



A Walk in Her Shoes: How Women of Color Navigate a Predominately White Institution

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Abstract

This study is aimed at understanding how Black and/or Latina undergraduate women successfully navigate a predominantly white institution. Using narrative inquiry methodology and Critical Race Theory, I collected the stories and voices of women attending the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire that identify as Black and/or Latina ethnicity. Another purpose for this research is to successfully apply the narratives of these women, audio-recorded as ‘testimonies,’ to gain greater insight on how students adjust to an environment outside of their comfort-zones. This project also aimed to provide awareness to enhance the experiences of future students who sacrifice their culture in the pursuit of higher education. The methodological approach of this research was to record and analyze the narratives of women who are currently enrolled at a predominantly white institution and transcribe the interviews into official testimonies. Interview questions were structured around the participant’s opinions, values, feelings, background, and demographics to understand their personal experience and how it impacted their time at a predominately white institution. As a researcher, I hope to share a clear and comprehensible understanding of the obstacles these minority populations face while attending a predominantly white institution. The research project has four main objectives:

- To identify how Black and/or Latina women adapt to the institution’s environment.
- To discover the resources available & the resources desired for success.
- To identify if mentorship plays an important part in support and guidance.
- To identify the personal investment behind each student.

The four concrete values examined throughout this project consist of mentoring, community, personal investment, and involvement. Through the analyses of the collected testimonies correlations between the four values were examined in order to propose changes within predominantly white institutions or prove which methods and resources keep Black and/or Latina women feeling safe, comfortable, and appreciated while pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Background

Students of color pursuing higher education have fought for decades to receive equality while attending predominantly white institutions. “Students of color” refers to groups of racial and ethnic minorities including Black, African American, Asian, Latinx, Chicana, Native American, etc., while the terms “underrepresented” or “targeted racial minority” refer to specific racial/ethnic groups that have been disadvantaged in higher education. These groups include African Americans, Hispanic/Latino(a)s, American Indians, etc.

In the article “Negotiating the Gaze and Learning the Hidden Curriculum,” J. Esposito explores the hidden curriculum within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and examines how women of color encounter higher education’s unspoken norms and rules that reproduce positional social politics. In the article “Connection and Commitment,” K. Booker underscores key factors including accessibility and approachability, authentic instruction, spokesperson pressure, and microaggressions. Booker points to the importance of having engaged and connected professors inside and outside the classroom as this is a factor that greatly impacts Black students’ success at PWIs. Having access to faculty of color creates positive memories for students because faculty of color often provide safe spaces for students to express themselves, their opinions, and their feelings.

It is clear that the process of changing an institution’s values and beliefs to fulfill the needs of the underrepresented student population requires the institution to be aware of the struggles and issues within EDI. My project seeks to “listen” to female students of color to examine how to increase this awareness and propose meaningful institutional change. The challenges minorities face are hard to comprehend until we walk in their shoes and hear their stories.

Narrative Inquiry & Critical Race Theory (CRT)

This research study utilizes two methodologies, Critical Race Theory and narrative inquiry. The primary methodology used for this project was the narrative inquiry approach. This approach is the study of experience understood narratively, a way of thinking about, and studying experiences. Narrative Inquiry is a storytelling method used when collecting qualitative data. It highlights and amplifies the participant’s voices by focusing on their interpretation of their lived experiences. The second method used throughout this research paper is the Critical Race Theory. CRT is a theoretical framework that uses critical theory to examine society and culture as they relate to categorization of race, law, and power. It is also a theoretical and interpretive mode that focuses on the appearance of race/racism across dominant cultural modes of expression. CRT is a school of thought meant to emphasize the effects of race on one’s social standing. This study utilizes this lens as an attempt to understand how students of color are victims of systemic racism and how they are affected by cultural perceptions of race, microaggressions, and prejudice thoughts.

