the status quo. Few scholars have looked at what it means to conceptualize leadership from a framework that addresses an individual's multiple intersecting identities and characteristics. As an alternative, ACL positions critical leaders at the forefront to confront and transform spaces through various behaviors and practices, given their understanding of their identities.

## POSITIONALITY

I realize that my role as a Black Woman who has a passion for wanting racially minoritized students to thrive in higher education may potentially create bias in my interpretation of the data. During my college career, I only attended both large and small predominantly White institutions. My undergraduate experience had a significant influence on my interest in student affairs. While my undergraduate institution was a small public institution consisting of mostly White students, faculty, and administrators, I often wondered why no one looked like me. If they did look like me, the individuals did not hold tenured faculty positions or senior-level administrative positions. I was heavily involved as an undergraduate student in co-creating an organization, holding administrative positions (VP, secretary, and treasurer), studying abroad, and volunteering. At the time, my knowledge of student affairs and what it entails was minimal. Through an internship and various opportunities, I have been able to gain experience and knowledge about the field of student affairs. These experiences furthered my passion for wanting racially minoritized students to succeed on predominantly White campuses. My engagement with various student affairs administrators left me wanting more. I was motivated to pursue this study for a number of reasons: (a) the role that my mentor played in my undergraduate career and beyond; (b) during my college experience, no one I encountered at a senior-level position looked like me; and (c) my culture, my identity, my values, and beliefs are instilled in everything I do. Learning how women who share some of the same identities as myself create inclusive and supportive environments for racially minoritized students is crucial to my personal and professional development.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to examine how Black Women VPSAs' understandings of their identity contribute to their motivation to create an inclusive environment for racially minoritized students. Since VPSAs oversee

departments and units that are crucial to student development outside of the classroom, it is important for co-curricular activities to contribute to the engagement, sense of belonging, and retention of students. Specifically, these spaces are vital for RMS due to the cited research on RMS feeling isolated on predominantly White campuses. Although there is extensive research on the importance of symbolic representation, few studies focus on Black Women VPSAs and their impact on the campus environment.

This study focuses on the role of VPSAs for three reasons: (a) a core concept of student affairs is to encourage, understand, and respect diversity, which is ironic given the lack of diversity in VPSA positions across predominantly White institutions; (b) the impact this position has on the student body and campus climates at PWIs; and (c) diversifying senior-level student affairs positions can contribute to the sense of belonging for underrepresented students. The following research question guided this study: In what ways do Black women VPSAs' understandings of their own identity contribute to their motivation to intentionally create a welcoming environment for racially minoritized students?

# METHODS

## Institutional Sample

The current analysis draws from six institutions that vary in institutional size, location, selectivity, and Carnegie classification within the United States. Site selection was based on self-nomination due to participant criteria, in turn making the site selection convenient. In addition to convenience, the sites represented in the sample present uniqueness in terms of urbanicity, location, and recruitment areas for the institutions. Of the six institutions represented in the data, four of them are in the Midwest. A variety of institutions are represented in the data, including public, private, Christian, and not-for-profit. All institutions represented in the sample are 4-year predominantly White institutions with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the institutions used in the sample.

## Participant Sample

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds, including educational attainment, career trajectory, upbringing, etc. The median age for participants was 48, with ten or more years of experience in higher education administration. Although it was not a requirement to hold an advanced degree while in the VPSA position, all six participants held a Ph.D. or Ed.D. The number of years in their current position ranged from 6 months to 6 years at the time the data were collected. A stipulation for the time in current position was not placed on the criteria to participate due to wanting to capture a range of experiences. Participants who held their positions for less than six months also have served in various student affairs positions at a previous institution or their current institution. Destiny (pseudonym), the first participant, held a Ph.D. in Higher Education and has served as the Vice President of Student Affairs at her current institution for less than one year. Prior to this position, she held the same position at a different institution for two years. Melanie received her Ph.D. in Educational Administration and has between 10-15 years of experience in higher education. Both Faith and Irene held an Ed.D. in Adult Education, with at least 15 years of experience in Higher Education Administration. Yolanda possessed over 25 years of experience in Higher Education Administration and had previously served as Vice Provost for Student Affairs and Dean of Students at a previous institution. Whitney, the VPSA at Turquoise University, had more than 25 years of experience in higher education with a Ph.D. in higher education. It was common for persons who held the Vice President of Student Affairs position to have previously worked as Dean of Students and/or Title IX Directors/Coordinators, providing them with years of experience and preparation for the position of VPSA.

