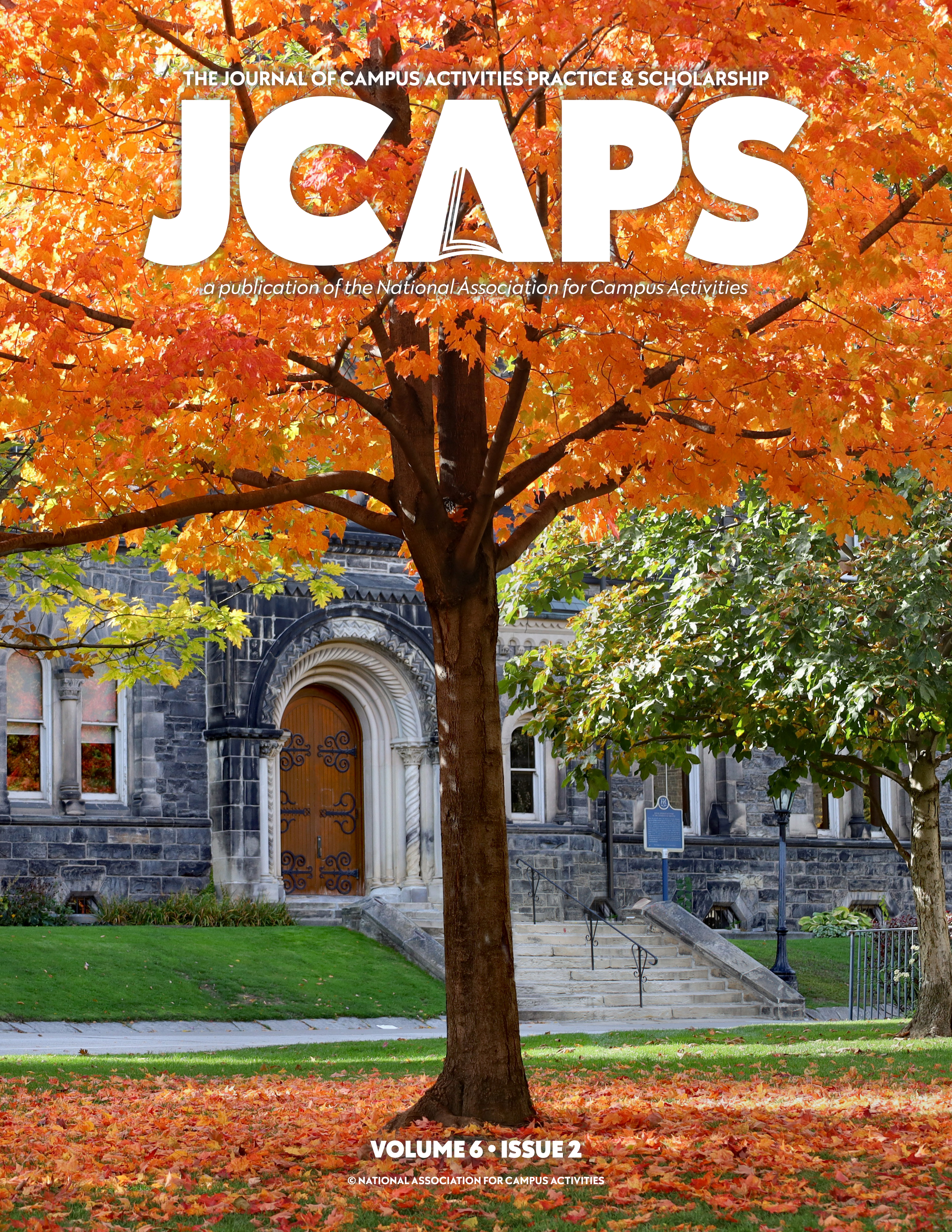

THE JOURNAL OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PRACTICE & SCHOLARSHIP

# JCAPS

*a publication of the National Association for Campus Activities*

VOLUME 6 • ISSUE 2

THE JOURNAL OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PRACTICE & SCHOLARSHIP

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*a publication of the National Association for Campus Activities*

Volume 6, Issue 2, Fall 2024

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JCAPS

# EDITORIAL: JCAPS IN RETROSPECTIVE AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Brittany Devies, Incoming Editor in Chief
David M. Rosch, Outgoing Editor in Chief

Seven years is simultaneously a long time (almost two presidential cycles!) and an eyeblink (where did the time go?). It was that long ago that the Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship was born, ushered into the world with the support of the NACA Board of Directors and a newly-formed journal advisory board tasked with determining the journal's structure and initial personnel. If you were building a journal literally from scratch – or a magazine, or a long-time podcast, etc. – how would you begin?

At JCAPS, we started with a simple question: how would a scholarly journal focused on the work of campus activities benefit the world? NACA already hosted a world-class magazine dedicated to campus activities. Dozens of scholarly journals already focused on higher education, student affairs, and university student development. What value would a journal like JCAPS provide?

We understood that the great folks most engaged in the work and study of campus activities were largely practitioners. Long, complicated, theory-heavy articles without strong practical applications or implications were not likely to be helpful. We understood that the world of campus activities is filled with resources for the work involved and for helping students succeed. We therefore wanted to provide a space for rigorous scholarship that examined those resources and their benefits. We knew that a vast population of higher education graduate students were engaged in the study of campus activities as part of their training, and therefore we wanted to provide explicit opportunity for student-authored work held to a different standard than work from authors with more experience.

Armed with these aims, we sought to build a journal dedicated to rigor and theoretical quality but always founded in the ultimate goal of practical application. Since its first issue was published in Spring 2019, JCAPS has included over 100 double-blinded peer-reviewed articles and over a dozen editorial or invited pieces. JCAPS issues have addressed topics as diverse as Greek-letter organizations and gaming; escape rooms and e-sports; and book clubs and burnout. JCAPS articles have focused on student involvement, student identity, student learning, student government, and student employment. JCAPS authors are full-time faculty, campus activities professionals, graduate students, higher education consultants, and often some combination of these.

Seven years from its birth, we feel strongly that those who have contributed as editors, as authors, as reviewers, and as sponsors should be proud of all that we have accomplished together. The field of campus activities is stronger because of our collective work.

As JCAPS makes its first transition of editor-in-chief, where does it look to go from here?

First and foremost, the Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship is committed to adhering to and upholding its original aim: to create space for rigorous scholarship focused on campus activities while centering the implications for its practice. This journal was crafted for practitioners, scholars, educators, and students alike and it will continue to serve so. In the last few years, JCAPS has seen an increase in faculty and empirical study

Devies, B., & Rosch, D. M. (2024). Editorial: JCAPS in retrospective and plans for the future. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship, 6*(2), 5-6.
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submissions. These submissions are invaluable for bettering our collective understanding of campus activities. However, empirical research is only one of four types of submissions JCAPS welcomes.

Moving ahead, we are committed to using our efforts to increase submissions in our other three categories of submissions, including media/source reviews, scholarship-to-practice briefs, and emerging scholar submissions. These submission types help increase the richness of JCAPS and ensure the centering of praxis for our collective learning. As outgoing and incoming editor, it is our collective hope that you will consider sharing your work across all four section categories. Additionally, we ask that you encourage your colleagues, mentees, students, and peers to share their brilliance through these mediums. We need their voices!

As we look to the future, it is our hope we do so together. We are immensely thankful to our JCAPS editorial board and our JCAPS advisory board for their continued commitment to JCAPS. We also could not do any of this without the continued support of the NACA office. We do not do this work in silos, and we are all better when we do this together. We hope you will continue on the JCAPS journey with us – we cannot wait to see where the future takes us.

JCAPS

# EXPLORING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONGST STUDENTS ENGAGED IN RESIDENCE HALL COUNCIL

Darren Pierre, University of Maryland
Allison Dunn, Texas A&M University

*Students learn how to be a leader and how to develop their leadership capacity as they participate in shared experiences or learning communities, many of which are facilitated by student affairs professionals through campus activities programs. For large numbers of college students, their first learning community, and subsequent path to future campus involvement, is their residential community. This qualitative study explored how participating in a residence hall council impacted students' conceptualization of leadership and their individual leadership development. Two overarching themes emerged. First, students do in fact build leadership capacity, motivation, and leadership efficacy from participating in collaborative, learning community environments, such as a hall council. Second, the role and behaviors of the learning community advisor matter, providing practical considerations for all student affairs practitioners.*

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a process and occurs in groups (Komives et al., 2013). This truth is at the heart of the work of student affairs educators' commitment to facilitate leadership learning. It is known that leadership development occurs throughout the college/university settings (Dunn et al., 2019; Haber-Curran, 2019). However, "students will find it difficult to lead until they have experienced effective leadership as part of their education" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 2). Enter the student affairs practitioner. Part of the responsibilities of student affairs professionals is to provide learning opportunities for all students, within their sphere of influence, for personal growth and development, including leader and leadership development.

Students' involvement on campus occurs in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons, and is often within the purview of student affairs professionals and paraprofessionals (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Campus involvement is a broadly defined term that ranges from 'one and done' experiences like a single day of community service, to weekend retreats or trainings, to week-long new student orientation camps, to multi-year student organizations. Student development or growth is a primary goal of these experiences, and that development often comes as a result of learning through a shared experience.

When students have prolonged engagement in a shared learning experience, a learning community can form. The benefits of learning communities are varied and lasting. As Dunn et al. (2016) noted, learning communities help students gain greater connection with their campus, increase their involvement on campus, and improve their academic performance. According to Cross (1998), "knowledge requires language, and people construct knowledge out of the language available to them in their community" (p. 5). For many students, their first collegiate learning community takes the shape of their residential community. Thus, a residential community is one of the first opportunities students have to get involved on campus; and just as many first experiences can influence subsequent similar experiences, a student's experience in and involvement through their residential community can influence their future campus involvement, residential or otherwise.

Pierre, D., & Dunn, A. (2024). Exploring leadership development amongst students engaged in residence hall council. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship, 6*(2), 7-18. **https://doi.org/10.52499/2024010**

As the student demographics of college campuses continue to diversify, it is important to understand what motivates students to get involved, if student affairs practitioners are to be effective. A student's motivation to get involved in activities beyond their courses is a dynamic construct that can be influenced by a variety of factors such as previous experiences, (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), developmental readiness (Keating et al., 2014), personal desires (Hamid & Krauss, 2013), or available resources. In fact, motivation may also influence the degree to which a student commits to or stays with an experience (Cho et al., 2015). Thus, this study was conducted to further populate the conversation regarding how involvement in residential hall councils fosters leadership learning in co-curricular offerings. While the specific context of this study was resident hall councils, the lessons learned may be transferable to other campus activities or involvement programs or initiatives where students serve as executive officers, councils, or teams and student affairs practitioners advise. The researchers leave it to the reader to make this determination.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Leadership is an essential asset within higher education and beyond. In our global post-industrial economy, leadership skills and abilities, such as teamwork and communication, top the list of skills employers want in their employees (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Subsequently, institutions of higher education have accepted the challenge to help develop the next generation of society's leaders (Keating et al., 2014; Rosch et al., 2015). However, leadership learning is not restricted to formal education settings; therefore, student affairs practitioners, regardless of functional area, play a vital role in advancing the student leadership learning that occurs on college campuses (Blake, 2007; Dunn et al., 2019; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Colleges and universities today offer students a wide variety of leadership engagement experiences: one-day conferences, semester-long seminar series, residential-based programming, student organizations, new student orientation programs, multi-year certificate programs, and countless others. With varying durations, commitment levels, costs, and theoretical grounding, students can find a leadership development opportunity that matches their individual needs, interests, and level of commitment.

As Day (2001) noted, leadership development is an overarching term used when discussing an individual's growth or advancement in their leadership capacity and competency over time. The two main components of leadership development are leadership education and leadership training (Brungardt, 1996). Leadership education, which typically occurs in a formal classroom setting, is the vehicle individuals who are committed to and engaged in leadership development use to learn, refine, and practice their leadership competencies over time (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Northouse, 2022). Leadership training, which typically occurs outside of a formal classroom setting, is a subset of leadership education and consists of learning the specific tasks needed for a specific job or responsibility (Brungardt, 1996).

Historically, student affairs viewed student leadership development as primarily leadership training rather than leadership education (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Roberts & Ullom, 1989). Workshops and other opportunities were directly tied to a position or job duties (i.e., training to be a Resident Assistant or the Student Body President or New Student Orientation Leader or Fraternity/Sorority Council President, etc.), focused primarily on specific leadership skills rather than holistic leader development, and were only open to students in those positions (Nuss, 2003). As the definition of leadership has shifted from one of title or position to one of influence, relationship, and process (Northouse, 2022), student affairs practitioners have likewise shifted their offerings from leadership training to leadership education open to all students regardless of academic program, position held, or level of involvement on campus (Haber, 2012; Shertzer et al., 2005).

Presenting leadership as a collaborative, influence process between leader and follower rather than training for a titled position, often challenges students' understanding of leadership as well as their categorization of who is and is not a leader (Shehane et al., 2012). Yet, processing the resulting cognitive dissonance associated with believing 'leaders' and 'leadership' exclusively pertain to those with a title or position, and then shifting to the belief that 'leader' and 'leadership' are concepts everyone has the capacity to cultivate, regardless of role or title within an organization, is a natural part of the leadership development process (Collier & Rosch, 2016), and a common experience for young adults. Knowledgeable student affairs practitioners can be an effective mechanism to support students as they process their cognitive dissonance regarding leadership; thereby aiding in the student's leadership development.

Leadership is an important factor in the conversation of student engagement (Komives, 2019). Through a host of curricular and co-curricular programs, students are able to interrogate their own beliefs, values, and perspectives; allowing all three to inform how they engage in groups and teams. In student groups, individuals gain in their perspective of others, grow in their own self-awareness, and question how their own identities inform their experience of the college/university in which they attend (Goodman, 2022). Thus, educators who work throughout and across student affairs functional areas, such as but not limited to student activities, student government advising, leadership programs, or service learning, can find value in this research involving Residence Hall Associations to guide their practice.

College can be a time fraught with transitions for young adults (Srivastava et al., 2009). Student involvement outside of the classroom, such as within residence hall councils, can support students in their development, community building, and overall retention in college (Astin, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993). Research shows, "residence hall involvement helps to model the process of community involvement for use later in students' lives" (Arboleda et al., 2003, p. 530).

Often, the invitation to get involved comes from more experienced fellow students, such as resident advisors (RA). An RA can be a basis of support, and an agent for cultivating a healthy living environment (Kacvinsky & Moreno, 2014). The contributions of RAs to the college experience have been well noted (see Arboleda et al. 2003; Brecheisen, 2015; Manata et al., 2017). Through social and educational programs, RAs provide residents opportunities to strengthen their strategies in finding success and belonging within the college/university setting.

Unlike many other student leaders or peer mentors, RAs are paid paraprofessional staff who are often supervised by hall directors. Riker (1980) described a hall director as a "coordinator, facilitator, consultant, teacher, administrator, counselor, change agent, planner, and researcher" (as cited in Beebe et al., 2018, p. 109). Beyond these descriptors, hall directors, who serve either in full-time staff positions or as part-time graduate assistants, are responsible for the day-to-day aspects of managing the residence hall, enforcing university policy, and cultivating a thriving residential community. Similar to RAs, hall directors play a significant role in the overall experience and co-curricular engagement of students living on-campus (Beebe et al., 2018).

But hall directors and RAs cannot create this thriving community on their own. If they are to be successful, they need the support of the residents they oversee. The hall council, student-volunteers who serve in a leadership capacity to deliver social programs intended to foster involvement from residents within the hall community, are vital (Arboleda et al., 2003). Working in concert with residence hall councils, RAs and hall directors provide the framing for an on-campus residential educational experience through programs, events, and services.

If student affairs professionals are to support emerging leaders, it is important to understand one's motivation to lead either through paid or volunteer positions, which in the case of residence halls includes being an RA (paid) or participating on the hall council (unpaid). Motivation is an essential component of leadership development (Porter et al., 2019), as an individual's motivation influences if leader development occurs and the depth of that development (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Murphy & Johnson, 2011; Priest & Middleton, 2016). Kark and Van Dijk (2007) suggest the opportunity for advancement can also be a key factor in one's consideration to lead. Additionally, insights into an individual's motivation can be assessed through understanding their personal values and leadership self-efficacy (Schyns et al., 2020).