Method

This research study consisted of collecting qualitative data on women of color studying at a predominately white institution within the University of Wisconsin System. Data was collected by recording the oral narratives of qualifying women who volunteered to participate in the study and transcribing the interviews into official testimonies for analysis. All participants must have been at a sophomore-level standing or higher, identified as a woman, identified as Black and/or identify with Latina ethnicity, and attended a university within the UW-System. Subjects were asked a series of 11 open-ended questions and had the freedom to share as much as they felt comfortable with. Interview questions were structured around the subject's opinions, values, feelings, background, and demographics. Pseudonyms were provided to keep subject's identity protected. Subjects were identified through multicultural organizations, Ronald McNair recruitment, and mentor connections. Subjects were recruited via email with an invitation for participation. A signed consent form was required in order to continue with the study. The benefit of participation in the research interview was being able to speak their voice, emotions, and thoughts in hopes to raise awareness of what it means to be an underrepresented woman at a predominately white institution.

Four Narratives

In this section, I analyze the narratives of four Black and/or Latina women: Kelly, Daniela, Vicky, and Shaun. Every participant was asked to choose a respective name as their pseudonym to protect their identity. By interviewing a small number of Black/Latina women studying at a university within the UW-System, I was able to gather enough data to understand the campus environment for women of color. Interview questions were structured around the four concrete values of mentoring, community, personal investment, and involvement. Although their testimonies revealed all participants shared underlying similarities, each participant's experience was unique, and they had very different stories to tell. Participants shared the struggles they have had to overcome as a woman of color attending a predominately white institution. Using a Narrative Inquiry approach and Critical Race Theory lens, I present the stories of four brave participants.

Kelly's Story At the time of the interview, Kelly was 21 years old and going into her senior year at a university within the UW-System. She is from a predominately white town and identifies as a biracial Black and white woman. Kelly was raised by a single mother and grew up with six older siblings. During her childhood, Kelly described herself as a troubled kid that needed more structure. "We moved around a lot, so I know it was tough for me." Her attention quickly focused on sports after discovering her athletic abilities. "I put all my energy into sports and that's literally kind of like what made me, motivated me to stay in school and pursue a future in education."

"I grew up in a really small town. I was the only Black African American in my high school, so I would say I stood out. I am mixed so I'm not as dark but coming to [the university city], I knew it was going to be a predominantly white university, it didn't bug me because

I came from a predominately white town and my mom is white so I was kind of used to it.”

Attending a predominately white school was nothing new to Kelly, in fact, it was all she was used to. She struggled to find her identity during her childhood as she battled the confusion of what it meant to be bi-racial. I asked Kelly at what age/school year did she begin to recognize her identity, she responded with “Pretty late... probably sophomore year of high school.”

“I knew I always looked different, but my mom was like ‘oh you’re so beautiful, like that shouldn’t matter’ but also, when you’re the only one that looks how you look, it starts to get to you and (you) compare yourself to others. Like why do I have such curly hair? Why am I so much taller? Why do they look like this and that? In high school, that’s really when everyone started to point out my flaws.”

As a first-generation college student, she chose the university she attends because it was affordable and close to home. “I’m a first-generation student, I didn’t know if college was for me. Nobody in my family really went to college or was successful so I’m like ‘worse comes to worse, I’m an hour and a half away from home, I could drop out and get a job.’” Kelly had no expectations coming into her freshman year. She quickly adjusted to the new environment and was fascinated by her first Black professor during her sophomore year of college.

“He was my first Black professor ever. I feel like that’s when I started to really think ‘wow, there’s really no people of color (professors/faculty) or any role- models at the university to look up to.’ I expected to see bigger diversity, I didn’t really question it because of where I come from, a white town.”

