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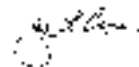
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**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**



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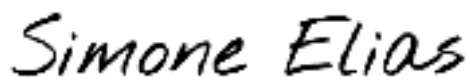
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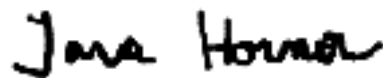
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Dr. Myron Pope, Chair



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Dr. Simone Elias



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Dr. Tara Hornor

Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

A Sense of Belonging Among Minority Students at a Southeastern State Flagship University

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Shakia D. Davis

May 2020

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my future self. This is a reminder to always believe in yourself, follow your dreams, and always remember your capabilities.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would first like to acknowledge Jesus, who has been with me every step of the way. I am thankful for Your grace, which helped me during this journey.

Next, I would like to thank my family for always supporting me. Thank you for listening to me talk about this process and being so encouraging. I love you all.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends, who supported me during this time. You all checked in on me and asked about my progress and my research. I am forever grateful.

To all my students thus far, thank you for motivating me to be better. You all were constant reminders that completing this study was for more than just me. I love you all more than you could imagine.

Lastly, I want to thank Dr. Myron Pope, my dissertation chair. You made sure I grew during this process. You allowed me to be independent, yet you were always there if I needed you. I can only hope to be a wonderful dissertation chair to a student one day. I would also like to thank Dr. Simone Elias and Dr. Tara Hornor, my dissertation committee. You both are awesome. I am so thankful and blessed to have had you both on my committee. Thank you to each of you for all your support, encouragement, and feedback during this process.

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### **Abstract**

The number of minority students enrolling into college is increasing. However, minority students are likely to experience feelings of isolation and a sense of not belonging on college campuses, specifically predominantly White institutions. A sense of belonging among minority students may contribute to a higher chance of academic persistence, academic achievement, and positive feelings about one's self. Therefore, creating and cultivating a sense of belonging among minority students at predominantly White institutions is crucial to these students' well-being and overall academic success. Key components in creating and cultivating a sense of belonging are student involvement and positive relationships with faculty, staff, and friends. A basic qualitative study was conducted to describe the experiences of minority students enrolled at a southeastern state flagship university. Data collected consisted of one-on-one individual interviews with 13 minority students enrolled at this predominantly White institution. The findings highlighted each participant's experiences at this university. The findings suggested that support from campus involvements and relationships and the school's environment all played a role in the students' experiences at this university. Further, these factors either contributed or did not contribute to their overall sense of belonging.

*Keywords:* minority student, involvement, relationship, belonging, support

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Going away to college can be stressful for students. According to Chinyamurindi (2018), enrolling in an institution is described as life changing and is associated with hardship and struggle for students. However, enrolling in an institution of higher education for a minority student can cause even more stress. Fuentes et al. (2019) defined minority students as those representing the Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Hispanic, and Latinx ethnic and racial groups. For these students, feeling as though they belong on their campus is of vital importance. A student's sense of belonging not only includes how they identify with others around them but also how they connect with the university or college as a whole (Jackson, 2016).

Researching a sense of belonging on college campuses has become more popular in recent years. Findings from many recent studies have revealed positive connections between a sense of belonging and student participation, belief in one's self, school satisfaction, and academic persistence (Jackson, 2016). For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conducted research that indicated that the notion of belonging to a group increased students' likelihood of obtaining their college degree. Additionally, when a student feels as though they belong on their college or university campus, they perform and thrive at their highest potential (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Researchers have studied the connection between a sense of belonging and students' quality of life (O'Meara et al., 2017). A sense of school belonging may be a significant factor in the mental and emotional adjustment among college students (Gummadam et al., 2016). Students who report a higher sense of belonging at their higher education institutions tend to have more positive mental and cognitive outcomes (Booker, 2016).