## PURPOSE

Given the possibilities for students to further their leadership development through involvement in collaborative, peer-led learning communities such as residence hall councils, and the limited exploration of the subject matter, the aim of this study was to better understand and describe how participating in a residential hall council influences students' leadership development. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do students describe their experience participating in hall council?
2. How do students describe leadership and subsequently what influence did hall council participation play in their description?
3. What general recommendations do council leaders have for advisors working with hall councils?

Note, the terms "hall council" and "area council" are used interchangeably throughout this piece to reflect the various ways college residential governing councils are named/described at different institutions.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was framed in the understandings of contemporary and post-industrial notions of leadership (Dugan, 2017; Northouse, 2022) as well as Alexander Astin's "I-E-O Model" which speaks to the impact of college experiences on student development (Astin, 1993). We (the researchers) sought to explore the experiences of students in 'positional' roles of leadership within a hall/an area council. It is worth noting, while the term 'positional leader,' as it relates to hall/area council, is used to name the type of participant who would be targeted for this study, we (the researchers) recognize leadership is not positional (Dugan, 2017; HERI, 1996; Northouse 2022) and therefore, while position was used as a factor, it was not the sole determinant for participation in this study. We posit, the term 'positional leader' can easily be replaced with a qualifier such as 'holds responsibility within hall/area council.' This distinction of conditions, and the subsequent use of both sets of terminology in our recruitment ensured the study remained inclusive of the various ways students understand, enact, and describe their leadership within residence hall councils. The only explicit requirement for eligibility in the study was at least two years of involvement (not required to be two consecutive years, but in most cases were) within a hall council. The approach described here outlines a multifaceted study with two institutional points of contact, diverse experiences of participants, and a set of rich narratives that can inform practice for leadership and student affairs educators alike.

The central focus of the study was to understand if students who were involved in a collaborative, peer-led learning community experienced recognizable growth in their leadership capacity and competency through their participation in a residential hall council (i.e., leadership skills, abilities, or behaviors; individual growth; etc.). As a result of the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, narrative analysis was the main framework utilized for gathering and analyzing data (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Narrative analysis continues to grow in importance as a relevant technique in exploring an individual's understanding of an experience. Personal stories are an integral part of narrative analysis (Meraz et al., 2019). Stories allow those who conduct a study a constructive way to analyze an experience (Frank, 2002). This study looked at individual experiences and elicited personal stories as a way of understanding hall council participants' grasp of leadership and the contributions involvement in residential hall councils played on their overall leadership efficacy and engagement.

Gatekeepers at four institutions (one large public, one mid-size public, one mid-size Jesuit-Catholic, and one highly selective private) were used to recruit participants for this study. Each of the four institutions that agreed to the study submitted an official 'letter of cooperation' as part of the IRB process at the Jesuit-Catholic university. Each gatekeeper served in an administrative leadership role within Residence Life, but did not have direct oversight/advising of residence hall councils. Participants were purposefully selected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) using these gatekeepers (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) to ensure the participants' experiences would complement the research questions of this study. Prior to the recruitment of participants, the gatekeepers and the research team spoke over the phone in length to discuss the research, the engagement of participants, and the parameters for eligibility to participate in the study. The research team wrote recruitment emails, which the gatekeepers sent to those they deemed eligible to participate in the study.

### Limitations

After a ten-week recruitment process, eight participants from two of the four institutions agreed to participate in the study (two from a large public and six from a Jesuit-Catholic institution). Because the study was carried out over the summer, the student's availability became the primary determinant in their ability to take part in this research and is a limitation of this study. Additionally, students were selected at the recommendations of gatekeepers at each of the two respective institutions. These gatekeepers carried rapport with the members of this study and that rapport could cause bias in students' experience, perspective, and responses to the questions asked. Despite the considerations offered on the limitations within the sample, there is still high confidence that the findings within this study render valuable insights and contributions to advising philosophy and approach.

### Interview Protocol

Once participants were identified, and with the support of four graduate student research assistants, participant interviews were conducted over a six-week period. Each semi-structured participant interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. The interviews took place via video conferencing and were recorded, as approved by the IRB. Participants received a $20 gift card for participating in the study.

An interview guide approach was used as the interview method to collect data for this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). This approach allowed for participants to not only share their responses, but also allowed the interviewer to ask probing and follow-up questions to elicit greater understanding as the interview progressed (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Each interview was semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a series of main and potential, subsequent probing questions used to direct the interview. Interview questions asked included questions such as: What does leadership look like to you? Beyond leadership, what were the other motivating factors that contributed to your decision to get involved in hall council? Now having served on hall council, how have you seen leadership growth and development within yourself? As it relates to your own leadership development while on hall/area council, what are the ways the experience could further enhance your view of leadership? What final recommendations would you offer to advisors/directors (student affairs administrators) to help support the leadership development of hall/area council members?

After the interviews were completed, transcribed verbatim using a transcription service, and approved by the individual participant, the researchers individually analyzed each interview looking for common themes. The researchers began with open coding of the transcribed responses, to unitize the data, followed by axial coding, to construct categories within the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Once each member of the research team analyzed and coded the data, the team came together for a peer debriefing of the findings to ensure the plausibility and agreement of the codes and categories developed across each member of the research team's observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the research team agreed to the codes and categories developed, the categories were then clustered into themes utilizing a deductive method. The themes were later used to frame the findings of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Nasheeda et al., 2019).

### Data Analysis

Maintaining trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Trustworthiness is described in terms of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Dependability was increased through an audit trail, where all data were coded by individual participants. To maintain anonymity, each participant was given a unique number, i.e., Student 1 or Student 7. By the end of the eight interviews, no new insights came to light, even after asking additional probing questions, thus the interview team determined data saturation had occurred (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility was developed through member checking (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) by providing each participant an opportunity to review, correct, or clarify, as needed, their verbatim transcription of their interview. All interviews were approved as transcribed. Confirmability was developed through peer debriefing sessions between the research team and the lead author as well as between the two authors. Thick description and representative quotes were used to increase transferability across context and to ensure each unique voice was represented; however, the authors acknowledge that the reader is primarily responsible to determine transferability from the research context to their own.

To enhance credibility, the research team bracketed our collective personal experiences working with leadership development initiatives, such as residential hall councils, prior to conducting any data analysis. The first author has over 15 years of experience working within student affairs in higher education and for the past seven years has served as a faculty member within higher education and leadership studies. With leadership at the center of his practical and scholarly endeavors, the subject matter is one in which he values and believes is an integral part of the student engagement process. His commitment to this line of research is deeply rooted in the belief that student engagement and involvement are the keystones to leadership, community, and belonging within college and university settings.

The second author has over 25 years of experience working with college students. Her professional experience includes over five years as a leadership education faculty member and 15 years as a student affairs practitioner, where she worked with peer mentors in a living-learning community, student government student leaders, multi-institutional leadership conferences, and other co-curricular leadership development initiatives. By honoring, acknowledging, and discussing our individual experiences with and assumptions of hall councils, the authors intentionally worked to separate our experiences from the voices of the participants through the process of epoche (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## FINDINGS

The narrative analysis of the interview responses led to a better understanding of students' motivation to get involved in a residential hall council, how participating in a hall council influenced students' conceptualization of leadership, and the influence student affairs practitioners, in this case hall council advisors, have on the students so engaged. Two overall themes emerged from the data: (1) being involved in collaborative, peer-led learning communities like residential hall councils help students build their leadership capacity, motivation, and leadership efficacy, and (2) the role and behaviors of the student affairs advisor matter to students. The findings are presented by research question.

To address research question one, all participants were asked to describe their experience being part of a residence hall council, including what motivated them to get involved in said hall council. Each interviewee had a positive reaction to their participation on their hall council. Many were motivated by a desire to connect with their fellow students and found the experience helpful in their efforts to do so. The following four representative quotes highlight this sentiment. One student said, "it's [being on hall council] a great way to make friends, it's a great way to use the resources you have" (Student 5). A second student commented that "I really wanted to get involved and get to know people that I thought were going to be a good influence ... so I could bond with people in my hall" (Student 3). Another student mentioned they got involved because "I wanted to meet people ...Getting to know people can be kind of intimidating" (Student 8). A fourth student related they got involved in their hall council because "I really wanted to meet a lot of people on my hall ... to have fun" (Student 4).

To address research question two, all participants were asked two specific questions. First, they described what leadership looks like to them and second, they discussed how their participation on the hall council influenced their understanding of leadership. Three sub themes emerged during the data analysis process (Motivation to Get Involved, Definition of Leadership, and Personal Development), which the researchers summarized as the Antecedents for Hall Council Participation and representative quotes for each theme are included in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Student Voices: Antecedents for Participation in a Hall Council*

| Theme | Example Quotes |
|---|---|
| Motivation to get involved | I went into [institution] wanting to take up a lot of leadership roles, wanting to do stuff for my community, lead things 'cause I feel like leading people, doing projects, I think are fun (Student 1) |
| | ...this one [being on hall council] really didn't seem exciting to me. I just thought it would be something nice that I can help contribute to, especially since my dorm is all honors program kids so I thought it'd be a nice way to really make an impact with my immediate dormitory (Student 2) |
| Definition of Leadership | For me [leadership] is ... More than just showing people how to act, it's living it in yourself, and I feel like it's showing others, through who you are as a person, how to be more themselves ... It's showing people how to be a better them (Student 3) |
| | Leadership is listening (Student 4) |
| | [Leadership] is not just one person demanding or directing everything, it's more how you can be a part of the group and have a voice, and they take you serious[ly], and they respect you, and making sure that within the group everyone is heard, and that what the group is working towards is efficient. Just because I'm not labeled as a president of the club doesn't mean I can, I ... still have a say and put my input in it. I think I can still be a leader without having that label as being a president (Student 5) |
| | I would say it [being on hall council] enhanced and kinda [sic] chiseled away at my previous idea of what leadership was, in the way that I probably, as a freshman, thought that leadership was just somebody who everybody followed, when what's not what it is (Student 8) |
| Personal Development | What made me grow is that people didn't give me that spoon-feeding you everything, they let me learn it on my own while giving me guidance along [the] way (Student 3) |
| | I've never had a leadership position before and this was like my first crack at it and I really enjoyed it. It led me to different ideas, different outlooks, different perspectives of different people. I guess I always know [sic] the world wasn't always like my view is the right view, but it's like just seeing so many varying views. It's just so eye-opening and just being like, "wow, that's so cool. I never really thought of it that way (Student 4) |
| | Playing with the group is very difficult, especially when everyone's so different ... But at the end of the day, we always have to decide how we're gonna [sic] execute it ... So I think hall council and my leadership grew through trying to be open ears to everyone and even myself and then seeing where compromises can be made (Student 5) |
| | I definitely saw myself grow this year. A lot of eye opening things happened. It was the first time I was buying for an entire school. An entire apartment complex. I really enjoyed having people to lean on my ideas ... There has been a lot of growth in ... just my abilities to talk to people (Student 4) |

For the students interviewed, leadership was initially viewed as a concept directly tied to a position or specific task that needed to be accomplished. For example, Student 2 mentioned a leader is found in "some hierarchy where there are people kind of giving out orders and other people kind of following that." Similarly, another student commented, "leadership looks something like a person working together with the rest of the team, like giving them tasks [to do]" (Student 1). Yet, when the students began discussing their experiences with their hall councils, their perspectives of leadership shifted. Working on the hall council helped them see that leadership was more about a process and less about a position or title. This shift is represented in the quotes detailed in Table 1 and can be summarized in the quote from Student 8, who commented that being a part of the hall council "chiseled away at their previous conceptualization of leadership."

To address research question three, each student was asked to reflect on their experience with their hall council advisors. Overwhelmingly, students had a positive experience working with their advisor. Two sub themes emerged when reviewing the data, which the researchers summarized as the Impact of the Student Affairs Practitioner and representative quotes are detailed in Table 2. The first sub theme being the positive, personal characteristics and qualities students recognized and appreciated in their advisors. The interviewees repeatedly commented how important it was to maintain good communication between the advisor and the hall council, as a whole, as well as between council members themselves. For example, one student commented that good communication "has to come from the advisor" because the students are new at this and may not have a lot of experience working in these types of situations (Student 8). But the students also found it as important to note that good communication skills also come with the ability to be comfortable in the silence when no one is speaking (Student 4) and the ability to really listen to their students while creating the space for students to share their ideas as they feel comfortable to do so (Student 6).

**Table 2:** *Student Voices: Impact of Student Affairs Practitioners*

| Theme | Example Quotes |
|---|---|
| Characteristics of Good RHA Advisors | I always appreciate when a leader or teacher listens to me, when they make the effort to listen to me or make the effort to try and incorporate me and ask me what I feel because ... I'm not always going to give my opinion right away, especially in larger groups. (Student 6)<br>Having good communication between the Hall directories and the members themselves ... I never spoke to my Hall Counselor Director ever. Not as a resident, not as a person in the Hall Council. Maybe in a group conversation, but definitely never directly. And so I think that might have also played a role in my lack of knowledge about what expectations were to be held of me and what responsibilities I had. (Student 2)<br>Do not be discouraged if you hear nothing but silence ... A lot of times people are thinking, trying to figure out "will this actually work?" ... Don't take silence for granted, like people are thinking. Don't blast into a whole nother [sic] speech. Try to hear a little bit from everybody. (Student 4)<br>Encouraging people to give their opinions ... Some people are more vocal than others, are more opinionated and stuff. So sometimes they kinda [sic] dominate what is going on or what's being decided on and sometimes people don't feel as free to express their opinion, especially when it differs ... sometimes people need a little push, a little of encouragement to do that. (Student 7) |
| Improved Practice | Encourage their council to take on ambitious projects ... Because most often, when you're pushed to your limit or you're doing something difficult, that's when you learn the most and that's when you develop the most as a person. (Student 1)<br>Hall council members [need] to reach out more to the community rather than ... It's good to be able to collaborate as a group and just accomplish to what you want to, but we're doing it for the community, so it's important to reach out. (Student 7) |

The second sub theme that emerged was improved practice, but the students did not solely focus on the need for their advisors to improve. Indeed, they recognized that success in a hall council only comes when council members and the advisor are united. For example, Student 7 mentioned that students on the hall council need to "be observant [and] get feedback." Another student addressed the importance of having all members of the council, advisor as well as students, "feel comfortable talking with each other and comfortable working with each other" (Student 2). This shift demonstrates that the students understand that it takes more than just the advisor to keep the council moving forward.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study offer a number of considerations for practice for the profession, including those who work beyond residence hall councils. First, and especially for those who work with first-year students, student affairs professionals should remain mindful that involvement in the organization they advise, may be for most students their first entry point into campus engagement and formal leadership opportunities on campus. With this in mind, advisors should consider in their approach to student mentorship and in the opportunities introduced to students how they are being purposeful and developmental in their work, which supports previous research that initial campus involvement opportunities influence students' subsequent involvement (Lichterman & Bloom, 2019).

Second, practitioners are well advised to intentionally develop engagement within their learning community, organization, council, or program as a leadership development opportunity. Educators should work with students to curate an operationalized definition of leadership and what it means to lead within the specific context of that learning community, organization, council, or program; this provides a common language for both students and advisors as they embark on this developmental opportunity (Lichterman & Bloom, 2019). Rather than approaching advising from a directive schema, advisors should ask students questions that elicit critical thinking and allow them to self-author, design, and lead with intentionality (Baxter Magolda, 2008) the types of experiences they desire out of their co-curricular experience.

The findings from this study highlight the idea that student affairs educators, specifically those advising collaborative, peer-led learning communities such as hall/area councils, should intentionally focus on their communication with students, challenge students to set ambitious goals for themselves and the organization as a whole, and view setbacks as part of the leadership learning process. We propose these findings are not exclusive to educators within residence life, but also apply to all who advise student organizations, councils, and programs. Thereby, reinforcing the educational and learning aspects of student affairs work. Students want to feel as though advisors believe in their potential as leaders and see them as young adults with the capacity and efficacy to affect change in their communities (Parks, 2011). Furthermore, student affairs practitioners should adopt an approach to advising that validates students in their questions and opinions. Serving in essence as a consultant rather than a supervisor will allow students the space to develop the cognitive and leadership capacities and competencies that will best celebrate their involvement (Guthrie & Chunoo, 2018).