## Data Collection

Data for the study were collected in both the late fall and early spring of 2019. Data were collected through audio-recorded interviews and demographic questionnaires. The demographic makeup of the participants was collected after participants signed the informed consent. The demographic questionnaire consisted of questions related to age, educational attainment, number of years in their current leadership position, number of years of experience in higher education, and more.

Once participants completed the demographic questionnaire, the next set of data were collected through two

semi-structured interviews. Each interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. A total of 12 interviews were conducted among the six participants. Of the 12 interviews, eight were conducted via Zoom, while the other four were conducted in person. In these semi-structured interviews, participants had the opportunity to share in-depth experiences of their time serving in a senior-level leadership position in higher education, what type of leadership models, if any, they employed while in their current roles, the role their intersecting identities played while leading in a multicultural environment, and more.

**Analysis**

The current study employed several phases of data analysis. The first portion of data analysis consisted of transcribing interviews. Interviews were transcribed through an online transcribing software. Once interviews were transcribed, the researcher listened to the recording while reading the transcripts to (a) ensure that the data was transcribed correctly and (b) to immerse themselves in the data more. By listening to the recording and reading the transcripts, the researcher was able to refocus their attention on the data rather than listening to transcribe. Also, listening to the audio while reading the transcripts allowed the researcher to reflect on any overarching generalities about the individual interview data and document them in the margins of the transcript (Creswell, 2014) before comparing the interviews to one another.

A series of coding techniques were used in the data analysis phase to ensure rich data emerged from the set. MAXQDA, a qualitative and mixed method data analysis tool, was used to keep track of codes and sub-codes. Open coding is the first stage in constant comparative analysis. In this stage of coding, the researcher tried to capture what was going on in the data in a very broad sense. If statements or expressions were repeated more than twice, they became a code in level one. Bazely (2013) states that

> the tendency of people to repeat themselves has three implications for coding: if you miss something important, it will come up again; repeated words or ideas point to concepts that should be coded; and variations in the use of a word or phrase provide an opportunity for comparison. (p. 167)

In addition to coding repeated words or phrases, in-vivo coding was used as a form of analysis to ensure participants' experiences were kept at the forefront of the research. In-vivo coding uses "words or phrases by participants as labels for codes to capture the essence of what participants are saying in their own terms" (Bazely, 2013, p. 166). In response to the study's research question, one *a priori* code (identity) was also included in the coding phase. Process coding was used to denote any action taken by the participants. This type of code was extremely useful when denoting the behaviors and practices participants engaged in. Once all initial codes from level one coding were derived, over 40 codes emerged from the data between the first round of transcripts. Level two coding allowed the researcher to constantly compare level one codes and collapse them into smaller clusters and subcodes; therefore, level two coding had a total of 15 codes. Level two coding is often referred to as focused coding (Saldaña, 2009). In level two coding, similar codes were combined to see new connections and alternative ways of interpreting the text. A codebook was developed within MAXQDA to assign definitions to each code. As a result of level one and level two coding, two themes emerged from the data. To derive the themes found in the data, patterns and trends that related to the research questions were noted. In the final reporting of data, narratives from Black Women based on the proposed research question are represented. Additionally, elements of Applied Critical Leadership are reported throughout the findings.

## FINDINGS

**Theme: "This is Bigger Than Me"**

The saying, "this is bigger than me," is seen as a humble acknowledgment that recognizes the work that people do to help someone else. This specific theme speaks to the research question: In what ways do Black women VPSAs' understandings of their own identity contribute to their motivation to intentionally create a welcoming environment for racially minoritized students? Between a combination of life, work, intersectional identities, and collegiate experiences, participants alluded to what contributes to their motivation to create welcoming environments for RMS.

## Upbringing

Various participants expressed that at an early age, their upbringings impacted their decisions to engage in this line of work. Both Irene and Faith addressed who they were raised around and what they were raised to do contributed to their understanding of motivation. For example, participants were asked how self-identified descriptors play a role in their lives. Faith described herself as a seasoned Black Woman, mother, wife, grandmother, educator, community activist, and spiritual guide. When asked how these descriptors play a role in her life, Faith answered:

> Most of them are my foundation, who I am and where I come from. I think because I was raised in a strong community. Everything that I have named that is a part of me is what I saw. And so, that is a part of my DNA, and who I am as a person today. There's no doubt about it.