More diverse groups of students are seeking out college educations (Thelamour et al., 2019). Snyder and Dillow (2019) stated that as of 2017, nearly 40% of all college students are of

a racial or ethnic minority. However, minority students are reporting a lower sense of belonging on college campuses than their White peers (Museus et al., 2018). More specifically, minority students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) report feelings such as exclusion, humiliation, contempt, anxiety, and disappointment in their college experiences (Booker, 2016).

Furthermore, minority students who do not feel welcomed, supported, and encouraged on their campus have difficulties adjusting to campus life and being successful (Han et al., 2018). According to Garcia (2019), a student's sense of belonging has significant positive effects on their mental well-being. A sense of belonging in college students involves their beliefs that they have relationships with the faculty and staff, thus making them feel a connectedness to the college campus (Yao, 2016).

### **Mattering**

A student's perceived sense of belonging is one's opinion on how they matter and are cared about at their institution (Stokes, 2017). Mattering helps students to find their social identities, and the need to matter remains constant even as students move from one location to another (Heinisch, 2018). The relationship between mattering and academic success is confirmed through many studies that state that students who feel as though they matter on their campus are more determined to learn, more involved, more likely to persist to graduation, and more academically successful (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) recognized two types of mattering: interpersonal and general. They defined interpersonal mattering as how much a person perceives that they matter to individuals and defined general mattering as how much a person perceives they matter to a community or group (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In this study, the community or group was college campuses.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Although some efforts have been made to help these students feel a stronger sense of belonging, students still cited a welcoming meeting place and a supportive ally that can understand what they need as a minority at a PWI are absent (Smith et al., 2015). Minorities currently make up about 25% of the U.S. population, which makes the academic success of these groups essential (Parsons, 2017). Students who perceived themselves as being successful on their college campuses were more likely to persist in college, make better grades, and be emotionally stable (Parsons, 2017). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the U.S. racial population is 76.6% White, 18.1% Hispanic or Latinx, 13.4% Black, 5.8% Asian, 1.3% American Indian and Native Alaskan, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

In this study, I explored perceptions of a sense of belonging among minority students enrolled in a southeastern state flagship university, a PWI. This southeastern state flagship university is the largest university in its state and sits in the capital city. This campus enrolls undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students.

While a perceived sense of belonging is shown to have positive effects on minority students, research has shown that a sense of belonging among students tends to decline as they matriculate through their school years (Jeffcoat et al., 2013). This decline is especially prevalent among minorities enrolled in PWIs. It is not clear why this decline happens, but Jeffcoat et al. (2013) also stated that teacher support declines as students matriculate as well. Other studies have tended to focus on a sense of belonging among minority students at community colleges, such as the study Wise (2011) conducted at three California community colleges or within certain academic departments within a university, such as the study Sedgwick et al. (2014)

conducted on minority nursing students. Very few, if any, studies have identified how minority students at a flagship state PWI perceived a sense of belonging on their campus.

A lack of a sense of belonging is a problem because of the adverse effects it has on minority students. Minorities who feel no sense of belonging at PWIs can experience feelings of isolation from their instructors and peers (Yuan, 2017). Further, research has shown that feeling disconnected to their campus can cause students to feel discarded, aimless, and distressed (Smith et al., 2015). A PWI's failure to provide support to minority students leads to destructive outcomes regarding their tenacity in college and their achievement and can even lead to a delay in obtaining their degree (Smith et al., 2015).

Bonner (2018) stated that a 6-year undergraduate graduation rate lower for Black males than for all other groups has been consistently observed by the U.S. Department of Education. Furthermore, 34% of Black males and 43% of Black women who were first-year registered students at a 4-year PWI graduated with a bachelor's degree within 6 years, compared to almost 60% of all students (Bonner, 2018). Bonner (2018) explained that the graduation gap between Black students and White students is growing and that graduation increases among White students are growing more rapidly than graduation increases among Black students. Research attributes this growing graduation gap and lower graduation rates among minorities to a lack of a sense of belonging these students perceive while attending PWIs (Jackson, 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the factors, if any, that affect minority students' perceptions of belongingness at a southeastern state flagship university.