Kelly utilized many academic and social resources during her time at her university. As a freshman, she was a part of a federal TRIO grant program designed to be an introduction to college that provides guidance and support for students to utilize. The program provides tutors, hosts events, and assigns a mentor to each freshman enrolled in the program. During the program, she met a lot of friends and even became a mentor after her first year. She also participated in a women of color student organization that hosted dinner and talks every semester. Kelly also discussed the challenges she faced as a woman of color at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

“I knew there would be challenges to face, especially being on your own. One of the biggest things is having honesty with myself. I am coming in... like I come from a pretty poor household, so I knew it was going to be on me. If I want to succeed, I know it is going to be by myself. Having no one that looks like you or can talk to you is very hard. “ One of Kelly’s biggest struggles was adjusting to the lack of representation on campus as well as the stereotypes and statistics provided to her. During her freshman year,

she was shown the average dropout rate for someone with similar characteristics that attended her university. “I feel like seeing it right away I was like ‘oh, like why am I even trying? Now I feel like it’s motivation because like knowing I am so close to graduating. I’ve doing so well; nobody is going to take me from finishing school.” Although Kelly has not taken any courses with a woman of color professor, she bonded with a Black male professor which has given her comfort and motivation to continue in her studies. He quickly earned her trust and became a mentor for her.

“He is such an inspiration and gives me motivation. He’s like one of the only professors that I feel comfortable even talking about personal stuff, like personal life and my personal struggles. He shares personal things with me, he’s the only one to reach out to me when racist on-campus incidents happen. None of my other professors have gone out their way to make (that) personal connection with me, you know. I feel like he’s amazing and he really cares for all students, especially students of color and supports them when we need it.”

One of the toughest questions I asked all participants was if they felt that they belonged at their university. By belong, I mean feel accepted as part of the institution and accepted by classmates and instructors. Kelly took some time to reflect of her answer.

“At the institution alone, I would say yes and no. I’m just another face going through, walking through, to get what I need to get done. I feel like I have done a lot to get myself out there and create meaningful connections. In my (major) department I feel very welcomed and belong there. But just like walking on campus, I still get anxiety, even as a senior, I get worried walking around campus. Are people going to stare, judge me, ask questions about me, stuff like that? In my (major department) I feel a lot more secure and safe than I do on campus. Maybe because I come from a small town or because I know it’s a predominately white campus and I don’t want to stand out or give the wrong impression, say the wrong things or just I don’t want to look different. I know you’re supposed to embrace your differences and stuff like that but also I’m a lot more comfortable when people know the real me.”

Kelly shared her own experience and struggles with the intention of motivating young first-generation women of color entering their undergraduate years. “Go out and get involved! It may seem scary, it may seem like nobody’s on your side, no one’s there for you, but with time you will find those people.” Being confident is essential. She expresses the importance of putting in hard work and effort in order to succeed.

“Don’t give up ever, whatever the statistics say, just keep doing you, keep focusing on you like your path will become apparent as you move on, just keep fighting for yourself. Believe in yourself, and don’t let anyone get in your way. Be confident.”

Daniela's Story Daniela was a 19-year-old sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences at the time of the interview. Daniela grew up in a predominately white Minneapolis suburb with her two older sisters and identifies as coming from a blended family of Vietnamese, White, and Honduran. Growing up, she attended predominately white private schools that quickly made her realize she was unique from those around her. "It was an interesting area where I grew up when you are kind of the only one." Daniela shares the frustration she faced during her childhood.

"Something I have noticed now and have been navigating or unlearning, so to say, I feel like I grew up with a lot of internalized racism which is something I have been, it's been a process to unlearn. It's like you know when you are younger and all your peers around you... all your mentors, friends are white, you just want to fit in, you know. You do whatever you can to fit in with your friends' lifestyles. I think it kind of just came down to, like, rejecting my culture. I did not have an interest in learning Spanish, now I obviously do, but when I was younger, I was like 'no, none of my friends do this, why would I?' I would never invite my friends over. I would be so embarrassed if my parents showed up (to school events) and I did not want to associate with them."

Daniela was always aware of her cultural difference, even at a young age. "I mean I think I was always really aware of it, because how can you not be, you know? You're brown and everyone around you is white." Although she was always aware of her uniqueness, she did not embrace it until her sophomore year of high school.