When asked what she attributes her success to in terms of diversity and inclusion, Irene answered:

> I attribute it to the way I was raised. I would attribute it to my mother and my grandfather. My grandfather and my mom were part of the Civil Rights Movement, but we've all achieved various things. It was ingrained in us when we were kids. I also think it has a lot to do with my background. My dad is biracial. So, my grandmother was White. I think that's just part of who I am and the way I was raised. So, it came long before I arrived here at my current institution. Even when I worked in corporate, I used to serve on the corporate diversity committee, so it has always been a part of me.

Faith and Irene both draw upon their social identities and their familial upbringings to support their understandings of critical multiculturalism, where language, culture, and experiences directly impact praxis. The critical multiculturalism perspective offers a deeper insight into how participants draw on their cultural experiences to inform their leadership practices. Through this phase of ACL, critical multiculturalism supports racial, ethnic, and cultural equity in relation to identity politics and social location. Given their beliefs of familial upbringing, both Faith and Irene understand the politics of cultural differences and social location impact their motivation to intentionally create welcoming environments for racially minoritized students.

## Lived Experiences

In addition to their upbringing, participants' lived experiences also contributed to their motivation. Half of the participants are at least 60 years of age, while the other half of the participants range between 30-49. Although there is an age difference represented in the sample, there are a wide array of lived experiences that each participant discussed. Some of these experiences include their own collegiate involvements, encounters with racism, and their parental guidance.

Destiny is of Jamaican descent and moved to the United States over 20 years ago. She drew on her experiences of bigotry and racism to inform the work she does with students. Because she has experienced some of the same things that her students are currently navigating, she draws on her personal experiences as motivation to disrupt the status quo.

> I won't go with a standard because I'm Black, so I get it because I'm a firm believer that not all skin folk are kinfolk. Like, not all our experiences because we look alike are the same. My intersectionality is all over the place. I'm an international student. I'm a first-generation college student. I'm Black. I'm a Black presenting woman, who people think I'm automatically African American, and I'm not. There are all these other layers that intersect to make me who I am and inform the work that I do. So, I feel my lived experiences when it comes to being marginalized or encountering racism, or encountering bigotry in different situations does help me to navigate a conversation with a student who may be going through something.

When asked how often she draws on her lived experiences to advocate for RMS, Faith answered:
> Oh, probably two, three times a day. If not more. I'm their voice. Sometimes that's how policies are written. When you get to this level and when you're sitting at this table, you're making policies, and you have got to remember who you work for. I don't work for anybody but students. So, I most definitely have to think about who I work for, my personal experiences, and how those affect a future.

In transformational leadership, a component of ACL, leaders address fundamental changes in their institution's political and cultural systems. Leaders who employ transformational leadership create new practices that challenge the institution's current structure. Historically, policies, practices, and institutional culture have ostracized racially minoritized students to the extent they are isolated and ignored. The participants of the study drew upon their lived experiences to enact change with equity as the basis of their leadership. Given their lived experiences, participants could answer the central question of Applied Critical Leadership, "In what ways does my identity enhance my ability to see alternate perspectives and practice effective leadership" (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012, p.8).

## Collegiate Experience

Both Irene and Faith attended HBCUs for their undergraduate experiences. Though HBCUs primarily serve African Americans, their student population is academically, financially, racially, and socially diverse. HBCUs foster a unique set of competencies along with "traditional" learning experiences. Both participants' practices are informed by the HBCU model to engage in work with racially minoritized students. When asked what types of experiences she brings to advocate for RMS, Irene describes her undergraduate experience at her alma mater, stating:

> The other thing that is interesting is that I attended a Historically Black College. So that frame of reference has helped me because I don't know how to feel inferior to White people. I have no concept of that. What I often do is teach my students how to advocate for themselves and how to honor the fact that regardless of how they are paying for tuition, their money covers our salaries. So, there's an expectation that we need to meet as a staff and a university.

When asked that same question, Melanie replied:

> I would say that my HBCU experience definitely shaped me. I attended an HBCU, and that was a critical experience for me in terms of the way that I think about my approach to students. The way that I want students to feel and the importance of being celebrated for who you are and all of your kind of many and multiple identities. I don't just see it from the lens of, like, someone who grew up middle-class with a fair amount of privilege. I do see it from a different perspective, one that I can't say of my own or that I know intimately, but I still have very much been exposed to that space.