Advisors should spend time working to develop community within the membership of their organization, council, or program. Through team building exercises, on-boarding activities, and intra-personal activities at the beginning of meetings, advisors can support students in building connections with their peers that may have a lasting impact on their overall experience and retention at the college/university (Tinto, 1993). As educators, advisors should remain mindful in how they use their platform to support learning (Keeling, 2006; Lichterman & Bloom, 2019). Advisors should make intentionality their top priority by being deliberate and consistent in their communication and advising; scaffolding their conversations so that they strike the balance of the challenge, support, and readiness (Sanford, 1966 as cited in Patton et al., 2016) of the students they serve. Finally, student affairs practitioners should engage in routine assessments with and from the students who lead the learning community, organization, council or program and consider the ways (formally and informally) they can receive formative and summative feedback in their role as an educator committed to the leadership learning and development of their students.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of students involved within residence hall councils and the impact of those experiences on their leadership learning and development. Three central questions were asked in the study to further understand students' perspective, insights, and recommendations on how hall council engagement can continue to support the leadership learning and development of students. The findings illuminated the importance of collaborative learning community involvement and subsequent advising in shaping students' understanding of leadership. Secondly, student affairs practitioners working with collaborative, learning communities, organizations, councils, or programs should adopt an approach to advising that challenges students to set high expectations for themselves and their peers, while offering support and encouragement to the students. Finally, advisors need to be intentional in how they cultivate community among students involved in the organization, council, or program they advise. While originally centered on the experience of residence hall councils, we believe these findings have meaning and value for any student affairs practitioner who advises a student organization, council, learning community, or program.

The times in which we live (social/political strife, post COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) amplify the need for and importance of community, engagement, and student affairs educators who are dedicated to the practice of using involvement as a tool to further support student leadership growth, development, and learning (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

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JCAPS

# "THEY CAN'T CONTROL THE STUDENTS": A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY REGARDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT FOR BLACK MEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN THE MIDWEST

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*This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore Black men's lived experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) through a student involvement lens. This study used critical race theory to determine if the experiences of Black men align with the desired outcomes of involvement theory. Racism is acknowledged by critical race theory as maintaining racial inequality. Involvement theory explains how students develop by being involved on campus. The current study explored the experiences and narratives of seven self-identified Black men and their perceptions of involvement at PWIs in the Midwest. Findings are classified according to three themes: impact and motivation, navigating the campus community, and a lack of support from campus administrators and peers. This study concludes with a discussion of implications for future research and practice, including student leader and advisor training to support Black men, constitutional audits, increased strategic planning, and long-term engagement strategies.*

Slavery was abolished more than 150 years ago in the U.S., but the impacts continue to reverberate (Garibay et al., 2020; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Okello et al., 2021; Squire et al., 2018; Whitehead et al., 2021). Black men on college campuses experience Whiteness-centered diversity and inclusion that center and prioritize Whiteness (Cabrera, 2016; Dancy et al., 2018; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Stein, 2016). Whiteness continues to impact Black students' experiences in higher education through various avenues, including diversity brochures, infomercials, admissions tours, marketing campaigns, and athletic programs (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

Institutions must begin to understand the needs of Black men beyond a source of entertainment and labor (Dancy et al., 2018; Stein, 2016; Williams et al., 2020). This study uses critical race theory (CRT) to evaluate whether involvement theory has gaps and to identify ways Black men's experiences are enhanced. Involvement theory asserts how significant it is for students to involve themselves on campus (Astin, 1984). CRT helps understand how laws can create or perpetuate racial inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Furthermore, this study seeks to understand how Black men define their involvement on campus and to determine whether the experiences of Black men align or misalign with the desired outcomes of involvement theory.

## PLANTATION POLITICS

Plantation politics is an idea and concept that higher education was founded based on plantation culture, slavery, and the exploitation of Black and brown bodies within the economy. This concept and phenomenon stemmed from how plantations and universities mirror one another (Squire et al., 2018). Dehumanization and power became the basis of plantation culture and plantation life, that translates into today's higher education system. Whiteness remains invisible as institutional leaders refuse to acknowledge their responsibility associated with slavery (Cabrera, 2020; Garibay et al., 2020; Stein, 2016).

Johnson, B., & Best, N. (2024). "They Can't Control The Students": A qualitative inquiry regarding the perceptions of student involvement For Black men at predominantly White institutions in the midwest. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship, 6*(2), 19-32. **https://doi.org/10.52499/2024011**

Black men do not get the necessary attention on campus (Harper & Wood, 2016). While certain efforts give an appearance of inclusion and involvement for Black men on campus, Whiteness-centered diversity and inclusion maintain the concept and culture of Whiteness. The institution's bottom line is a priority in brochures, infomercials, and marketing campaigns instead of the experiences of Black men (Lewis & Shah, 2021). Perpetuating this bottom line does not capture the lived realities of Black men's experiences.

All Black men have not had the same experiences due to environmental variables (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Davis & Allen, 2020; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Warren & Bonilla, 2018). Environmental variables are experiences outside the classroom and campus that impact a student's academic performance (Harper & Wood, 2016). One must consider how environmental variables impact the involvement of Black men. Black men want to have a sense of belonging and space on campus but cannot help the environmental variables they navigate (Harper & Wood, 2016; Hypolite, 2020; McDougal et al., 2018; Patterson, 2020; Shappie & Debb, 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Alexander Astin's (1984) involvement theory explains how students' growth, development, and overall change is connected to their co-curricular involvement. The theory posits that involvement requires physical and psychosocial energy. Energy varies between each student, and what a student gains from involvement connects to the quality and quantity of involvement (Astin, 1984). Involvement theory centers around inputs, environments, and outcomes. Inputs focus on a student's background and experiences prior to college (Astin, 1984). Environments acknowledge a student's experiences while in college (Astin, 1984). Outcomes examines how a student is after graduation, including a student's characteristics, belief systems, and values (Astin, 1984).

### Critical Race Theory

CRT challenges laws and policies oppressing underrepresented communities (Bell, 1993, 1995; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005). One of the five CRT tenets, counterstorytelling legitimizes the experiences of people from underrepresented groups by providing space for validation and affirmation (Delgado, 1989; Hiraldo, 2019; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Within the lived experiences of people from underrepresented groups (i.e., people of color) many counterstories have yet to be heard and recognized (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Personal stories, other people's stories, and composite stories are three approaches to creating counterstories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). When creating counterstories, one must utilize theoretical sensitivity, while incorporating one's professional and personal experiences to transform what already exists (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, counterstories build community amongst those who are underrepresented, challenge dominant narratives, and open new possibilities of reality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Multiple scholars acknowledge that marginalization can also be a site for new realities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstories provide a different approach and perspective. CRT uses counterstories as a mechanism for community building and transformation among people who are often marginalized (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### Involvement Theory Critique

In a study by Patton et al. (2007), CRT was introduced to show how it can be applied to both theory and practice in student affairs. Like other student development theories and frameworks, Astin's involvement theory (1984, 1996) continues to serve as a frame and foundational tool that continually contributes to student affairs practice (Astin, 1984, 1996; Kuh, 2001, 2009; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Tinto, 1998; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). However, since the theory was conceptualized, it affirms the lived experiences of students who primarily identify as White, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied (Patton et al., 2007).

When students who have privileged identities are consistently affirmed, there leaves a gap for students with marginalized identities and their experiences to be overlooked. Students with marginalized identities, who are underrepresented, such as Black men, are not centered in the foundational theories and frameworks that shape student affairs practice. Though it may not be the intent to overlook the lived experiences of Black men or not center their lived realities, this unfortunately perpetuates a cycle of marginalization (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, it is vital to listen and understand the personal stories of how involvement impacts Black men and their holistic experiences. The theories and frameworks student affairs professionals use will continue to produce an antiquated approach to developing students, until the experiences of those often underrepresented are amplified with intentionality and care.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to center the lived realities of Black men on college campuses who are navigating co-curricular experiences and identify what mechanisms of support are critical for their involvement (Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Involvement theory has not considered students' multiple identities, which has created a significant gap in research in the hopes of reconceptualizing involvement theory to better understand and center the needs and experiences of students who are often underrepresented (Abes et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2007). This study aims to fill that gap and provide insight into how Black men define their involvement through two research questions: (a) Do the narratives and experiences of Black men on college campuses align or misalign with the desired outcomes of student involvement theory? and (b) How do Black men describe their student involvement experiences on campus?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological approach informed the analysis of the involvement experiences of Black men. Phenomenology focuses on the conscious lived experiences of participants (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Conscious experiences derive from the idea that a person has lived through or experienced something and recalled it to their memory (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Thus, this approach aims to understand the lived experiences of Black men, assuming some commonality (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

To answer the research questions, seven Black men from public predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the Midwest were recruited through snowball sampling (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Juniors and seniors were recruited instead of first-year or second-year students due to the time the students had to get involved on campus. Gatekeepers who work with Black men in their classes, student organizations, residence halls, athletic programs, and other modalities helped to identify and secure access to Black men for participation in this study. Gatekeepers agreed to participate in this study by responding to the electronic communication and outreach. Upon sending that email response informing of their participation, gatekeepers forwarded a recruitment email template to students who were eligible based on the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria created a sample of students who identify as Black men who were willing to share how their social identities impact how they navigate campus and their student involvement opportunities. Table 1 presents information on the seven students who consented to participate in interviews for this study. Most of them were involved in student organizations, with some serving in student leadership roles in student organizations. No participant's primary involvement on their campus was through athletic programs. This study did not intentionally seek to exclude the experiences of Black men who are student-athletes at PWIs. Each participant signed an electronic consent form. The Maryville University Institutional Research Office approved data collection for this study.

**Table 1.** *Study Participants*

| Pseudonym | Midwest State | Academic Year | Involvement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bryen | Michigan | Junior | |
| | Student Organizations, Academic Clubs, Residence Life Employment | | |
| Ed | Iowa | Senior | Academic Clubs, Fraternity & Sorority Life |
| Jay | Illinois | Senior | Academic Clubs, Residence Life Employment |
| Jayant | Indiana | Junior | Fraternity & Sorority Life, Athletics |
| Ke'von | Illinois | Senior | Student Organizations, Academic Clubs, Campus Employment |
| Omar | Michigan | Junior | Cultural Organizations, Residence Life Employment |
| Trevor | Iowa | Senior | Cultural Organizations |

### Procedures

All interviews followed a semi-structured and open-ended format, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. An interview protocol was followed, but one benefit of semi-structured interviews is the capacity for conversations to engage organically in the desired direction (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Students were asked explicitly about their social identities as Black men, how they might have shown through their student involvement opportunities, and how they chose to engage.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Given the nature of the study, establishing trustworthiness was vital at the onset of data collection and throughout data analysis. Trustworthiness is a process ensuring the quality of the study through the procedures and criteria used, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). To increase the reliability and validity of the study, Dedoose software was used to organize and analyze information gathered from participants in the semi-structured interviews. Inductive or open coding named what happened without empirical research, data, or prescribed themes (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Open coding allowed for codes and themes to develop as the data analysis process continued, although the process did take a considerable amount of time (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

Open coding occurred in three phases. In each phase, total reads of each interview transcript occurred. The full reads of each interview transcript ensured connectedness with the data. Open coding occurred within each interview transcript, allowing for involvement theory and the experiences of Black men to remain at the forefront. Themes emerged from the finalized codes.

Member checking was incorporated after each semi-structured interview. Interview transcripts were sent to each participant to validate and check for accuracy (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Upon verifying the participants' interview transcripts' accuracy and validity, the data went through three inductive (open) coding cycles. To further improve the validity of the overall study, peer debriefing was incorporated, allowing for several peers who are not personally involved in the study to review and evaluate the literature review, methodology, transcripts, and initial findings for any biases, vague descriptions, and overemphasized or underemphasized points. Peers consisted of experienced colleagues, leaders, and scholars with practical knowledge and expertise on Black men in higher education or student involvement.

# FINDINGS

The participants' narratives reveal critical information about how Black men navigate their college experiences and campuses. Through comprehensive data analysis, three themes emerged from those narratives. The first was impact and motivation. Participants reported how they became involved and maintained their involvement through intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, such as family or chosen family, creating space for future generations of students, and the long-term benefits of networking and connecting across campus. The second theme that emerged was navigating the campus community. Each participant expressed their impact and motivation for involving themselves on campus. However, each participant also expressed how navigating clubs, organizations, and self-governed spaces can be cumbersome.

The third and last theme was the need for more consistent campus support. Each participant expressed how the campus community encourages student involvement by offering various involvement fairs and recruitment initiatives for student groups. Moreover, participants shared that because of the lack of continuity, consistency, and accountability, these Black men had to take the initiative to create community amongst themselves and connect with other students who share similar identities.

## Impact and Motivation: "Loved Ones Motivate Me…Peers Impact Me"

Participants shared how their involvement experiences connected to impact and motivation. Several participants mentioned how life experiences impacted their drive and motivation to involve themselves on campus. Moreover, participants shared how experiences on campus empowered them to leave a lasting impact on the larger campus community and protect other students from navigating similar experiences. By using their salient identities and experiences to guide what engagement and involvement opportunities to participate in, participants exercised agency in their involvement choices.

All students shared that they chose to get involved and remain on their campuses for various reasons. Some participants attributed their willingness and consistency to their loved ones or chosen family. For instance, Jay, a fourth-year education major, shared that their mom motivated them to get involved on campus. Jay stated, "It was mainly my mom. She always told me as I was packing up and getting ready to go to college, she's like, don't be dumb, don't just be in your room, playing that game all the time." Interestingly, Jay has been involved as a resident assistant in their housing and residence life department and spoke to how constantly interacting with new people keeps them involved.

Some participants acknowledged how their nontraditional approaches to college drove them to involve themselves. Trevor, a nontraditional student, shared how they took a gap year to work and focus on themselves, but Trevor had other loved ones who attended the college they were attending. Having that inside information from their loved ones gave Trevor an idea of the campus culture when they transitioned to campus. Trevor mentioned that what motivated them to get involved was the community. Specifically, Trevor shared, "I was searching for community. I got active in multiple clubs and orgs to create more diverse communities and help bring more people into those communities. I was searching for communities within those communities."

An idea shared amongst participants is how they choose to involve themselves can benefit others. Some Black men are involved in clubs and organizations, either academic or non-academic, but what keeps them involved is what they can provide to others. Bryen, a third-year Theatre and Fine Arts major, shared a goal of being a producer in the entertainment industry and getting hands-on experience. Bryen stated, "I love the stories that I put up. I see myself bringing those stories to an audience. That's what motivates me and my work. I see it more like storytelling."

Engaging in clubs, organizations, and groups allows students to constantly remind themselves why they choose to engage and be consistent with their involvement endeavors. Black men understand how their involvement impacts others, and knowing who is connected to them, whether chosen family or friends, will increase their sense of community and motivation (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Moreover, remembering why you choose to remain involved is essential when navigating and combatting anti-Blackness, lack of socialization, and isolation that may resonate within PWIs.

### Navigating the Campus Community

As Black men navigate the culture and campus environment of predominantly White institutions (PWIs), it leaves a lasting impression on how they engage. At PWIs, Black students experience challenges impacting their involvement (McDougal et al., 2018). Such challenges are primarily due to microaggressions and expectations of speaking on behalf of the Black students on their campus (McDougal et al., 2018; Mills, 2020). However, everyone navigates the campus community differently, depending on their interests and environmental variables (Mills, 2020; Wood et al., 2016). Examples of environmental variables include familial responsibilities, financial support of others, and other circumstances outside of an institution that affect how a student succeeds within an institution.

Jayant, a third-year student, talked about how he navigates environmental variables while remaining involved as a student. Jayant shared, "I am not attentive to the meetings and stuff, but I am in the group chats. I work at a child development learning center on campus. I do participate in the basketball league, however. I think I am involved." However, when no environmental variables are in play, Black men are assumed to have unlimited opportunities to involve themselves on campus. Unfortunately, when Black men excel on campus in these organizations, even pursuing student leadership, they are often overburdened and tokenized (Lewis & Shah, 2021). Ke'Von, fourth-year women, gender, and sexuality studies major, shared, "It is not my responsibility to be everywhere. I have started to step back and let the people around me lead because I need to teach others when I need to recover."

With environmental variables and feeling overburdened with student involvement opportunities, another layer of complexity lies in the impact that Black men feel simply existing in these spaces. Black men must remain cognizant of where they are, who they are, and their actions within the culture of PWIs. Ed, a fourth-year aerospace engineering student, shared an experience in a student club on campus:

> A club is allowed to 3D print guns. As a Black male here in a predominantly White institution, there is no way I would go to a club where they are printing guns, like if anything was to go wrong, I would be the first one on the chopping block. I feel that as a Black man, there are just certain things that I'm not going to gravitate to because I understand the impacts if something were to go wrong.