"I'm brown and yeah, I don't look like everyone else, but that means I have better, sometimes bigger things to offer, you know? Like I said, it was a process of unlearning, it is something I still think about, I think about my childhood and all those things I did to fit in, I feel horrible about it. It's very uncomfortable and it's sad to think about that I rejected me- what made me and my family, I rejected it so much. I became more outspoken like with accepting who I am."

Daniela decided to attend her university because of the more affordable tuition and the first impression she got while touring the campus. She remembers the tour guide making a good argument for the school valuing social justice and inclusivity, something she is very passionate about. She was also looking for something different than her school, and a larger public university seemed like a good fit. As an undergraduate freshman, she quickly began to understand the campus environment.

"I feel like the university puts on a good front about valuing social justice and valuing inclusivity and I think they should and can be doing more for minorities but also the two rather large racist incidents, I think were handled very poorly and I don't know, it doesn't make for a good campus environment all the time."

She shared her frustration about being the only women of color in most of her classes. The expectations for students of color at a predominately white institution is an unspoken

norm that non-students of color do not understand.

“Something that I noticed... like right now I’m in a diversity in media class and I feel like I’m providing a lot of labor, you know? To just like explain people’s lived experience and be like ‘well this is how it affect me and people that identity as me’ and it’s like don’t mind it most of the time, but it’s like it’s very frustrating. For example, in my class if I wouldn’t say anything about whatever we may be discussing nobody else in the class is going to say anything, then they won’t learn about it.”

Daniela did not have many expectations of her university and was only looking forward to being in an environment where she could be academically focused. “I wasn’t really expecting anything because I was coming in without knowing anyone or knowing anyone that came before me. I was just going off the good vibes I got on the tour.” Daniela had a full year of experience as a student at her university before being interviewed for this research study.

As a freshman, Daniela was living on campus in the university dorm rooms. She expressed her frustration about girls in the building being openly racist and getting away with it.

“There was an issue where some girls on the floor that were just openly racist and very open about microaggressions and kind of just made their perspectives on students of color very clear and I feel like the RA (residence assistant) on that floor and the housing director did not handle it appropriately. The people that came forward (about the racist comments) ended up moving out the dorm because nothing was being fixed. I think it just makes you hypervigilant about the people that you’re around, like in your own dorm, the people you come across, like what are you thinking about me, you know? Not that it should matter that much what people think about me but I’m like ‘due to the color of my skin?’”

Although Daniela was only going into her second year at her university, she was already involved in school organizations such as progressive advocacy nonprofit and political action committee. She hasn’t reached out to any academic or social resources as she feels she does not need them yet. As a freshman, she attended student of color organization meetings but did not feel welcomed and felt excluded because she did not know anyone there. We move onto discussing any challenges that have occurred to her as a Woman of color.

“One thing I have noticed particularly with white men I’ve been in contact with is like an open fetishization of Woman of color, which is nasty, they are not people I’m friends with anymore. They would say things like ‘Can you say something sexy in Spanish?’ I don’t know, I’ve been asked that more than once and it’s shocking every single time. I think it comes down to like educating a lot of peers and things like that.”

As a student in the College of Arts and Sciences, Daniela believes her major is a more male-dominated department.

“I’ve had all male professors and it’s more intimidating to speak more in class. Sometimes you’re just very aware that you’re the only one, specifically woman of color, in the room so I can be very intimidated, but it’s just fine.”

Daniela has been lucky to have taken courses taught by women of color faculty. She was excited and scared, but in a good way, as she pushed herself to do particularly well in their courses. After meeting a woman of color faculty mentor in her department, she immediately called her mom to share the wonderful news.

“I thought it would be very cool to have a mentor that looks like me, you know. I think they can understand your experience more because it is also their lived experience and they understand the challenges you may face, they get it.”

Daniela believes she fights for her place at her university. Feeling like you belong at a predominately white institution can come with a lot of confusion and mixed emotions.