Although Destiny did not attend an HBCU, she attributes her understanding to her post-secondary experience as an international student.

> Having experiences throughout those two years that exposed me to this feeling and the importance of someone like myself being a woman of color, being in the field and the impact that I can have on other lives. I believe our lives are not for us to just live. It's to impact those around us.

Irene describes her college experience as a commuter student as something she draws from to guide her work with students.

> I would go back to I was a student myself. I had to pay my own way through college. So, I use my life experience to kind of direct what I'm doing. And so, then the other distinction with me was we had financial aid, but the expected family contribution came from me. I worked full-time. I was a commuter, I only lived on campus for a short time. So, I've been the unique student. Those are the experiences I draw from, but I also realize that things are a lot different. I like the engagement that I have with students; it helps me to navigate my professional life. I also really pay attention, listen, and draw from my younger staff.

## Identity

Participants acknowledged their identity as an understanding that contributes to their motivation. Although it is often strenuous to synthesize and navigate intersecting identities, the VPSAs in the study shared how their identity informs the work they do with RMS and how these understandings motivate them to engage in creating welcoming environments. Destiny finds that her identity informs the work that she does with all students.

> I feel my identity is ingrained in how I view all things. That is my cultural capital. That's my background. I use my identity to inform the way I engage with students, regardless if they're students who are presenting in a cultural way that mirrors mine or not. Because again, I feel that there are so many misunderstandings

around race, ethnicity, gender, and those relations. So, for me it's disrupting that and standing firm in that. It's also important for me to support and be confident in supporting diversity and inclusion and explaining to folks why that's not just a marginalized student thing, but how that enhances the experiences of all students in our community as a whole. So, my identity does inform the work that I do in that regard.

When asked how much importance she places on her identity as a Black woman, Faith answered:

On a daily basis. It's probably, especially on a White on campus, at a PWI, I would probably 99.9%. Everything I do, I don't do it for myself, but I do it so that underrepresented students can see that this is possible. Anything's possible, writing is possible. That when they open up their textbooks and they see my name on there, they realize that it can happen. I don't do any work for myself anymore. I used to when I first started off, I wanted to be Dr. Faith. Today I just want to make certain that I'm leaving a legacy.

The phrase, "I don't do any work for myself anymore. Today, I just want to make certain that I am leaving a legacy" speaks to Faith's commitment to cultural advancement. The notion of cultural advancement is inherently embedded throughout the administrators' practices, and a distinct element of racial uplift is present when describing relationships with their students.

Melanie expresses she does the work to impact the Black community. Through this conversation, I interpreted Melanie's actions as being more than just for her personal gain, but impacting the Black community and helping students reach obtainable goals. In this instance, she does not relate it to any particular understanding, except that it is her life, ministry, and passion.

And this is, for me, about enhancing and educating the Black community. And I'm never going to touch the entire Black community, but I know that I'm planting seeds with folks who are planting their own seeds, who will plant their own seeds. I just have to have trust and faith that that is going to benefit us as a community. And when we win as a community, it is a benefit for the entire world. When the students are coming in and they can go back to their space, college becomes possible for someone else in their family. It becomes possible for someone on their street, for someone in their high school in a way that it wasn't before because now it's tangible and it's real. In the same way that a student who might have never believed that they could run a company or be a vice president will see me and say, 'Oh, I can do that too.'

As participants acknowledged their identity as an understanding that contributes to their motivation, it was evident that who these women are within the context of their identities was salient to my understanding of the influence of race, class, and gender on their academic roles. Participants placed a vast amount of importance on their identity as a Black woman. This importance placed on their racial and gender identity shaped how they approached their work. Participants make use of their own personal stories when working with RMS for several reasons: (a) to relate to students, (b) they feel as if their own personal stories humanize them and their experiences, and (c) to show RMS that anything is possible despite their circumstances, marginalized identities, or stories.

Researchers have documented there is added value in the stories and narrative accounts educational leaders of color, women in particular, share about the ways in which they lead, which are qualitatively different from historically mainstream leadership practices (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Jean-Marie, 2010; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). Additionally, participants expressed it is the cultural capital and commonality they share with students to be able to engage in their leadership practices effectively. The Applied Critical Leadership framework was used to operationalize leadership in a way that challenged the status quo. Few scholars have researched what it means to conceptualize leadership from a framework that addresses an individual's multiple intersecting identities and characteristics. The main justification for using the Applied Critical Leadership model throughout the study was to position the critical leaders at the forefront to confront and transform spaces that have a history of marginalization and oppression.