As Black men navigate PWIs, it can be challenging, especially when advocating for others and not being taken seriously while dealing with trauma and harm (Foste & Johnson, 2021). Jay shared an experience as an RA where they had to step in and advocate for Black women who experienced being called a racial slur:

> As an RA, a racial slur was posted on another student's door. Another RA was very nonchalant with talking to the affected Black women. I had to check her because it's like, what do you mean it is not a big deal? The students who did this are telling them they do not belong here. When working with someone who does not look like you, sometimes they get too comfortable in that, and they tend to like blow off issues. I tried to check them like, you probably did not mean it like that. But at the end of the day, that was the wrong choice of words to use against someone who just had a racial slur posted on their door.

Black men navigate through significant experiences on their campuses. Throughout the interviews, many participants shared how self-identifying as a Black man impacts how they navigate the campus community and, specifically, what they choose to participate in. Bryen shared how they felt when they were peer pressured to express interest in an Interfraternity Council organization when they felt more comfortable with the benefits a Black Greek Lettered organization could have for them (Miller & Bryan, 2020), "There weren't any Black Greek Letter fraternities, so I felt like out of place. There were many moments where it felt like organizations were predominantly White; it was not a space made for me to be there."

Additionally, Black men navigating spaces find dissonance in wanting to be in spaces to engage, but not if it means compromising who they are and how they physically present themselves. A third-year student, Omar, shared, "Even though I do not talk often in meetings, I feel comfortable. I do not have to sit straight or fix my dreds in a bun. I can be myself. In these instances, navigating the campus community and conflicting with yourself, your values, and your interests is challenging and requires a significant amount of energy, where sometimes it appears the alternative is to remain disengaged and isolated."

### “Too This or Too That”

Astin (1984) asserted that the energy a student invests in their curricular and co-curricular involvement, there is a greater likelihood that they will achieve their goals. However, when students, specifically Black men, experience a lack of support and understanding from other students when wanting to join or participate in activities, it makes it difficult to involve yourself. Furthermore, a lack of support and underrepresentation impacts how Black men choose to engage in activities at predominantly White institutions. Participants shared that they often felt their salient social identities conflicted depending on the space they entered. Trevor offered:

> I can honestly say that there still was a divide even in certain black spaces. Your identity changes depending on what space you go into. If I was going into the Black Student Alliance, I think I would be African American, Black male. But if I were going into the African Student Association space, I would be an African American in that space. Or if I go to an international student space, I’d be an African American male. It varies on the space itself.

When the identities of Black men conflict with each other depending on the culture of an organization, it makes Black men question why they are there and what they will gain from the space. A participant shared how being a Black man has contributed to particular challenges they experienced on campus. The participant said, “The hardest thing for me is identifying what I want from a certain space. Who do I feel is like me? What community will accept me? Or how can I create a community?”

Some students found it challenging to get involved and feel belonging simply because they felt they were too much for a particular space. When asked how being a Black man impacts what they choose to participate in on campus, they shared that they perceive themselves to be “too black” based on behaviors from others. Black men conform to certain prescribed and unwritten expectations of organizations, and the students within damage their sense of belonging. Ke’Von said:

> I do not think everybody gets it right. I do not feel affirmed because of how my queer identity interacts with my identity as a black man, which is tough. However, I have been trying to build up a community of people that affirm my unique position, which is like individual people I have pulled. It is not necessarily the whole campus. So that is a hard thing to navigate.

There are added complexities to navigating the campus community and involvement, primarily when affiliated with organizations at the intersection of Blackness and queerness (Travers et al., 2018). Ke’von went on to say:

> So many people around here don’t want to work with us. They don’t put in the effort to work with us, because we’re the main LGBTQ arc here on campus. And in some ways, when trying to work with other Black leaders, and like Black higher ed professionals around campus, sometimes I feel like, because I lead with both my Blackness and my queerness, that they don’t often feel like I’m sort of like Black enough to know what I’m talking about. And that makes it harder to do the work I want to do.

Black men must be free to exist in student organizations and involve themselves in being their whole authentic selves. Choosing which identity to suppress or water down in spaces is not conducive to Black men’s success and sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions.

### “Where’s the Help?”

The functionality of what the campus provides, or lack thereof, was discussed. In addition to discussing what the campus provides for Black men to remain involved, the students talked about the importance of creating spaces amongst themselves because of the inefficacy of campus support mechanisms. Black men become self-reliant to create their own experiences and find their own ways to engage. Trevor shared:

> I realized, like how hard it is to find a space or figure out what it means. Navigating all these clubs and orgs, it’s still a process, because you can find a certain community of individuals, and you would hope to have some things in common, but then you cannot find people that are like you, or people that like you.

However, there are times when collaboration can occur and students feel supported, but there remains a disconnect. Ed shared, “The campus does a good job providing a safe space, but they can’t control the students and that’s where problems lie. Other students don’t understand the experiences of students of color and there’s not much the university can do." Institutions and stakeholders must look beyond Black men as numbers, but as human beings that desire involvement. Staff who support Black men must understand their unique needs and humanize their experiences (Chung et al., 2020).

Participants collectively shared how difficult it can be to maintain engagement beyond the beginning-of-year orientations or student activities fairs. Trevor shared, "Actually trying to get other people that join is hard because if you miss those freshman orientations, it is hard to find those other students." Black men shared how those specific events are the only actual times where events and opportunities to engage with Black men cause a significant gap in the sense of belonging. However, Black women are significant partners in the involvement gap. A participant offered:

> The hardest thing about being in a leadership position or a leadership role was that not enough Black men were trying to do the same thing. It is a strong disconnect sometimes because we are trying to reach out to the entire community, but it is only pushed like everything is only pushed by the Black woman because they have always been the trailblazers. It has been hard to steer Black men in that direction to help the community, be in those spaces, talk to people, and be more than what they are.

Black men cannot simply partner with other students to reach a broader audience and engage other students. Faculty and staff must provide quality leadership development to lessen the gap in student connection, engagement, and belonging for Black men.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, Black men experienced and navigated significant challenges and environmental variables beyond their control. Nevertheless, when they want to engage and position themselves in the campus community, they cannot control the campus community and the behavior of others. Black men navigate the transition to college with inputs and environmental variables pertinent to their experiences (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Furthermore, it is vital to determine how institutions might reframe the mechanisms of support that guide the retention, sense of belonging, and engagement of Black men (Ottley & Ellis, 2019).

Black men sustain themselves by discovering a sense of liberation in who they are, how they express themselves, and how they want to show up on campus. However, there appears to be a perception from higher education administrators and leaders that the self-sufficiency of Black men equates to administrators supporting and ensuring they feel a sense of belonging and integration into these student clubs, organizations, or activities. Two specific elements of plantation politics, structural and processual, are highlighted with particular emphasis on recognizing the parallels in higher education spaces and systems for Black men.

The structural elements of plantations consist of sentiment, goals, and sanctions (Squire et al., 2018). Sentiment describes the superiority and hegemony enslavers displayed, allowing enslaved people to express resistance and powerlessness (Squire et al., 2018). Sentiment parallels placing numerous rules and regulations on underrepresented students' spaces (Squire et al., 2018). Goal informs how slave labor equates to profit. Goal parallels with athletics and how Black men frequently exist in campus brochures and tokenized booklets (Dancy et al., 2018; Squire et al., 2018). Sanctions parallel how Black students deemed "good" are constantly promoted and tokenized (Squire et al., 2018).

Processual elements include boundary maintenance, systematic linkages, social control, and institutionalization (Squire et al., 2018). Boundary maintenance protects the system and stops enslaved people from running away from the plantations they were on. Boundary maintenance parallels how higher education administrators will attempt to remove those who cause trouble and take away freedoms for student-athletes and scholarship recipients, who are predominantly Black men (Squire et al., 2018).

PWIs in which Black men exist have similar characteristics to plantations (Squire et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021). Black men share a code and language understood by other Black men, like how enslaved people had slave codes (Durant & Knottnerus, 1999). Nevertheless, Black men choose to involve themselves primarily based on the culture of that institution, including competency of student leaders and advisors, a curated sense of belonging, and if that institution is ready to accept Black men at all intersections. However, participants shared that progress can be slow-moving, spaces may be removed or not exist on campus, and campus administrators cannot control the students themselves (Hypolite, 2020; Squire et al., 2018). What remains to be determined is where students receive instructions to isolate and dehumanize Black men.

Institutionalization focuses on organizational stability and the processes that plantations keep up. An example of institutionalization is how task forces on diversity and equity are established, including social justice strategies that do not work (Squire et al., 2018). From the participants' narratives, colleges and universities sometimes lack in considering the environmental variables Black men navigate to remain involved and engaged (McCoy, 2014; Wood et al., 2016). Some studies highlight the need for Black men to have directed and focused educational opportunities and activities, including but not limited to leadership development opportunities, counterspaces, and culturally affirming curricula (Brooms et al., 2021; Davis & Allen, 2020; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Ottley & Ellis, 2019).

This study aimed to explore how Black men at PWIs in the Midwest experience and describe their involvement and whether those experiences align with the desired outcomes of Astin's involvement theory. The Black men's narratives and experiences speak to how everyone navigates institutional spaces differently based on the impact, motivation, and who and what exists in the campus community to support and humanize those lived realities. Moreover, the narratives and experiences shared by the participants highlighted that their social identities as both Black and man mattered in how they experienced and navigated student involvement opportunities on campus, whether social or academic. The findings from this study have significant implications for working with Black men at predominantly White institutions, including humanizing the experiences of Black men and evaluating current systems, ways of knowing and standard practices.

### Home is…

First, students shared how impact and motivation were meaningful when they decided what they wanted to get involved in and what kept them involved. Those experiences on campus empowered them to leave a lasting impact on the larger campus community and protect other students from navigating similar experiences. Some participants attributed their willingness and consistency to their loved ones or chosen family. Specific individuals connected to the participants were keenly aware that the collegiate experience could be isolating, causing their student to lose their sense of self, so they encouraged them to get involved. The culture of plantation politics taught by White colonizers and settlers was rooted in stripping the enslaved from all their identities and isolating them from their ways of knowing, culture, or loved ones (Williams et al., 2021).

Students from historically underrepresented groups at PWIs deal with a lack of belonging, connectedness, and isolation (Williams et al., 2021). The Black men who participated in this study used their experiences and linkages to wherever and whomever home is to inspire their involvement. Institutions that desire to build transformational relationships and long-term engagement pipelines with Black men should not supersede or generalize their individual lived realities and experiences. Humanizing and celebrating how Black men approach involvement is essential, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

### Experiences Become Power

The second and third findings, describing how Black men navigate the campus community through involvement and lack of campus support, connect to existing research and scholarship. Research posits that Black men's lived realities and experiences are often monolithic and generalizable (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper & Wood, 2016; Williams et al., 2020). Given the challenges that Black men encounter at predominantly White institutions, they need spaces and interactions with people who humanize their realities and combat the anti-Blackness they encounter (Brooms et al., 2021).

According to the students' narratives, they needed to know who they were, why they wanted to get involved, and what kept them involved. Scholars have asserted that student engagement is about how much energy students put into their collegiate experiences (Kuh, 2001, 2009). Astin (1984) initially suggested that the more involved a student is, the more successful they will be. From the findings of this study, Black men desire to be engaged and energized through their campus involvement. However, these students navigated additional circumstances, such as work, home life, biological family, chosen family, and a lack of support from administrators and other students. These factors, including others, influenced the experiences of these Black men. However, they were only sometimes inherently a detriment to their experience.

Higher education must examine how implicit biases show up in the experiences of Black men and how those biases impact their ability to thrive in spaces they are required or encouraged to be in (Williams et al., 2020). Implicit biases in higher education coupled with the unacknowledged impact of Whiteness decrease the desired outcomes of involvement theory. These factors lessen aspirational capital acquired by Black men while navigating during their time navigating the intricacies of college campuses (Yosso, 2005). Thus, higher education must examine how implicit biases diminish involvement.

Campus administrators, student affairs professionals, and those in leadership cannot control the actions and behaviors of students themselves. However, suppose Black men cannot find belonging in building community, skills, and agency within their PWIs. In that case, they will create the spaces themselves in their backyards. A backyard is a created space that caters to what an individual wants and desires. Backyards are spaces where humans can share, be vulnerable, and control who and what enters the space. Backyards serve a unique purpose as a counterspace for Black men (Brooms et al., 2021). In most cases, whoever has access to a backyard uses it as a multi-purpose space. In reflecting on how Black men navigate PWIs, the backyard exhibits a different function and purpose for each of them.

As Black men navigate the campus community wanting to experience freedom in what they choose to involve themselves and whom they feel connected to, it will sometimes create a self-started space. When a Black man enters a backyard, they must feel comfortable enough to create the space that allows a sense of liberation and empowerment. Furthermore, Black men must identify the role of their backyard in maintaining and building networks, a sense of belonging, and leadership development. The backyard only works for Black men if they can cultivate a purposeful and intentional space customized to their needs, wants, and outcomes.

## LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of this study is that it is not representative of or generalizable to the experiences of all Black men at PWIs in the Midwest or elsewhere. This study did not include Black men in their first or second years, those in graduate school, or nontraditional Black men, which can further affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, this study did not include findings from Black men who attend other institutions, such as HBCUs and community colleges. Lastly, this study focuses on the experiences of Black men and not those of Black women. However, this study intends not to exclude the experiences of Black women's experiences at predominantly White institutions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

In this study, Black men sought experiences that allowed their social and salient identities to align with their involvement. Campus involvement and student activities professionals should consider how to create a holistic organizational culture and leadership development amongst students to create inclusive spaces. In addition, professionals on campus should seek creative ways to engage and build relationships with Black men at their institutions.

Again, recruiting juniors and seniors is due to the amount of time the students had to get involved on campus. Students in this study spoke extensively about how continuous engagement and support are necessary for effective learning, growth, and development. Suppose leaders within higher education spaces and institutions make Black men feel a sense of belonging beyond trying to fill a quota or goal. It will create a more holistic and effective partnership.

### Constitutional Audits

Student affairs professionals requiring audits of constitutions and bylaws for student organizations and student groups are recommended. Constitutions are foundational in establishing structure, guidelines, policies, and procedures by which an organization can function smoothly and orderly. In a constitution, student organizations should include topics such as duties of officers, advisors, purpose, and, most importantly, membership information. Student organizations should not be discriminatory based on a protected class. In addition, constitutions should include information regarding membership recruitment.

This recommendation is based on participants' experiences navigating the campus community, specifically student organizations. Participants shared how they felt they had to choose between social identities and campus engagement. Additionally, participants reflected on how students have agency and cannot be controlled in student organizational culture. However, higher education professionals responsible for student engagement, student activities, and any involvement opportunity impacting Black men can require a bi-annual constitutional audit of documents that govern each student organization to ensure compliance and inclusiveness unless the organization is specifically designated for a specific gender or racial identity.

### Leadership Development and Advisor Training

Student affairs professionals requiring leadership development training and advisor training are recommended. The findings of this study assert that Black men want to be involved and engaged on campus, but no one can predict how they will be received by student leaders already invested in these organizations. Furthermore, students elected to serve as officers of any organization, club, or group, regardless of an academic, social, or service classification, must participate in bi-annual leadership development training. Student affairs educators must inform and provide foundational training and competency building for any student to ensure they know how to effectively lead organizations, being mindful of their own implicit biases and how to navigate those to not cause harm to any student who chooses to involve themselves.

For additional accountability and ownership of student clubs and organizations, advisors must stay informed of what is happening in the student groups they are responsible for. Advisors should be accessible to students and be informed of student organization happenings, including constitutions, to effectively provide and influence the organization's culture to provide critical and intentional options to engage students who choose to participate. Any advisor must also participate in bi-annual training for foundational knowledge and competency.

### Long-Term Engagement after the first six weeks and first year

Student affairs professionals requiring long-term strategic planning and engagement after the first six weeks and the first year for Black men are recommended. The findings of this study arrive at the idea that campuses encourage student involvement through avenues such as orientation, involvement fairs, recruitment fairs, and electronic communication sent to students. While initial outreach and communication within the first six weeks and first year set Black men up for success, long-term strategic planning and engagement models are vital to maintain involvement for these students and to ensure that any student who has yet to get involved and has the energy can get connected.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the experiences of these students, there are several ways to extend and close the gaps in the body of knowledge for Black men at the direct intersection of student involvement and engagement. First, the students' experiences collectively spoke to how navigating the campus community looks different for each student, depending on their pathways and interests. Scholars could examine the effectiveness of specific trends and pathways to student involvement and how those can be increasingly transformative. Also, identity resonated in each finding. Researchers could examine precisely how the concept of othering occurs in spaces for LGBT-identifying Black men, Black men who are nontraditional students, and Black men who identify as international students.