“Last year I went through a phase where I wanted to transfer (universities) but the way I look at it is, I think any institution in our society you are going to face issues with race. I’d rather help the environment for future students to come than for me to walk away. I don’t care if people don’t remember who I am, I just think there could be some changes to the environment on campus to make students of color feel like they belong and feel like they are safe and feel like this institution was also made for them.”

For future generations of students of color attending a predominately white institution, Daniela believes they should prioritize finding a group of supportive friends to lean on when needed.

“Do not settle for friends who don’t understand, whether that means finding friends that look like you or friends that are educated and understand your experiences, but make sure you have something that you have to go back to for the days that are too much to handle.”

Vicky’s Story When the interview was conducted, Vicky was going into her senior year at a university within the UW-System. She identifies as a bi-racial woman of color and is a student-athlete. Coming from a diverse suburb in Illinois, she was immediately culture shocked when she arrived at her predominantly white institution.

“I didn’t really know I was a person of color until I came to this town. My hometown is really diverse and white people are definitely the minority. I don’t know, I just never really considered it an issue because it wasn’t really an issue and I think I’ve learned a lot more like why my skin color is important and why me being a person of color is important coming to college.”

Vicky was raised by a single mother, and she believes being raised by a white mother played a big part of her not understanding what it means to be a person of color. She experienced racism in high school, but she played it off more because there were so many other people that looked like her, making it easier to ignore. She recalls having a wonderful happy childhood and a good life growing up. "I've always known that I'm brown, but I guess I never really saw it problematic or the way society saw it until I got here." Coming from a diverse hometown helped Vicky gain a different perspective on society.

"I feel like I'm more open to a wider array of things because I have experienced so many different cultures, whereas some of my friends that grew up in a predominately white neighborhoods or white towns, they don't have that."

Vicky began to recognize her ethnicity/culture at a very young age, during preschool. A classmate did not want to play with her and her sister because "she was too dark." At such a young age, Vicky began to question her differences from those around her.

"I think that was the first time I really noticed... I didn't really get why, and my mom wasn't very good at explaining why, not that she did anything wrong, but I just don't think she could find the words." Reflecting on her freshman year of college, she shared her first racist incident at her institution.

"The first time I noticed it (racism) in a negative way was freshman year in one of my Latin American studies class, someone called me a mut. So, I think that was kind of the first time I was like... 'oh wow.' I just, I think I just knew that I was dark, I did not know that I was Black. I feel like I can't identify as white because I'm brown even though I am predominately white. I'm 50% White and I am 25% Mexican, and 25% Black so it's like... I can't because I'm brown, so I feel like I've always leaned towards that part of me. When I tell people that I'm 50% white like they often don't believe me which is just interesting to me, but I definitely feel like I lean more towards my Black side. I feel like just because I look that way but that's like I feel like I'm kind of forced to identify that way, the way that we structured race in society. Going back to me being 50% white, like I don't look white, so I feel like... I don't know, I kind of just have to be Black."

Vicky decided to attend her university for one main reason, to be a college athlete. She explains how she did not look into any specific program and knew very little about the university. "I knew nothing about the diversity, nothing about my major, like literally nothing about this school at all, I just didn't really care." Becoming a part of an athletic team that is predominately white was also a shock for Vicky.

"Honestly, I don't think I've ever (been a part of) a team that was predominately white. I get here and I'm the only person of color, so that's was like... I was shocked like I didn't even know what to say when I get to the first day. I definitely expected there to be more

people that look like me, but I think that was the first time I realized ‘Oh wow, this is not a diverse school.’”

Going into her fourth year at her predominately white institution, Vicky shared her experience so far.

“I feel like I just had to get used to it (the lack of diversity) and it’s definitely open me up to different situations and like I’m grateful for the experiences I’ve had and being able to deal with a place that’s not as diverse instead of like just going in the workforce and like expecting everything to be super diverse. There’s definitely been experiences that I wish I didn’t have to deal with it, but I mean that’s just like being a person of color. A lot of my friends from freshman year didn’t know what white privilege was and didn’t believe in it. Most of my friends are white so just kind of adjusting to that and like explaining it to them. I’ve never really had to explain my experiences to anyone until I got to college so learning how to kind of navigate that, it’s been interesting.