## IMPLICATIONS

This work has provided additional insights into the leadership practices of Black Women VPSAs at PWIs. Black Women in senior-level administrative positions play a vital role in not only the growth of diversity and inclusion,

but also enhancing the experiences of RMS at predominantly White institutions. Many of the participants mentioned their experiences with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) on a variety of levels. Some participants attended an HBCU, while others either worked at these institutions or sent their children to them. Nonetheless, participants spoke highly of their experiences and attributed a lot of their success, motivation, and/or leadership practices to the HBCU model. For these reasons, I suggest further research should examine the preparedness of senior-level administrators who attended an HBCU and how those experiences matriculate into their work at PWIs. Furthermore, this research may speak to the scholarship in various ways; in particular, this research may help alleviate and dismantle stereotypes associated with HBCUs. In addition, this research could speak to the importance of continuing to fund HBUCs as an alternative to closing these prestigious institutions. HBCUs, which were originally created for Black youths who were excluded from other institutions due to racial discrimination, are an integral part of higher education. The culture of HBCUs can best be characterized as a place of refuge—one of caring, one that builds confidence, and one that equips students with the required understanding and skills needed to make an immediate contribution to the global environment. I argue that future research should pay closer attention to how HBCUs prepare their students to lead in confidence and make meaningful contributions to the lives of others.

Through analyzed themes, participants were able to answer in what ways their identity enhanced their ability to see alternate perspectives and practice effective leadership, a key question within the Applied Critical Leadership framework. Given the findings in the study, implications for practice should be considered. First, to implement institutional change across higher education, it is vital that everyone affiliated with the institution is committed to the change. It is more than just the responsibility of senior-level administrators. To continue to move higher education forward to adapt to the changing demographics of students, faculty, and staff organizations must take steps toward activist leadership. Activist leadership moves beyond simply stating that there is a commitment to equity, educational access, racial/ethnic diversity, and gender participation. It is a form of leadership that demonstrates through active engagement, within and outside the campus community, the importance and vital nature of building an inclusive community. To execute this form of activist leadership to affirm diversity, Zamani-Gallaher and colleagues propose 6 steps. (Zamani-Gallaher, O'Neil Green, Brown, & Stovall, 2009, p. 172).

The six steps include:
1. Take a clear diversity stance by integrating diversity throughout the organization. This goes beyond mission and vision statements to include organizational practices and policies.
2. Craft and articulate a clear message to campus constituents.
3. Educate the press/media about the institution's diversity stance, programming, and community-related events around diversity.
4. Encourage and participate in ongoing dialogues.
5. Use a leadership team approach.
6. Revise or correct failed practices.

Secondly, to respond to feelings of seclusion, academic isolation, and overall lack of satisfaction for racially minoritized students on predominantly White campuses, institutions must adopt culturally responsive practices to ensure the success of racially minoritized students. Given that culturally engaging campus environments are associated with higher levels of sense of belonging, and in turn, a greater likelihood of success in higher education (Museus, 2014), research has recommended that (a) enhancing faculty and staffs' cultural awareness and knowledge (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Singleton & Linton, 2006), (b) using culturally relevant language (Cartledge & Johnson, 2004; Monroe, 2009), and (c) increasing cultural competence of school leaders to support staff (Bustamente, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009) are all important factors in creating a culturally engaging campus environment.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how Black women VPSAs understandings of their identity contributed to their motivation to create an inclusive environment for racially minoritized students. Drawing from the Applied Critical Leader-

ship framework, participants were positioned at the forefront to critically examine their understandings of their own identities in relation to the work they engage in. Santamaría & Santamaría (2012), referencing the framework, stated that educational leaders consider the social context of the communities they serve and empower them based on the educational leaders' identities as perceived through Critical Race Theory or another critical lens. Findings suggested that participants' internalization of culture, identity, and environment were influences for their methods of practice. Given the findings of the data, one could argue participants hold the knowledge and potentially the experiences, all while empathizing with racially minoritized students, given their intersecting identities and experiences on predominantly White campuses.

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