## Conclusion

This study sought to answer how Black men define their involvement on campus—by employing a qualitative phenomenological methodology, navigating the campus community, and lack of support and resources by the campus surfaced. Black men used their social identities, experiences, and existing networks to make meaning and determine their involvement. It is important to support Black men at PWIs in unpacking their own involvement experiences by advocating for more resources and support. Allocating more resources and support will decrease restrictions and pathways to access, opportunity, and belonging, which contributes to anti-Black racism. Future research should consider the intersectionality of social identities for Black men and how that shows up in what they choose and how they engage.

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JCAPS

# "IT REALLY EMPOWERED ME": HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLOR AMPLIFY THEIR COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AND SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ON-CAMPUS STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

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*Sparse research has explored how on-campus student employment may help students of Color develop soft skills to increase their career readiness. Filling this critical gap through Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, this study explored how 12 graduates of Color developed soft skills working an on-campus position. Findings suggest students of Color predominantly developed interpersonal communication and organizational skills that helped them stay enrolled as students and assisted them as current professionals. Implications for research and practice are addressed.*

Prospective college students have articulated a wide variety of reasons as to why they chose to enroll in college, many saying they pursued college to have new experiences and build new personal relationships (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Others have desired a deep exploration of a specific academic topic of interest (Astin, 1993). However, for generations, many college students have said they wanted to pursue a postsecondary credential in pursuit of a career (Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). In fact, this may be a shrewd financial decision for enrolling in higher education, as completing a postsecondary credential has been found to be one of the most certain, time-tested, long-term financial investments an individual can make in their lifetime (Carnevale et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, recent reports assert that bachelor's degree holders will earn an average of $2.8M over the course of their working life, compared to only $1.6M for high school diploma holders and $1.2M for those without a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2021).

However, people of Color in the United States (U.S.) have been socioeconomically marginalized by many inequitable employment policies and practices that have contributed to a persistent racial wealth gap (Carnevale et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2016). Yet, equitable postsecondary access and postgraduate outcomes could partially mitigate the racial wealth gap, especially for Black and Latinx people (Carnevale et al., 2019). Although Asian American college graduates have largely maintained pace with the postgraduate earnings of Whites, Black and Latinx college students and college graduates continue to be marginalized in the workforce (Carnevale et al., 2019). As a result, institutions of higher education have been called upon to be catalyst to help eliminate the racial wealth gap by credentialing and preparing students of Color, especially Black and Latinx students, to be competitive in the 21st century labor market (Carnevale et al., 2021; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Hora, 2016).

For generations, college students have explored a wide variety of campus experiences to bolster their résumé and increase their postgraduate career readiness, including on-campus employment (Burnett & Taylor, 2023; Hora, 2016; McClellan et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Yet, akin to many other on-campus experiences—due to persistent racism and systemic exclusion from social groups—students of Color have also been marginalized

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from on-campus student employment (OSE) (Quaye et al., 2014; Riggert et al., 2006; Turner, 1994). As a result, students of Color have not benefited from OSE as White peers have, possibly leading to inequitable postgraduate outcomes, including securing gainful employment upon graduation (Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Hora, 2020).

Yet, rarely has the educational research community engaged with students of Color to explore their experiences with OSE, particularly how students of Color develop soft skills, transferable to their postgraduate profession. Described by Knight and Yorke (2004), soft skills are "...practices needed for the deployment of disciplinary expertise and those generic practices that enable disciplinary expertise to be applied effectively in the employment arena" (p. 88). Attributes associated with soft skills are self-management, the capacity to work productively with others, awareness of internal politics of organizations, the ability to deal with divergent points of view, and the ability to determine what is possible in a given situation (Knight & Yorke, 2004). However, employers have consistently reported that college graduates do not possess adequate soft skills to fill any number of jobs in many professional sectors (Carnevale et al., 2013; Hart Associates, 2015; Wilkie, 2019). Even though soft skills are critical for postgraduate employment (Carnevale et al., 2013; Hart Associates, 2015; Wilkie, 2019), sparse studies have examined how students of Color develop soft skills specifically through OSE (Elliott & Smith, 2022; Wilkie & Jones, 1994; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Filling this critical gap in the literature, this study intentionally engaged with 12 graduates of Color (bachelor's degree holders) who participated in (OSE) during their undergraduate career to explore whether these students developed soft skills, how these soft skills were developed, and how these soft skills translated into the workforce. Here, this study answers a critical research question related to how students of Color can benefit from OSE:

> Upon graduation and successful employment, which soft skills do students of Color report developing as a result of their on-campus student employment as an undergraduate?

By answering this question, practitioners and institutional employers can better understand how students of Color experience their employment, develop skills, and prepare themselves for the labor market. Moreover, these practitioners can better facilitate OSE experiences for students of Color to better integrate students of Color on-campus, potentially increasing their sense of belonging, retention, and postgraduate outcomes. Subsequently, institutions of higher education may be better able to embrace the skills and abilities that students of Color bring to campus (Yosso, 2005) and amplify those skills and abilities through OSE, preparing graduates for the skills that employers demand and helping push against a persistent racial wealth gap in the United States (Carnevale et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2016).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is framed by, and attempts to extend, Yosso's (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), an outline of six forms of capital cultivated by communities of Color that resist a deficit framing of people of Color. The six forms of capital identified are aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005), and these forms of capital are explained by Yosso (2005) as dynamic processes that overlap and interact with each other to develop unique forms of cultural wealth not described or valued in traditional conversations of education, learning, or career readiness.

Aspirational capital, according to Yosso (2005), "refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Described further as resilience, aspirational capital in communities of Color is handed down from generation to generation in hopes that the younger generation can break the cycle of poverty or oppression of the older generation to enhance their academic and occupational attainment (Gándara, 1995 as cited by Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital is described as the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and reflects the idea that students of Color are raised by families and support systems and attend schools from diverse language backgrounds (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital centers on the cultural knowledge handed down from older generations that serves to preserve community history and cultural intuition (Yosso, 2005). It is through a commitment to one's heritage that an individual maintains connections to a community and its resources (Yosso, 2005).

Social capital refers to the networks of people and community resources one can access for, "instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Historically, people of Color have engaged their social networks to acquire education, health care, and employment and reciprocally communities of Color serve as repositories of information and resources gained through these institutions back to their social networks (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital, according to Yosso (2005), refers to the skills required to navigate social institutions which have not been created without consideration of communities of Color. Systems like higher education, for example, feature a meritocratic structure and pedagogy that are remnants of an exclusive and oppressive White culture, a culture proven to be difficult to access and more difficult within which to thrive and experience success (Yosso, 2005). Finally, Resistance capital is described by Yosso (2005) as a combination of skills and understanding facilitated, "through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80). Stemming from the intergenerational opposition to subordination exhibited by communities of Color, resistance capital undermines the fusillade of societal messaging devaluing communities of Color (Smith et al., 2011; Yosso, 2005).

This study frames students of Color as possessing wealth that they can leverage as college students (Yosso, 2005), yet we also acknowledge that students of Color may amplify their CCW through college experiences that can amplify both their CCW and their soft skills as defined by Knight and Yorke (2004). For instance, a student of Color with linguistic capital may be a native speaker of a non-English language, providing them with a unique communication skill set. However, we theorize that OSE can help a student of Color amplify both their English and non-English speaking skills, empowering these students and preparing them for the professional workforce.

As Yosso (2005) explained, "… there is a contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize, while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 74). From this perspective, the concept of soft skill development can be seen as a mechanism to amplify CCW and both emancipate and empower students of Color. In fact, one student of Color in this study spoke to how the experience of OSE "empowered" them to be a better student, employee, and ultimately, full-time professional.

## METHODS

To successfully answer these research questions, we employed a qualitative research design. This section will outline our qualitative design, as well as how we identified and sampled participants, how we gathered and analyzed data, and how we addressed limitations and made delimitations to the work. This study was approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board (IRB), and more information can be provided by the authors upon request.

### University of Study, Target Population, and Participant Identification

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-to-late 2021), and subsequently, we conducted purposive and convenience sampling of participants who were all graduates of a single institution of higher education. Central Canyon University (a pseudonym, CCU) is in a predominantly Republican state, typically enrolling 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students annually. CCU employs over 3,000 faculty members and confers over 14,000 degrees annually across 18 colleges. CCU's student body is 55% women and 45% men, with a racial composition of 34.6% White, 24.8% Hispanic, 21.1% Asian, 9.8% international student, 5.3% Black, 2.7% multiracial, 0.1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.6% unreported race.

When formulating the study, we wanted to sample participants who 1.) once held on-campus student employment (OSE) as an undergraduate for at minimum two long semesters, 2.) had graduated and moved on to a professional position not affiliated with student affairs, and 3.) had held that professional position long enough to allow time for them to reflect on their OSE experience as it related to their current professional position. As a result, CCU was an appropriate sampling site, as we collectively held over 20 years of full-time professional employment experience at CCU and held close, professional relationships with many hiring managers and student supervisors on CCU's campus. Through these connections with managers and supervisors, we asked to be connected with former student employees of Color through a purposive sampling framework. During the pandemic, we connected with these graduates of Color who held full-time professional positions to explore their views of their former OSE. As a result, 12 college graduates of Color were sampled for this study. Table 1 below outlines the demographics of the participants of this study.

**Table 1.** *Participant demographics (n=12)*

| Participant | Grad Year | Race | Age | Gender | Degree | VPSA Unit | Employment Length | Professional Title |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Badari | 2018 | Indian | 23 | Woman | Communications | Dean of Students Office | 2 years | Sr. Executive Associate |
| Chris | 1993 | African American | 49 | Man | Marketing & Advertising | Housing and Dining | 2 years | Senior Art Director |
| Davante | 2018 | African American | 24 | Man | Biology | Housing and Dining | 3 years | Healthcare Administrator |
| Florita | 2020 | Latina | 22 | Woman | Human Development and Family Science | Vice President's Office | 2 years | Development Associate |
| Hector | 2010 | Latino | 32 | Man | Biomedical Engineering | Recreational Sports | 4 years | Marketing Manager |
| Karlos | 2019 | Latino | 23 | Man | Economics | Vice President's Office | 2 years | Technology Sales |
| Monique | 2017 | African American | 25 | Woman | Philosophy | Dean of Students Office | 1 year | Consulting Analyst |
| Nina | 2018 | Latina | 24 | Woman | Marketing & Advertising | Recreational Sports | 4 years | Jr. Art Director |
| Oscar | 2016 | Latino | 26 | Man | History | Recreational Sports | 5 years | Software Developer |
| Reena | 2019 | Asian | 24 | Woman | Biology | Recreational Sports | 3 years | Medical Student |
| Tamara | 2019 | Latina/ White | 24 | Woman | Psychology | Recreational Sports | 2 years | Project Manager |
| Vida | 2017 | Latina | 25 | Woman | Human Development and Family Science | Recreational Sports | 4 years | Registered Nurse |
| Wilson | 2019 | African American | 23 | Man | Finance | Recreational Sports | 2 years | Financial Analyst |

### Data Collection

We connected with graduates of Color through email to schedule one-on-one interviews. All interviews were recorded (audio) and transcribed for detailed analysis. All interviews were conducted via an online video platform, Zoom, with only the audio portion of the interview recorded. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant. These graduates of Color participated in one-hour open-ended interviews regarding their OSE, their potential skill development, how those skills were developed, and how those skills transferred to their professional position. These one-hour long interviews involved standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2014) and fill-in-the-blank structural questions inspired by Spradley's (1979) dyadic line of questioning. Experience and behavior questions (Spradley, 1979) and mini-tour questions (Patton, 2014) followed to dig deeper into the specifics of the participants' lived experience (Patton, 2014). During this series of interview questions, we incorporated elaboration probes (Patton, 2014) to tease out more reflection from the participants' past OSE.

### Data Analysis

Our analysis of the qualitative data occurred concurrently with data collection. A concurrent data collection and analysis strategy helped correct for blind spots and facilitated the generation of interim reporting required by many studies (Miles et al., 2014). To inventory and organize the interview response data, we employed a partially ordered meta-matrix (Miles et al., 2014). Initially, we employed an open coding system (Miles et al., 2014) which facilitated a general understanding of what the data and what participants were expressing, coding data separately and then collaborating to compare results.

Next, we conducted a round of deductive coding, leveraging definitions of employable skills forwarded by (Carnevale et al., 2020, 2021), systematic literature reviews (Deep et al., 2020; Hart Research Associates, 2013; Marin-Zapata et al., 2022; Matteson et al., 2016; Schulz, 2008; Stewart et al., 2016; Touloumakos, 2020) and professional organizations (NACE, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). During this round, we specifically coded the text for the presence of skill development that aligned with any prior literature outlining employable skills in-demand by employers. The interview responses were partitioned individually (Miles et al., 2014), where the parent code group represented the foundational literature (Carnevale, NACE, etc.) and the child codes represented the skill inherent in the participant's response (interpersonal communication, persistence, etc.).

Then, we conducted another round of deductive coding, sorting codes into Yosso's (2005) categories of Community Cultural Wealth. This round of coding allowed us to begin to make connections between the employable skills that employers demand with Yosso's framework that positions people of Color as foundations of knowledge, rather than empty vessels. After multiple rounds of thematic coding and one round of collaborative coding, we arrived at major themes related to the role of OSE in developing soft skills, as well as the types of experiences that best facilitated soft skill development and which soft skills most often transferred to professional positions. In all, four themes and one sub-theme emerged directly related to the above research questions, as this study's data suggests that students of Color developed soft skills including 1.) Interpersonal Communication, 2a.) Organizational Skills and Ability to Multitask, 2b.) Time Management, 3.) Creativity, and 4.) Persistence.

### Limitations and Delimitations

The main limitations of this study are the sampling technique and number of participants—however, sampling from a single institution was most feasible given the communication restrictions of the pandemic. Yet, future studies could engage with greater numbers of students of Color from different employment backgrounds and institutional contexts to further investigate the role OSE plays in college student development and career readiness. Future research could also reach beyond four-year universities and student affairs units, exploring how community college students of Color benefit from on-campus employment or whether benefits vary depending on the unit in which a college student is employed.

## FINDINGS

### Interpersonal Communication Skills

Students of Color discussed OSE as it related to soft skill development in depth, easily able to hearken back to their student employment experiences and recall which soft skills they developed, what context they developed them, and how those soft skills translated to their professional position. However, students of Color most frequently discussed how they developed interpersonal communication skills, predominantly in face-to-face settings within a team framework, and how these soft skills have been critical for their success as a professional. This interpersonal communication skill development could be viewed as an amplification of Yosso's (2005) navigational, social, and linguistic capital.

#### *Navigational and Social Capital*

To begin, all 12 students of Color mentioned "communication" at least once in their response to the question, "Which skills do you think you developed in your on-campus student affairs employment experience?" In fact, students of Color often provided long, detailed responses to this question, including Vida. Vida reported developing interpersonal communication skills while working in recreational sports, especially communicating with people face-to-face and navigating work relationships, soft skills valued by employers. Vida explained:

> I developed communication. Communicating and knowing who you're communicating with because how you communicate with people differs. If I'm at the event talking to a child, it's different talking with them than talking to my supervisor…from talking to a college student who I'm trying to get to come out to this event. Learning to tailor my communication to the person that I'm speaking to, which I think is important in everyday life and my work.

Here, Vida not only specified that she developed the soft skill of communication and relationship management during a recreational sports event, but she developed the capacity to communicate with different educational stakeholders, demonstrating her capacity for self-management and amplifying her navigational and social capital (Yosso, 2005). Oscar echoed Vida's sentiment, saying, "I had to learn these skills first to make sure that I can adequately tell people what needs to be done, what they need to do. Learning the better ways that I can communicate with different people." Moreover, Oscar's statement illustrates his understanding of how important communication is in working with others and the self-management required in articulating tasks that need to be done and how to do them to coworkers. Additionally, Oscar said his specific position on-campus facilitated communication with many different people, which did not come naturally:

> When I started working at recreational sports, I was very introverted. The position forced me to go talk to people and communicate. For me, I couldn't do my job well unless I was engaged. Not only communicating with people that needed things fixed, but also with other students and with my supervisors.