I thought I was doing a good job and now the world’s exploding and I’m realizing I still got work to do. I don’t want to (have that responsibility) but I feel like for most of them I am the only person of color they are friends with.”

Vicky was introduced to some academic/social resources during her first year of college but was quickly overwhelmed. Although she did not utilize them, she was always aware of the resources offered to multicultural students on campus. “I think I kind of rebelled against it because I didn’t really like the idea of, I don’t know how to put it, like it just kind of made me feel like a number. I was like ‘All these people are here to help you’ but like none of my friends had to do that so I don’t know, it’s kind of a source of frustration for me more than a source of like a place that I felt welcomed. We’re at a predominately white school so yeah, just shove all the people of color in this room and like make them be friends, you know. We don’t all like have to be friends because we are brown.”

Vicky faced many challenges as a woman of color at a predominately white institution, most of them happening in the classrooms. “Sharing my experiences has been a big source of frustration for me. Even in my(major) studies classes because I am the only woman of color or I’m part of a small group and I feel like often times it’s on us, which shouldn’t be.” When the topic of minorities is brought up in class, students often look at her. Most of Vicky’s frustrations have happened in the classroom but being a student-athlete at a predominately white institution has also come with challenges.

“I’ve definitely asked my coach like why there aren’t more people of color on our team and then he was just like ‘Well, this is like where I recruit’ and I’m like ‘Well, don’t you want to be more diverse?’ and he was like “Do you want me to go further and find less good athletes, not as good athletes to make the team more diverse or you want me to stay where I am at and keep recruiting white people?’ You can still look at good athletes, it can just be athletes of color.”

Vicky has been fortunate enough to have a woman of color advisor through her department. “It’s actually been pretty interesting; she definitely has a more diverse perspective. She’s Hispanic and I’m Hispanic and she’s a woman and I’m a woman and we get each other’s perspectives more.”

Being a woman of color at a predominately white institution has come with unspoken challenges for Vicky. She does not feel like she belongs at the predominately white institution because she stands out from the student population.

“Ever since the first day I got here I kind of felt like I stuck out for some reason. I kind of had a hard time identifying why because it’s not always in your face, you know. It’s like you’re brown but it’s kind of hard to forget when you’re just surrounded by people that don’t look like you. It’s not like I don’t feel welcomed, I do feel welcomed, and I love it here, but I can’t forget that I am a person of color no matter where I go. I think that’s why I don’t belong, it like it’s kind of just like my skin color is a constant reminder you know, and it’s like maybe that’s just my reckoning with race too in college. I can’t go back and unsee it, you know.”

For future students of color attending predominately white institutions, Vicky believes patience is key and setting boundaries is essential. “Be patient with yourself, you don’t have to tolerate if people are being racist or racially bias, you don’t have to take it.” Vicky also thinks allowing time to adjust is a major part of surviving a PWI. “I think the transition into college is hard, but the transition into an institution with not many students of color, you have to take race into consideration. I wish someone would’ve told me that because I was just in the state of shock, and I didn’t know how to prepare for it.”

Shaun’s Story At the time of the interview, Shaun was 21 years old and was going into her senior year at a university within the UW-System. She is from a diverse city in Illinois, comes from a single-parent household, has two other siblings, and is in the College of Arts and Sciences. Shaun identifies as Black, white, and Mexican.

“I don’t pick one over the other, It’s kind of hard because I’m not like super dark-skin, well not dark-skin, I’m obviously (of) color but I don’t look Mexican nor do I really look Black, so I don’t really consciously pick one over the other. I feel more Black just because I don’t look Mexican.”

Shaun’s hometown is much more diverse than the city where she attends school. “I think of it like the minorities (in her hometown) are actually the majority.” In middle and high school Shaun never had to pick out how many students of color were in the classroom. It wasn’t until college when she began to look for other students that looked like her.