Here, Oscar developed soft skills and self-management to better navigate relationships and professional work, an extension of Yosso's (2005) social and navigational capital. Similarly, Reena emphasized her development of interpersonal communication with her OSE and how it translated to her work as a medical professional. Reena explained, "I think that's another big thing that my recreational sports job taught me was how to communicate because your medical team is made up of a nurse, a respiratory therapist, a doctor, your charge nurse. You have to be able to communicate with lots of different people." Reena then connected her professional experience to her OSE, stating, "Being able to effectively communicate in my current job is a result of interacting with patrons, a diverse staff, and a structured organization while I was employed at recreational sports." Here, several students of Color developed communication skills and the capacity to adjust communication styles for fluctuating audiences that helped them be able to connect with different stakeholders, amplify their social capital, and navigate complex institutions.

### *Linguistic Capital*

For other students of Color, OSE facilitated the confidence that they needed to become better communicators, developing their sense of linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Florita exclaimed, "Oh my goodness! My time with the VPSA, I always worked on my communication skills. I hated presenting, absolutely despised it. I was a very anxious person." However, by the end of her OSE, Florita had worked with her student affairs supervisor to hone her public speaking abilities to the degree where one of her professors asked her during class, "Wow, what did you do this summer? You didn't start shaking this time!" Florita replied, "I know! Thank you!" Similarly, for Hector, having OSE helped him feel more confident as an international student from Mexico. Hector said:

> It really empowered me. Working empowered me and provided me a dimension and a place for me to work the soft skills that have really opened the doors that I would not have gotten. Especially for me as an international student from Mexico, English is not my first language. I could not pronounce debris or availability. I was very intimidated when talking to patrons, especially with patrons that are very demanding. Walking through tours, talking to people day in, day out, engaging with my peers, got me comfortable to the point where I am now able to speak in front of anyone and be comfortable. It really gave me that confidence to just talk and be able to express myself the best way possible.

Here, Hector's linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) as an international student was further amplified by his communication and soft skill development, rendering him an even more prepared future professional. Chris made a similar comment, as he said, "I developed tools like interpersonal communication, interpersonal communication dealing with different types of people."

However, Wilson discussed development of interpersonal communication skills as something that made him and others more comfortable, whereas Badari reasoned that her writing skills were sharpened in OSE, giving her an edge, and augmenting her linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Wilson said that after working on-campus, he was able to connect with colleagues better. Wilson remarked, "Now, it's not awkward like, 'I barely talk to my coworkers.' We're a very small team, so it'd be worse if we didn't talk. I feel like I'm able to communicate with coworkers and that's an environment I was in at recreational sports." Similar to Wilson's development but through problem solving, Badari said, "To me, now, I have a unique skill set." Badari continued by saying she had developed "technical skills" while a student and on the job as a professional, but because of OSE, she also has "really strong writing skills and strong communication skills that I was able to develop because of my [OSE]." In all, these students of Color immediately identified their development of communication-related soft skills—an augmentation of their linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005)—connecting those soft skills to their experiences working with others during OSE, translating to their professional positions.

### Developing Navigational Capital Through Organizational Skills and Ability to Multitask

Followed closely by communication was students of Color articulating how their OSE experience facilitated growth in organization skills and an ability to multitask, a soft skill that many students of Color brought into their professional position. Like communication skills, students of Color developed organization and multitasking skills in a variety of ways and through a variety of OSE experiences, amplifying Yosso's (2005) notion of navigational capital. Nina, for instance, remembered her time both as a college student and employee as a catalyst for this soft skill development:

> As a student, I'm going through a ton of stuff. Trying to maintain a good GPA and taking full hours, and on top of that, having to work and be responsible for other people at work. But when I was in the office, I learned how to be able to separate those things from each other and just focus on my task, whether it was just supervising or going through timesheets. That's helped that now. That's just a skill that I learned to develop as a student employee.

Also related to organization, Florita commented on her soft skill development, remembering that, "I'm thinking of resources and knowing what resources you have and being responsible over those resources. Knowing how to find resources and knowing how to bring everything together. I learned that." Here, several students learned how to better organize responsibilities and resources from their OSE, facilitating a further development of these students' navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) and a development of their soft skills.

Somewhat similarly, both Chris and Reena shared OSE experiences when they resolved conflicts, and in the process, learned to organize processes and multitask, both valuable soft skills. Chris likened his OSE experiences to "putting out a lot of fires all the time," but that he learned to be comfortable "juggling a lot of things" to lead a team and accomplish goals. Reena also spoke about her development of multitasking skills through having to delegate and lead as a student employee:

> It taught me a lot of multitasking. You have to just delegate and multitask and it taught me how to be a leader. One of the best things I learned was don't ever ask your supervisor to do something you wouldn't do. Never ask your team to do something that you as a leader would not be willing to do. The best leader will never say, "You do what I tell you." You're going to do it, and we're going to do it together. If I have a minute, I'm going to go mop the mats just like I would ask somebody else to do. That's what I learned, just how to be a good leader, how to multitask, how to talk to people, and how to manage a giant building.

From these OSE experiences, students of Color developed organizational and multitasking skills, including how to manage people, delegate processes, and resolve conflicts, necessary to navigate their roles as college students and employees. Other students such as Davante and Tamara shared similar stories, recalling that they learned to organize their work in ways that allowed them to be better at their job and be better students, as in Davante's words, "Working on-campus helped me stay focused as a student." Moreover, Nina said that developing organizational skills while a student helped her organize her work as a professional, which has allowed her to practice better self-advocacy, a critical soft skill. Nina said:

> Being able to progress at my current job is a result of having my own set of responsibilities as a leader while I was a student. I had to make my own agenda, make my own programs, and a lot of things that involved asking for things. I guess just having my own responsibilities and actually acting on those responsibilities

> helped me in my current job to ask for what I wanted and be able to communicate that clearly.

As a result, given the information provided by Davante, Tamara, and Nina, findings suggest that some students of Color may also benefit academically through OSE experiences that improve their organizational skills, while others may develop an important sense of self-advocacy and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) that can parlay itself into successful development of soft skills and a navigation of higher education and future employment.

### *Time Management (Sub-theme of Organizational Skills and Ability to Multitask)*

One sub-theme related to the prior theme of Organizational Skills and Ability to Multitask is the theme of time management. In all, seven of the 12 students of Color interviewed commented specifically on how OSE enhanced their ability to manage their time, a soft skill they have carried into the professional workplace to help them navigate their career. In fact, several students felt that the time management skills they developed during OSE was their most important soft skill, bolstering their navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, students of Color explained that their development of time management skills allowed them to be better students and manage their academic time along with their work time. Both Wilson and Tamara directly connected time management skills to their OSE and their undergraduate coursework, with Wilson explaining that:

> Oh boy, I think time management is probably the biggest one. If I said I couldn't work because I had to study, but then I didn't, and someone else who had an exam or had to study was working because you weren't, then I was just being lazy. It made them feel bad, and it should make you feel bad, too. That's probably the biggest thing I learned, time management.

Here, Wilson was trying to balance school and work obligations while also considering the impact it may have on his peers, who he knew were struggling with the same school and work obligations. Similarly, Tamara said that time management was "super important," and she also needed to balance school and work with her social life:

> In conjunction with having to take classes, it's not like I could just be President of this org and work and not do school. I had to do well. I learned a lot of time management, a lot of time management actually. That was huge. I was in a social group as well, and I had to make sure that I did all of the requirements for that and met with all the people that I needed to meet with. I really had to be creative with how I spent my time and maximize that and be as efficient as I could.

For Monique, she learned to keep her academic and student employment "ducks in a row." Similar to Monique, Hector also connected his OSE experiences to his capacity for professional efficiency, saying that, "My time management responsibilities at my student job helped me be a better professional and diligent professional at my current job. Time management, God, that was important." Hector then shared a specific situation where he was late for his OSE position and his supervisor said bluntly, "Be on time, figure it out." Hector said he took that message to heart and in his words, "I figured it out." In these cases, students of Color developed their extant navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) and their soft skill of time management to become better students and in Hector's words, a "better professional."

### Social Capital Development Through Creativity

Although less prevalent than other themes related to how students of Color developed soft skills through OSE, seven of 12 students of Color spoke about how they developed creativity while working on-campus. In fact, all seven students shared experiences about developing creativity out of a sense of collaboration with peers that led to creative synergy, an extended iteration of Yosso's (2005) social capital. Karlos put it best when he said, "I loved having a creative mind to approach. Me and students that work around the office, they all relied on us to bring our creative juices and to see what types of approaches we're going to have and who has a great idea." Monique also shared her creativity development because of networking with supervisors to understand the bureaucracy of the institution. Monique asserted:

> Creativity. The light bulb, the instincts, something that just came to mind. That happened because I got to see the behind-the-scenes contributions from the top down, from where I am to where my supervisor was, to where our VP was, to where you were. I got to see how all the moving parts drove the institution. That helped.

Here, because Monique was exposed to social situations and supervisors that allowed her to see how the institution functioned as a bureaucracy, Monique was able to see what the institution was and was not going to allow her to do in her role, fostering a sense of creativity, potentially to solve problems or do her work more efficiently while developing social capital (Yosso, 2005) and the soft skill of demonstrating resourcefulness. For Reena, that sense of creativity she developed in her OSE experiences absolutely helped her solve problems and delegate work. Reena said that working on-campus helped her with "creativity," explaining that "you just had to get creative with how you solve problems and how you delegated things." Reena continued by sharing a situation when she needed to organize a year-end meeting and create decorations for the gathering. She said, "Creativity is being able to think outside of the box and think critically to find different solutions to what some people might think are straightforward answers. That just helped me be a creative leader in all aspects." This soft skill of creativity or resourcefulness, catalyzed through interactions with colleagues and a utility of navigational capital, allowed students to further develop social capital (Yosso, 2005) both on-campus and after graduation.

### Aspirational Capital Through Persistence

Finally, several students of Color (six) in this study shared OSE experiences that helped them persist and engage with their aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), including as a student employee and a professional. Reena shared an experience when she and her family had to shelter during a natural disaster, likening it to her OSE. Reena said, "Like that situation, you just had to make it through and keep rolling on. I would definitely say that ties back to perseverance." Vida also shared a story about a particularly difficult day on the job as a student employee, saying, "We just had a tough day where you don't really know if you're going to be your best, but you have to keep on keeping on." Vida then connected that memory to her current role as a nurse, saying, "Those patients that you can't necessarily pinpoint what's wrong with them, you have to keep going and just figure it out because at the end of the day, they're relying on you." Here, students of Color connected their prior experiences leveraging their aspirational capital to their student employment experiences, further strengthening their aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) to inform their work as professionals.

Two students also specifically mentioned imposter syndrome and how their work in OSE helped them overcome those feelings, develop a sense of belonging on campus, and persist as a student and professional. Nina remembered that her time managing a climbing wall in recreational sports triggered feelings of being "a failure" and feeling "that I was doing a bad job." Yet, Nina said that her OSE allowed her to find moments to fail safely and say to herself, "Oh, I failed. I need to learn from this, and I was allowed to." As a result of being allowed to fail and being given more opportunity, Nina said:

> Especially in the imposter syndrome realm, I had to constantly remind myself that I was hired for this student position for a reason and the people who hired me saw that I had potential and that I could lead. That sense of failure and sense of impostor syndrome still exists with my current job. I still have to remind myself that I'm worthy of this job, I can do it, and I was hired for a reason. I think more of just a parallel experience with being a student employee and professional.

Here, Nina leveraged her aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) and student employment experiences to persist as a student, which then helped her persist as a professional. Like Nina, Badari also shared her feelings, saying, "I think I will always feel a sense of failure and a sense of impostor syndrome." However, because she remembers her growth within her OSE experiences, she still has "a reminder of the growth and the progress that I've experienced since then." As a result, Badari insisted that in her professional role, "I will feel failure, and I will feel crappy at times, but also, I have the strength to talk to myself and bring myself up and know that I belong here."

Here, students of Color tied their sense of professional persistence back to their experiences with OSE, suggesting that on-campus employment both bolstered their aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) and developed their persistence and determination, two critical soft skills. Then, several students were able to connect that sense of belonging and self-confidence to their professional work, reaching back to their OSE memories to find strength within their aspirational capital, understand their feelings of imposter syndrome, and remember that people believed in them and relied on them both as a student employee and current professional.

# DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, students of Color, who are now full-time professionals, shared that their on-campus student affairs employment (OSE) experiences helped them develop critical soft skills to increase their career readiness and their prowess in their current position. These soft skills included interpersonal communication, organizational skills, and ability to multitask, time management, creativity, and persistence. Given the critical gap in the literature that this study fills, there are several implications for research and practice related to students of Color and their OSE experiences.

First, regarding students' experiences, participants in this study recalled a plethora of moments from their OSE that developed soft skills, which in turn students were able to translate to their professional role. Perhaps more importantly, many of these skills were developed while students were working in supervisory roles, leadership roles, or networking with supervisors to learn more about the institution and being a professional. Described as navigational capital, Yosso (2005) explained that students of Color possess the ability to navigate organizations and power structures that have historically excluded them, including institutions of higher education. In this study, Yosso's (2005) navigational capital was absolutely present in the narratives of students of Color. These students navigated a hegemonic, White structure and translated their skills developed as a student employee to postgraduate outcomes. This fusion of individual agency through leveraging navigational capital coupled with individual experiences of student employment bolstered these students' ability to navigate predominantly White social institutions like their university and future job market. As a result, practitioners could consider facilitating not only more on-campus employment opportunities for students of Color but specifically experiences that position these students as supervisors, leaders, or being present with their supervisors and leaders. These experiences seemed to be the most memorable and impactful for students of Color and could amplify their navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) even further.

Next, more research could be dedicated to how OSE may amplify the linguistic capital of students of Color, facilitating a further development of navigational capital in both academic and professional spaces. In this study, students of Color strongly asserted that their OSE helped them communicate and become organized in ways that helped them succeed academically as students and as future professionals, developing soft skills that their future employers have benefitted from. Referred to as linguistic capital, Yosso (2005) suggested that most college students of Color possess multiple language and communication skills and, therefore, have unique intellectual and social capabilities that can be deployed in academic and social contexts. Yet, students of Color spoke about how their continued development of communication skills—an extension of linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005)—may allow them to better navigate academic and professional settings,

bolstering their navigational capital. Although prior research hinted at the role that on-campus employment may improve academic outcomes (Elliott & Smith, 2022; Giles-Gee, 1989), this study strongly suggests that OSE could help students of Color achieve in the classroom, allowing them to move past the institution and achieve in the professional workplace through further development of linguistic and navigational capital. The same research and practice could also focus on how OSE can improve a student of Color's sense of belonging, as Quaye et al.'s (2014) and Elliott and Smith's (2022) prior work asserted that students of Color should be allowed experiences that increase these students' sense of belonging. Although a wealth of research has shown the benefits of on-campus employment on sense of belonging for White students (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wilkie & Jones, 1994), much more research could continue to explore the experiences of students of Color.

Finally, closing the racial wealth gap (Carnevale et al., 2023; Sullivan et al., 2016) may involve helping students of Color develop marketable, employable skills that their future employers want. This requires institutions of higher education to recruit and retain more students of Color, strategically placing them in OSE experiences to amplify their soft skill set and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). For example, through mentoring relationships during OSE, students of Color could learn how to leverage their navigational capital (capacity to navigate divergent social institutions), aspirational capital (resiliency in the face of perceived barriers), and resistant capital (verbal and nonverbal methods of resisting tropes and stereotypes) into a unique and powerful conglomerate of employability capital (Peeters et al., 2019) for induction into the postgraduate labor market. In this study, students of Color were easily able to articulate their soft skill development, tie that development to OSE experiences, and relate those experiences to their professional work. If employers truly do demand soft skills (Rockwood, 2021; Schulz, B., 2008; Stewart, C., et al., 2016), institutions of higher education should help students of Color convey their possession of both Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and soft skills to future employers.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of OSE, students of Color largely echoed a simple message: "It empowered me." In an era of U.S. higher education where students of Color routinely feel marginalized and excluded (Quaye et al., 2014; Turner, 1994), on-campus student employment may be a path toward racial equity. This change could come in the form of equitable hiring practices of student employees of Color, considering that students of Color are often marginalized from many on-campus experiences that White students have benefitted from for years. To become an institution that practices equity, both during enrollment and after graduation when students become professionals, institutions must strive to include students of Color in OSE when possible, amplifying these students' community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and resisting the exacerbation of a historically persistent racial wealth gap (Sullivan et al., 2016). Clearly, OSE was empowering for students of Color, even years after their graduation. Now, it is time for institutions to do the same and leverage their power to facilitate career readiness for students of Color in the future.

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# IDENTITY AFFIRMATION AND CONFLICT: STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AND INVOLVEMENT EXPERIENCES OF ARAB AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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*Arab American college students must navigate the paradox of being hypervisible as well as invisible while in college. They are a unique and diverse group of students whose lived experiences and ways of belonging are underexplored. In this study of 12 Arab American college students, participants discussed how they understand their Arab American identity and how they belong at their institution, as well as how engagement in student organizations and other means of student involvement impacted their experience with sense of belonging. Participants' involvement both affirmed their Arab American identity while also potentially causing conflict at times.*

Considering varying identity-based scholarship in higher education, there is still little-known empirical research about Arab American college students and their overall college experience (Naber, 2021; Naser, 2021). Research shows Arab Americans are hypervisible in the media and face discrimination and racism regularly (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Research also suggests that negative stereotypes of Arabs directly relate to rates of discrimination and racism (Cainkar, 2006). Despite this, Arab Americans continue to be invisible in that they remain a marginalized group in the United States (Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2006; Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Further, these disparities are often hidden by the lack of disaggregated data and racial or ethnic classifications of Arabs on student forms and in census data (Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2006; Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Because Arabs are categorized as white in most official data, their unique needs and experiences blend into data collected on white individuals. Thus, they are overlooked as People of Color.

Even more than a lack of scholarship on Arab American students' experiences in higher education is an area of opportunity regarding Arab American college students' involvement in campus activities and leadership. Nested in a larger, broader study about Arab American college students' experiences with a sense of belonging in higher education, this article offers insights on two aspects related to student involvement and leadership experiences. In this article, I ask: *What role do student activities and leadership play in supporting Arab students' sense of belonging in higher education?* This question and accompanying article allow us to identify one element of Arab American students' experience in higher education, specifically through campus activities involvement and leadership such as serving as an academic tutor, teaching assistant, or officer or member in a student organization. The following reviews the relevant literature, methodology, key findings, and recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OF ARABS AND ARAB AMERICANS AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility traverses all aspects of Arab Americans' lives, and Arab students have similar experiences in classroom and university settings (Cainkar, 2006; Mango, 2012; Naser, 2021). This could factor into why Arab American college students are overlooked within the higher education system. Despite there being limited research on Arab American college students, the following literature review consid-

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ers Arab Americans and history, the media portrayal of Arabs, and Islamophobia and discrimination faced by Arabs. In addition, how students achieve a sense of belonging related to their identity and involvement will be reviewed. I believe this context is a foundation for a better understanding of Arab American students, and thus, further contextualize their involvement experiences as introduced later in this article.

### Historical Contexts

The first wave of Arab immigration began in the late 1800s (Awad, 2010, Cainkar, 2006), and by 1882, most Arab immigrants arrived from an Ottoman province that is modern-day Syria, which prompted U.S. officials to begin labeling all Arabs as "Turks" (Naber, 2000). In 1914, a judge in South Carolina ruled that "while Syrians may be Caucasians, they were not that particular free white person to whom the Act of Congress (1790) had denoted the privilege of citizenship" (Naber, 2000, p. 39). The federal courts continued to question whether Syrians had the right to gain citizenship, and in 1923, the 1914 court decision was reversed (Naber, 2000). Pursuing U.S. citizenship, some Arabs sought to be classified as white, rather than a unique racial and ethnic group. At the time, individuals with the white classification were more likely to be considered for U.S. citizenship than other racially minoritized immigrant groups (Awad et al., 2021).

Due to anti-immigrant rhetoric and discrimination, during the second wave of Arab immigration to the United States, most Arab immigrants began to 'Americanize' themselves to white American culture and standards by identifying as white, speaking English, anglicizing their names, and restricting who knew their ethnic identities (Naber, 2000). The second wave of Arab immigrants began in the late 1940s and had a larger number of Muslims than the first (Awad, 2010; Naber, 2000). Arab immigrants included refugees from the 1948 Palestine War, professionals, and university students (Naber, 2000). The third wave began in the 1960s, with Arab immigrants coming from more diverse religious and professional backgrounds than those who came to the United States in previous waves. The third wave of Arab immigrants had a stronger sense of Arab nationalism, were more critical of U.S. policy, and maintained connections to their cultural roots (Naber, 2000). The pan-ethnic term "Arab American" became popular after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 (Awad, 2010; Awad et al., 2021; Naber, 2000). The term quickly caught on as a political means for the media and government to identify other individuals based on geographic origins, culture, and religion (Cainkar, 2006; Naber, 2000).

Over time, research has found that about half of Arabs supported using the Arab and Arab American labels, while the other half did not (Awad et al., 2021). The latter population felt these labels did not reflect their culture, identity, ancestry, or sense of pride (Awad et al., 2021). Maghbouleh et al. (2022) found that when the Arab identity category was offered, the number of individuals identifying as exclusively white decreased, with only 10% selecting so. Furthermore, second-generation Arab immigrants, Muslims, non-religious Arabs, or those who experienced higher levels of discrimination were more likely to select the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) classification over white (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). This new fidelity to Arab identity could be related to heightened surveillance, discrimination, and stigmatization of Arabs since September 11, 2001 (9/11) followed by the anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies that arose during the 2016 presidential campaign and the resulting administration (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). The Republican Presidential candidate ran on a platform that regularly targeted and dehumanized Arabs and Muslims (Hobb & Lajevardi, 2019). This rhetoric normalized and encouraged hatred towards Arabs and Muslims resulting in increased hate crimes among Arabs and Muslims (Hobb & Lajevardi, 2019). These incidents suggest that self-labeling is important when highlighting the identities of ethnic minority populations. Understanding the Arab identity is complex; it is critical to recognize how context and circumstances influence the evolution of the Arab identity, emphasizing the need for further exploration. Given the political and social climate in the United States and the increasing number of Arab Americans and Arab immigrants (Yalla Count Me In!, 2019), it is important to disaggregate the data to better understand Arabs' overall experiences and needs.

### Media Portrayal of Arabs

U.S. media portray Arabs as homogeneous, despite the vast diversity of the population (Cainkar, 2006). This pan-Arab American identity began to emerge during the 1960s when the government and media began using Arab American as a derogatory way to group individuals geographically, culturally, and religiously (Naber, 2000). Individuals' impressions of Arabs are impacted by continued negative narratives and portrayals of Arabs in the media. American media often conflate Arabs and Muslims, influencing the racialization of Islam and Muslim stereotypes (Cainkar, 2006). This continues to muddle the Arab American identity and perpetuate the assumption that all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are Arabs when, in fact, most Arabs in the United States identify as Christian (Awad, 2010). Arab Christians make up 77% of the Arab American population (Awad, 2010). Despite Christians being the prominent religious group of Arab Americans, the racialization of Islam continues.

Other well-known stereotypes include Arab men being portrayed as terrorists, controlling, or violent (Naber, 2000). Arab women are also depicted as oppressed by religious rules, cultural expectations, or the men in their lives (Naber, 2000). Further, Arab women often find themselves being addressed as the enemy or aliens in the media. When this happens in the classroom, some try to explain how Arab women belong in the United States while attempting to counteract the stereotypes and assumptions they have just made about them (Mango, 2012). This is understandably taxing on Arab women, leaving them feeling shocked, disappointed, and betrayed (Mango, 2012). Despite this, Arab women continue to feel the burden to educate those around them (Mango, 2012), even while these stereotypes continue promoting systematic Islamophobia and increasing the discrimination, violence, and othering they face. And this is just one example of how these experiences in the classroom affect Arab American college students' overall experience and sense of belonging in the education system specifically.

### Islamophobia and Discrimination

Arab American college students in the United States suffered an increased number of attacks and beatings after the United States bombed Libya in 1986, directly impacting Arab faculty, staff, and students (Naber, 2000). During this period, Palestinian-American Islamic scholar, Isma'il Raji al Faruqi, and his wife were brutally murdered while their pregnant daughter, Anmar, was violently injured in their home (Naber, 2000). Then, in 1987, the "LA 8" were arrested and labeled as a "terrorist threat" for their humanitarian and cultural efforts. The case instilled fear among Arab Americans as the U.S. Department of Justice publicly stated its plans to arrest 10,000 Arab residents en masse and establish detention camps for possible deportation (Naber, 2000). To prevent further discrimination after 9/11, Arabs avoided places where they expected to experience discrimination, and some abandoned friends or jobs and even changed their names (Cainkar, 2006). As a result of the 2016 presidential campaign and election, Arabs continued to be attacked, harassed, and discriminated against (Naber, 2021). For instance, on the day the 2016 presidential election projected winner was announced on November 9, 2016, a San Diego State University student was robbed, and her car was stolen while on campus; during the attack, the assailants yelled ethnically derogatory and political statements at her (Jimenez & Moran, 2016). Additionally, since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, there has been increased violence and discrimination towards Arab Americans. For instance, Wadea Al Fayoume, a six-year-old boy, was murdered because he was Muslim and his mother, Hanaan Shahin was also stabbed several times while trying to protect him from the attack (Yan et al., 2023). Three American college students, Hisham Awartani, Kinnan Abdalhamid, and Tahseen Ahmed, were shot while walking in Awartani's grandmother's neighborhood (Al Jazeera, 2023).

According to the Arab American Institute Foundation, Arab American college students' academic success and emotional well-being are directly affected by these lived experiences (Naser, 2021). Peers often associate Arabs and Arab college students with terrorism, threats, and violence. Arab college students shared that this association was often magnified due to negative media stereotypes, and they had experienced being called racial slurs or made fun of at their universities (Naser, 2020, 2021). Further, Naser (2021) found that many Arab American college students felt that hostile political climates amplified their insecurities and, as a result, they often questioned their place in the United States. Whenever they saw terrorist attacks in the media, Arab college students often lived in fear that their peers would turn against them or blame them rather than the actual terrorists (Naser, 2020). Arab American college students live in a state of hyperarousal, permanent alert; constantly worrying about danger (Naser, 2021). Some are left numb and empty or feel like their experiences are dismissed, misinterpreted, or judged (Naser, 2021). These experiences directly impact Arab American college students' overall well-being and college experiences.

### Identity's Influence and Student Involvement

The various social identities students carry play a part in their sense of belonging. Moreover, identities like race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and more may intersect in ways that concurrently influence students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley et al., 1993; Strayhorn, 2019). For individuals to gain a sense of racial identity, they undergo internal processes of understanding ranging from a relative unawareness of one's racial identity to an understanding of their racial identity as it relates to their holistic self (Alvarez, 2002; Chan, 2017; Kim, 2012) related to societal forces of racialization and racism. Chan (2017) built on this and suggested that one may immerse themselves in a racial and ethnic community and negotiate their identity through the norms of the dominant white culture. During college, students encounter other cultures, identities, values, and norms that may differ from their own (Arar, 2017; King et al., 2013). Because of this, college students continually examine, deconstruct, and reconstruct their identities related to the norms and values of others around them (Arar, 2017; French et al., 2006; Fries-Britt et al., 2014). For racially and ethnically diverse students, additional stressors are placed on them as they navigate differing expectations and norms of their college communities and their racial and ethnic identity and culture (Nasir & Saxe, 2003).

Identity is perhaps one of the most important or most studied factors in Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging. Individuals' sense of belonging can be positively impacted by making connections with others who carry comparable identities and participate in non-curricular activities (DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Hunter et al., 2019; Shammas, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). Several studies have shown students' involvement in ethnic or race-specific student organizations increased their sense of belonging (e.g., DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Samura, 2016). Shammas (2015) addressed many of these aspects of identity in their study about Arab and Muslim students creating their own campus communities. However, because Arab American and Muslim American students are not as well integrated into campus communities, they are left to form ethnic and religious groups for themselves to simulate a sense of connectedness to the campus (Shammas, 2015). There is a positive relationship between campus friendships and a sense of belonging (Shammas, 2015). A strong sense of ethnic identity helped both Arab students feel more comfortable making friends with their same ethnic identities and enhanced social integration within the campus community (Shammas, 2015). Related, Museus et al. (2017) found that cultural familiarity, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, proactive philosophies, and holistic support were all positively associated with students' sense of belonging. Proactive philosophies are what drive institutional agents, like faculty and staff, to extend their efforts beyond making information, opportunities, and support available to students to ensure that students know how to use them and get the most out of them (Museus et al., 2017). Holistic support is the extent to which students have access to one faculty or staff member who provides them with information and support and provides them referrals to resources or contacts they may need (Museus et al., 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology is a human science that explores the human world as we find it and wishes to meet human beings where they are naturally engaged in their worlds (van Manen, 1997). As individuals reflect, their experiences are seen more clearly, and the meanings expand. *Essence* is the ultimate understanding of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Through phenomenology, researchers gain a better understanding of social phenomena through participants' perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). One should explore the everyday meaning as it stands and not with prior meanings of systems that are in place (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenological research is an intimate approach to research and requires researchers to pursue their work with care and to have a desire to uncover meaning. To do so, one must question the world in which they live and experience it and engage with one's assumptions of personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs, views, and theories (van Manen, 2014). For example, in the context of this larger study, I wondered, *how do Arab American college students experience the world, and in particular, U.S. higher education?* Phenomenologists must investigate, probe, reflect, analyze, and interrogate experiences and prepare themselves to live with the uncertainty, frustration, and risk required for genuine insights (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenologists must balance unraveling an experience while immersing themselves in the moment and process.

Because humans experience the world through a unique lens and the context of their own lived experiences, participants may have differing opinions about what it means to "be Arab American" especially related to their salient identities and experiences. Using phenomenology allows us to examine Arab American college students' experiences through multiple perspectives and find common experiences—the *essence* of their experience—among the participants. Through reflection, phenomenology allows us to discover the meaning of lived experiences within a specific social context (Crotty et al., 1996; Crotty, 1998; van Manen, 2017). This study sought to explore the essence of how Arab American college students make meaning of their sense of belonging while in college, and particular findings through the lens of involvement.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories one uses to support and inform their research is its conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Robson, 2011). Maxwell (2013) suggested that conceptual frameworks inform one's research design, influencing how they choose their overall research goals, research questions, and methods used, and helps to identify potential validity threats to one's findings. When building a conceptual framework, researchers borrow from existing theories and research to craft something relevant to their study (Maxwell, 2013).

First, sense of belonging as a basic human need expands on belongingness in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). It is also important to recognize that Maslow based belongingness on Indigenous values and beliefs (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). Maslow spent time with the Blackfoot people and took what he learned from them—their culture, values, and beliefs—to form this hierarchy of needs without acknowledging their contributions (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). Thus, the very foundations of belonging research were taken from Indigenous values and beliefs. Belongingness serves as the starting point for Strayhorn's work on sense of belonging in higher education settings. Belonging is a basic need for college students as they must feel a sense of connectedness, membership, and inclusion at their institutions, and that it leads to positive outcomes like happiness, wellbeing, achievement, and optimal functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Jonier, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) includes seven core elements to sense of belonging, saying it:

- Is a universal, basic human need;
- Is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior;
- Is given importance based on context, time, and factors;
- Is related to mattering;
- Is influenced by one's identity;
- Leads to positive outcomes and success; and
- Must be satisfied as conditions change (p. 30).

I used Strayhorn's (2019) core elements of belonging as a conceptual framework to examine how Arab American college students accomplish a sense of belonging, and while involved in leadership and campus activities specifically. During the data analysis process, I used the core elements as foundational themes and priori codes, or codes that were developed before examining interview transcripts (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). I, then, found more themes that arose in the thematizing process. The core elements influenced the building of the research and interview questions. Because the participants have a specific racial and ethnic identity, I placed particular focus on exploring how identities affect belonging in college. Using this lens as a guide through the research process helped to unravel meaning along the way. For example, there is a specific interview question about participants and their relationships with others on-campus as a starting point for exploring their relationships with others at their institutions and the impact these relationships may have (e.g., see Vaccaro et al., 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007).

When exploring positive outcomes and success, it is important to understand what this means to the participant. Strayhorn (2019) mentioned student engagement, achievement, wellbeing, happiness, and when they are optimally functioning in a specific domain or context as positive outcomes and success. This includes leadership and involvement in campus activities. Students' sense of belonging shifts as they progress through college (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, participants' sense of belonging may fluctuate. When analyzing the data, I examined if there were significant differences between the participants and their classification. This conceptual framework provided for a better understanding of how Arab American college students developed a sense of belonging and what major elements affect them.