“I would say I’m very lucky in the fact that that’s how I grew up. I got to interact with so many people. It wasn’t until I came to college where I would pick out like ‘there’s

another student of color.’ I’ve never had done that before and coming here I knew it was a predominately white institution and, in the beginning, I was like fine, and I still am with it. It’s given me opportunities to help learn about myself but also like teach others what it means to be a minority but at the same time, I had never been in the position where I had to teach others about what it means to be a minority.”

During her childhood, most of Shaun’s friends were white. It wasn’t until middle or high school, when she would have to fill out forms by herself and pick her race and ethnicity, that Shaun really began thinking of herself as a person of color. Although she began to accept her identity in middle and high school, Shaun began questioning it during kindergarten. One of Shaun’s classmates refused to play with her and her sister because of her skin tone. “I felt more like I had found an identity or part of my identity.” Shaun decided to continue her higher education journey at an institution within the UW-System because it was less expensive than other schools she was considering. “The campus is gorgeous, the people are super nice, let’s go here and we’re going to have a great experience. It was kind of more like the financial part of it than the diversity part that made my choice.” Before arriving to campus, Shaun had low expectations of the institution. During her freshman year, Shaun and her roommate did not socialize with other girls on their dorm-room floor, because they didn’t have much in common. Overall, her experiences have been pretty good. “I’ve had a lot of opportunities with finding research and classes. There’s no part that regrets coming here and choosing this university.” Finding a support group where Shaun could feel accepted and welcomed was essential.

“A huge thing for me, freshman year, was just like finding a group that I could be a part of, like I could, I guess, build a family with, maybe, if that makes sense, like build a sense of community. That for me was like finding different student organizations to be a part of. I found two (student organizations). They were more welcoming and open to everybody and there were people who looked like me, that was a huge thing, I was introduced to it through [a student organization event hosted every semester.]

Although Shaun concluded she hasn’t faced challenges for being a woman of color, she does struggle from imposter syndrome when it comes to presenting research. For the first time since she arrived to campus, Shaun felt like she belonged in her department when presenting her research at a symposium.

“After my research presentation, I sat there after I finished, and I was like ‘Oh my God’ it was the first time I’d actually felt real. I guess up until that point I finally felt just like somebody doing it and going through the motion. At that point I was like ‘This is who I am.’ Part of that was because, and this isn’t necessarily a bad reflection of the [major] department but we only have one woman of color in our department, so it’s kind of hard to see yourself [in that profession] when you don’t see people in your department who look like you. I wouldn’t say that I have challenges due to like, not having opportunities,

because I've had tons of opportunities, it's just more like there aren't people who look like me so how could I possibly succeed."

Shaun respects her department because they are aware, they need to increase the diversity within faculty. "I think their efforts in trying to diversify in general are genuine." Reflecting on the past three years, Shaun believed she finally felt a sense of belongingness as she was going into her senior year.

"I feel like I belong but it's like still like, I don't know, weird because I'll walk around campus and look up and see another person of color and be like 'Oh my God, there's more of us, this is weird.' So, that's still things I do, count how many of us there are in class. Overall, now I feel like I belong. Maybe not a year ago, but definitely not my freshman and sophomore year because I was still like 'I don't really know where I fit in.' I just hadn't found my community that I clicked with. It took me a while to find those (supportive people) and actually commit to doing it (student organizations) and realizing these people are here and like I want to stay here because of them. I hated it here for so long because I didn't have that community."

Shaun had a hard time finding her community through student of color organizations because she never felt like enough of the race or ethnicity. For future generations of students of color, Shaun believes getting involved is essential.

"Don't do what I did! Do it (join student organizations) because maybe you'll learn more. I would love to go back and do that and find friends that look like me and embrace more those parts of me. Be open to every opportunity you possibly can. Don't turn down opportunities because you feel like you don't belong. Just because you don't have people who look like you, doesn't mean you can't be the first person to do it and forge the way for other people to come after."