## METHODS

Drawn from a larger study on the lived experiences of Arab American college students at one institution, this article illuminates two key findings related to Arab American students' experiences with organizations and involvement. Using a phenomenological research approach allows researchers the freedom of scholarly nonconformity, challenging the rigidity of the research process and prioritizing the act of unraveling the essence of lived experiences without having to conform to strict research processes found in other methodologies (Mobley, 2019). This flexibility allows for the essence of phenomena to emerge more naturally (Groenewald, 2004).

With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from [institution], recruitment flyers were sent to various institutional listservs, including academic advisors and student affairs professionals to share with students and student organizations. As participants signed up and participated, I relied on snowball sampling to help gain more participants as needed (Patton, 2002). Two 60-minute semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to gather a better understanding of the participants' experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, I spent time reflecting on what resonated and why both in writing and through conversation. I explored what I was feeling and the roots of why I might be feeling that way (Groenewald, 2004). Throughout, I debriefed with colleagues about these experiences including any triggers or feelings of uneasiness that came up in addition to the moments of validation and joy (Groenewald, 2004). Participants selected or were provided a pseudonym and all data collected was de-identified and associated only with the pseudonym. Thematizing was the primary data analysis process. Thematizing can be used to code data holistically (Van Manen, 1997). Holistic coding allows researchers to provide comprehensive descriptions of participants' lived experiences by surfacing overall themes (van Manen, 1997). In addition, to further the analysis process, following Hycner's (1985) guidelines for phenomenological analysis were applied while analyzing the recordings and transcriptions.

In sum, twelve undergraduate students participated in this study (see Table 1). All participants self-identified as Arab Americans. Out of the 12 participants, two individuals identified themselves as men and ten identified themselves as women. Participants held majors in natural sciences, liberal arts, engineering, architecture, and social work. Their generational status reflects whether one or both of their parents immigrated to the United States. Their ancestral countries of origin included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Syria.

**Table 1.** *Participant Profiles*

| Pseudonym | Race | Generational Status | Ancestral Origin |
|---|---|---|---|
| Amira | Arab | Both parents | Lebanon |
| Basmah | Arab | Both parents | Lebanon, Palestine, Syria |
| Evangeline | Arab | One parent | Palestine |
| Faye | Arab | Both parents | Iraq |
| Jasmine | Arab & White | Both parents | Syria |
| Joha | Arab & White | One parent | Algeria |
| Kate | Arab & White | One parent | Lebanon |
| Layla | Arab | Both parents | Lebanon, Palestine |
| Mark | Arab & White | One parent | Palestine |
| Sara | Arab | Both parents | Iraq, Syria |
| Suroor | Arab | Both parents | Egypt |
| Zainab | Arab | Both parents | Morocco |

### Positionality

In tandem with these methods, an understanding of author positionality is both helpful and relevant here. I am a multiracial woman who strongly identifies with my Arab roots. I was born in the United States and identify as Arab American. As a student, I had a difficult time establishing my sense of belonging, often feeling alone, isolated, invisible, and othered. It was difficult to connect with other Arab Americans on campus because of our different cultural backgrounds. I managed to find other Students of Color to connect with in a few of my classes. I regularly hide my cultural identity from others hoping to avoid questions and the mentally taxing efforts required to educate others about the identities I carry. It was difficult for me to find spaces on campus where I belonged and felt comfortable being my authentic self.

While in academia I have been a student, student-facing staff member, administrator, and faculty member. It became my goal to create spaces and programs for marginalized students to belong, including Arab Americans. I established and facilitated multiple student leadership programs that placed a sense of belonging at the core of their designs and implementation. This research is personal to me because of the identities I carry and the experiences I have had and continue to have. I am aware that I am an insider to participants because of the identities I carry. I write this paper acknowledging the important intersection of Arab American students' experiences with student involvement and leadership; at the same time, I acknowledge that research involving an intersection such as this may come with more questions than answers - true to the form of phenomenological approach that guided this study.

### Limitations

This study addresses needed literature around understanding the lived experience of Arab American college students, and through the lens of their experiences with campus activities and leadership. Still, there were a few limitations within this study. First, all twelve participants were students from the same institution. The study specifically focused on how Arab American college students at this institution experienced a sense of belonging. The institution has over 40,000 undergraduate students and is a historically white university in the South. Thus, participants may not be representative of Arab American college students across the United States. Next, there are some limitations around how I use language and identity. For example, I use Arab American as a pan-ethnic term, which generalizes the wide range of identities found within this group. Additionally, there were only two students who identified as men, one who identified as Queer, and none who identified as non-binary or transgender; all participants were undergraduate students. Arab American graduate students may differ in how they experience a sense of belonging. Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have limited the study's findings as well. For example, since the university represented in this study employed remote learning from March 2020 through September 2021 with some opting to continue virtual learning through December 2021, some participants may have limited in-person university experiences.

## THEMES

Individuals are motivated by their need to belong and will seek out opportunities to fulfill their belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Strayhorn (2019) suggested that this can affect students' academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. This was shown by the participants as they often sought out ways to connect with others. This included exploring campus activities–and student organizations specifically–attending events and speaking to peers in the classroom. Participants often explored student organizations that were related to their Arab American identity or their interests, both academic and political. With this in mind, the following two subthemes illuminate participants' experiences with *identity affirmation and identity conflict within organizations.*

### Identity Affirmation Within Organizations

Largely, students in this study found identity affirmations through their organizational involvement. When beginning their journeys at their university, all participants tried joining the [Arab Student Organization] (ASO) in hopes of connecting with other Arab college students. For instance, Evangeline shared that ASO meetings are the only formal spaces where she could find other Arab college students. She elaborated:

> I feel like the only place that I've really experienced people that are like me are when I go to the [ASO] meetings. When I don't go to those meetings or when I'm not in that community, I guess it is still pretty isolating…I thought there was gonna be more [Arabs] than there was in college.

Outside of ASO, Evangeline felt isolated, showing the importance of having organizations accessible that are related to one's identity. Other participants also joined ASO while some pursued other identity-based student organizations where they felt a stronger sense of connection. For instance, multiple participants were part of [Palestinian Unity Group] (PUG), an organization that supported both their Arab identity and political beliefs. Amira joined PUG and when at their meetings she felt like she belonged. Amira shared:

> [PUG] the Palestinian um group, it is really nice because they always like sometimes put on a Dabke class and that kind of stuff. And every time, I get started with the Dabke it always makes me just like flashback of home… just being in their meetings is always really nice, because everywhere you turn you like, you ask someone where they're from, and they're all Arabs and it's just nice to kind of share your little experiences, and just a little bit about yourself and stuff.

Connecting with other students who had similar lived experiences created spaces where participants felt comfortable, made connections with their peers and explored their culture. Similarly, students who participated in the [Sakena Hassan Arabic Program], which is composed of Arabs and non-Arabs, felt a strong connection and ability to be their authentic selves, which heightened their sense of belonging. This was likely due to the nature of the program and how it was a designated space for individuals to learn more about Arab culture.

For some participants, leadership roles materialized in the form of academic leadership, in which some found leadership and activities in classroom and academic units. For example, Zainab shared her experience of finding a sense of belonging on campus when she declared her major and took on a teaching assistant (TA) leadership role.

> Honestly, I feel like my whole experience has been like not belonging. Honestly. Maybe like last year, my senior year, I feel like I belong like in the [Science] Department. In the beginning I felt like I belonged nowhere honestly… But eventually, once I started getting into classes and understood more. And also, I became a TA for [science] classes. So that's what I really felt like okay "I'm not that I'm not a stranger to this."

Similar to Zainab, other participants mentioned that having academic leadership roles and involvement in student organizations increased their sense of belonging at the university. Often, the leadership roles were within academic spaces such as being an academic tutor, teaching assistant, or officer in an academic student organization. Participants were drawn to student organizations that connected them to their Arab identity, academics, and political beliefs.

### Identity Conflict Within Organizations

With so few Arab-focused student organizations to join, each participant tried joining ASO. They had mixed experiences with the association and as a result, several participants' sense of belonging was decreased because they did not feel Arab enough or like they could truly be themselves. For instance, some participants constantly questioned their Arab identity and whether they were Arab enough while attending Arab student organization events.

Given the unique variations of encounters alongside the Arab American experience, as well as within the community itself, it was difficult for participants to find a sense of belonging inside organizations related to their racial and ethnic identity. This circumstance held especially true when most members were Arab and not necessarily Arab American. However, Faye shared that her sense of belonging in the ASO conflicts with her identity and that she sometimes feels disconnected from her peers, unable to meet their expectations.

> But on campus biggest org that has that has anything to do with being an Arab student is [ASO], and I've been to our student association meetings. And I was so so sorely disappointed I felt like I felt like it. I wasn't gonna gain anything. Umm it's yeah, that like it's so weird the how it worked out because that was when I felt the most disconnected from [institution] students is when I went to an [ASO] meeting.

Faye, like other participants, found it difficult to belong in Arab-specific student organizations. She felt like, although these organizations were for Arab and Arab American students, participants often separated their Arab and American identities, prioritizing their American identity. This prioritization influences the way others articulate their Arab identity in everyday life and speech, thereby rendering the Arab identity superficial and detached as compared to the American identity. She shared wanting to find spaces where she could proudly be Arab American, reconnect with her Arabness, and meet other Arab students. However, with the dearth of spaces where she feels this sense of belonging, Faye found ways to explore and share her Arab American identity with non-Arab peers.

Although Mark found himself somewhat estranged from his Arab identity, he tried to find an Arab student organization to join when starting at the university. In his struggle to find an Arab student organization on campus that made him feel like he fit in, he returned to the environment cultivated in his major. Similarly, Suroor tried to find places and organizations on campus where she felt like she belonged and was still searching for the right place. She found it difficult to find an organization where she related to other participants, with similar shared experiences. She shared:

> Also, there is the [ASO] which I've been trying to go to those. I've gone to a couple [ASO] events. I don't know if I fully feel like I belong with them but just kind of trying to try different things and make a mark in different spaces makes me feel like if I left tomorrow, I might miss some things.

Suroor continued exploring her Arab American identity and searched for other Arab Americans with similar experiences to connect with. She thought finding peers with similar backgrounds would help her understand and embrace her Arab American identity in a more meaningful way.

## DISCUSSION

Participants wanted to belong and because of this, they were motivated to find ways to connect with others both on and off campus, and specifically through student organization involvement. Thus, this was actualized through identity affirmation and conflict found in student involvement as a form of campus activities. Participants found limited campus communities dedicated to the Arab American identity. Participants also expressed that because there was a lack of university-sponsored events related to the Arab identity, they created their own events to connect with each other and to feel a sense of connection. This reflects Shammas' (2015) findings that Arab American students are not as well integrated into campus communities as other students and as a result are left to form their own group(s) to create a sense of connectedness to their campuses. This also highlights some similarities between Arab American and Latinx college students' experiences. Like Latinx students (e.g., see Nuñez, 2009), participants in this study sought out opportunities to connect with others on campus and in their communities. Participants expressed the important role of social events held by the ASO and how these were the only events on campus dedicated to their identity.

Participants also shared that if they could not find communities on campus where they belonged, they then turned to seeking communities off campus. For those who sought communities off campus, they expressed having limited connections to their institution and that they limited their time on campus. Thus, Arab American college students' desire to belong was a sufficient motivation for them to seek out community. Unfortunately, when these Arab American college students did not find organized communities at their institution, they looked elsewhere, and their campus engagement lessened. This suggests that some Arab American college students lack college communities where they belong. This disconnect reiterates the importance that students from diverse backgrounds, including Arab American college students, need to have additional opportunities to engage with one another and campus communities in meaningful ways. Otherwise, they face a lack of belonging at their institutions (DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Hunter et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Van Horne et al., 2018).

Several scholars have argued that students' involvement in ethnic or race-specific student organizations can increase their sense of belonging particularly for Students of Color (e.g., DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Samura, 2016). At the participants' institution in this study, there were only four groups that specifically related to the Arab identity despite their state being among the largest with the highest population of Arabs in the United States (Yalla Count Me In!, 2019). Connecting with other students who have similar lived experiences created spaces where participants felt comfortable, making connections with their peers and exploring their culture (e.g., joining ASO, PUG, and the Sakena Hassan Arabic Program). This reflects how racially and ethnically diverse students face additional stressors as they navigate the varying expectations and norms of their college communities and their racial and ethnic identity and culture (Nasir & Saxe, 2003).

Knowing that sense of belonging motivates students to seek out opportunities to fulfill their needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), student activities and involvement can be a way students become closer to both their institution and their identity/ies. Strayhorn (2019) suggested that these motives can affect students' academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. This was shown by the participants as they often sought out ways to connect with others. This included exploring student organizations, attending events, and speaking to peers in the classroom. Participants often explored student organizations that were related to their Arab American identity or their interests, both academic and political. Unlike Nuñez's (2009) findings on Latinx students, participants in this study did not disclose that campus hostility factored into their behavior in seeking opportunities to connect with others. This was shown by participants as they all attempted to join student organizations within their first year at their university, hoping to find friends. In addition, when participants spoke about these positive experiences and their sense of belonging, they were excited, joyful, and happy with their experiences reflecting that students' sense of belonging is impacted by positive outcomes such as achievement, engagement, and well-being (Hausmann et al., 2007). Suggesting that Arab American college students want to belong, and this need motivates their behaviors resulting in positive outcomes such as increased involvement and academic success. When Arab American college students feel that they belong, it provides institutions with engaged students who are likely to perform stronger academically and potentially increase retention and four-year graduation rates.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With identity affirmation and conflict in mind, it is imperative that higher education and student affairs practitioners and scholars consider the intersection of identity and involvement at this juncture. I offer several recommendations for practice and research regarding Arab American college students and their engagement with campus activities and student organizations specifically.

### Recommendations for Practice

First, practitioners should work to understand the different needs of Arab international and Arab American students, as well as the complexity of their relationships–or lack thereof–with one another. Student activities and involvement offices, for example, can tailor services to provide more support for student groups across identities, and with a mindfulness that although Arab students may share a racial category, their cultural experiences and expectations differ. While this can be done in student organization spaces, it can also be through campus events and student body-wide programming. For example, student affairs programmers can increase the overall Arab American racial and ethnic representation at events via food, music, speakers, and cultural highlights. Given many Arab American students in this study felt like they belonged when with other student of color communities, student involvement spaces can create and provide opportunities for cross-racial socialization, friendship, and more.

### Recommendations for Research

Beyond these practical considerations, additional research about Arab American college students and their overall student experience is needed to help improve university services, classroom experiences, and their overall sense of belonging. This study focused on the undergraduate experience in student involvement and organizations specifically; future research can be done to further explore the experiences of Arab American graduate students in campus activities and organizations. Graduate students may experience belonging differently than undergraduates as they are in different developmental stages, possess varying expectations, and are viewed differently than undergraduate students. Perhaps this is also a unique area where support for graduate students is needed differently, especially in the areas of community across generations and life spans (e.g., graduate students with children, spouses, etc.).

Additional research related to the understanding of the Arab identity and how it relates to enoughness is needed. Participants' feelings of enoughness varied. Gaining a better understanding of what directly impacts their feelings of enoughness could improve higher education services, curricula, and organizations. Through additional qualitative research, scholars can examine what enoughness means to Arab American college students, when they experience feeling enough, and how it affects their overall belonging. Research can be conducted to examine how Arab college students' families and communities affect their experiences navigating their identities (e.g., perhaps students feel more or less drawn to certain organizations due to familial expectations). This study suggests some participants searched for community on campus and when they were unable to find it, they looked elsewhere for community and belonging. Creating a sense of belonging on campus will aid Arab American college students' feelings of mattering, and overall well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Arab American college students, how they achieve a sense of belonging, and the role student involvement and leadership play in these experiences. Participants shared their experiences navigating their racial and ethnic identity while seeking a sense of belonging. While searching for opportunities to connect with their peers in student organizations related to their Arab American identity, at times participants were excluded. These experiences left them feeling invisible, othered, and isolated. Participants remained resilient, resourceful, and eager to belong, pushing them to seek opportunities to belong both on and off campus. Student leadership opportunities helped participants feel like they mattered, belonged, and gave them a sense of connection to their peers and institutions. It would behoove higher education professionals to ensure there are opportunities where Arab American college students can take on leadership roles and actively engage with their peers and institutions.

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