Discussion & Conclusion

In this section I will focus on the four themes of the research project: mentoring, community, personal investment, and involvement as well as how participants illustrated the themes.

Mentoring can play a crucial role in a student of color's experience while attending a predominately white institution, which is why it is the most important theme. According to Seasons of a Man's life, mentoring contributed to the successful development of individuals and the mentors "support and facilitate the realization of the Dream." The "Dream" can be interpreted as the vision a young person has about the kind of life they want to have as an adult. Mentors can be guides for students of color that need additional support and encouragement, especially if do not have a support-system at home.

Kelly, the first participant, was fascinated with having a Black male professor for the first time in her life. She shortly realized the lack of diversity within faculty and staff at her predominately white institution. Kelly quickly bonded with this professor, as they shared a lot of similarities and understood each other. Her mentor is her inspiration and gives her motivation to continue working hard during her higher education journey. “He’s like one of the only professors that I feel comfortable even talking about personal stuff, like personal life and personal struggles.” Lack of representation in faculty members may lead to faculty of color taking on a lot of extra mentorship work that their white colleagues may not feel as obligated to do. The pressure to take on a mentorship role comes naturally as people of color feel the need to assist one another. Students of color feel safe, comfortable, and relate to people that look like them and share similar personal experiences. Having representation within faculty and staff is an important factor in student of color retention.

Another important theme is community. Community can be defined as a feeling with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. Having a healthy community for students of color can also enhance their experiences. Through communities, women of color can be themselves, find support, feel welcomed, and gain comfort while attending a predominately white institution. Shaun, our fourth participant, expressed the importance of finding a community where she felt she belonged. During her freshman year, she struggled to find a sense of belonging. After a couple years, she finally found a community that felt like family to her. Predominately white institutions often encourage students of color to become a part of diversity student organizations. Often times, students of color feel too pressured and become uncomfortable. For Shaun, she never found her community through student of color organizations because she felt she was never enough of the race or ethnicity to belong. For example, she did not feel as if she belonged in a Black student organization, or a Latinx student organization because of her biracial background. Shaun believes one of the main reasons why she did not transfer institutions is because she found her community.

The third theme that is highlighted throughout this research study is personal investment. Personal investment can be understood as an act of personal growth. While women of color navigate through a predominately white institution, they often face many challenges and obstacles that consists of facing fears and insecurities and transforming them into strengths. Investing in their selves takes personal willpower. This theme is different from the other three themes because personal investment is something that only you can do to enhance your experience. Daniela, our second participant, quickly began joining student organizations that aligned with her passions. Being a part of a progressive advocacy nonprofit and political action committee as only a second-year student enhanced her abilities to navigate a predominately white institution. As a freshman, Daniela admitted she wanted to transfer universities. She quickly included that any predominately white institution in our society was going to face issues in regards to race. She concluded that her mission was to assist in the improvement of the environment at her current institution

for future students of color. Daniela's personal investment in wanting to create a better campus for future generations is a journey that will not come easy.

The fourth theme of this research study is involvement. When focusing on the experiences of women of color at a predominately white institution, it is important to highlight their involvement on campus. Being emotionally and/or personally associated with someone or something can shape every student's experience in a unique way.

Throughout this study, it is important to recognize that involvement was only possible if the participants felt welcomed and comfortable. By providing a welcoming environment, students of color will feel safe to participate in on-campus events and organizations. All four participants share the commonality of being involved on campus with either support groups, student organizations, or athletics teams. Predominately white institutions can be intimidating for students of color, as they feel like a small number within a large white student population. Involvement of students of color is only possible if the campus provides them with safe environments to express themselves freely.

By analyzing the stories and experiences of these four women of color attending a predominately white institution, we can amplify the voices of other students of color. Even if universities have a small student of color population, these institutions should prioritize making them feel as if they mattered with welcoming and open arms. The journey can be draining and it can sometimes be impossible to see the finish line as a student of color.

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