### **Research Question**

For this study, I addressed one broad research question:

RQ1: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Belonging.** Belongingness is the sense that one is connected or belongs to a community, or group of individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this study, a sense of belonging refers to an individual's sense of connectedness to their institution.

**Flagship state university.** This is the original institution from which the state university system developed (Miller, 2015).

**Mattering.** This is one's feeling of significance or importance.

**Minority students.** Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) defined minority groups as groups of people who are singled out for unfair treatment because of their physical or cultural distinctions. For the purpose of this study, the term "minority students" was used. "Minority student" refers to a student who is of a race or ethnicity other than Caucasian (White).

**Predominantly White institution (PWI).** This is a college or university in which the majority of its enrolled students are considered Caucasian or White.

### **Summary**

It is imperative that minority students find a strong sense of belonging at PWIs, more specifically flagship state universities. Since university systems come from flagship state universities, it is crucial that flagship institutions set an example of how to successfully promote a sense of belonging among minority students on their campus. If minority students continue to feel disconnected from these institutions, the graduation gap between majority and minority students will continue to grow. Furthermore, the graduation rate among minorities will continue to decline. Considering what flagship state institutions seek to offer, it is important that



researchers identify minority students' perceptions of what creates belonging at these institutions.

Chapter 2 provides a review of scholarly literature important to this study. This section includes the previous and current negative effects that a lack of a perceived sense of belonging has on minority students, a theoretical framework relevant to students' involvement and its connection to belongingness, as well as a discussion about the benefits associated with a minority student's sense of connectedness to the PWI in which they are enrolled. This may contribute to a better understanding of the factors that affect minority students' perception of belonging at this southeastern state flagship university.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature**

The purpose of this study was to describe factors, if any, that affect minority students' perceptions of belongingness at this southeastern state flagship university. The information this study yielded could possibly help researchers understand how to identify factors that may contribute to minority students' perceived feelings of not belonging at PWIs. This study includes literature about the constructs of belonging and mattering and several elements impacted by students' perceived sense of belonging. These elements include academic persistence, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. This review of literature also provides information about concepts connected to a minority student's sense of belonging on a college campus.

The review begins with a description of this southeastern state flagship university. Next, I discuss the theoretical framework based on Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement. This section explains how the theory connects student involvement on a college campus to student achievement. Next, I discuss the three sections of involvement, belonging, and minority students' success in higher education. Within the involvement section, I explain how involvement, or lack thereof, can contribute to a student's positive or negative college experiences.

Next, I discuss social integration. The review of literature continues with an explanation of belonging and a focus on a sense of belonging, perceived belonging, and the concept of us vs. them and how this phenomenon can contribute to feelings of isolation among minority students at PWIs. Next, I discuss minority students' success in higher education and how mattering and mentorship may help minority students have a positive sense of belonging on their campus. Then I explain the concepts of psychological well-being, self-esteem, academic persistence, and microaggressions and how a perceived sense of belonging among minority students connects to these factors.

## **The Southeastern State Flagship University**

This southeastern flagship state university is the largest college institution in its state and was founded in 1860. The institution is part of a system of nine other institutions, and this flagship university is located on the main campus in a capital city. According to the university's website, this institution has been recently named the best in its state. Additionally, the flagship university was ranked 65 among Kiplinger's Top 100 Public Colleges (Kiplinger, 2019). According to the institution's 2018 impact report, of the 25,363 undergraduate students enrolled in the southeastern flagship state university in 2018, 69.64% were White/Caucasian, 12.60% were African American/Black, 6.60% were Hispanic/Latinx, 4.44% were Asian/Asian American, 2.17% were International, 2.06% were unknown/other, 1.93% were multiracial, 0.43% were Native American/American Indian, and 0.13% reported as being Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I discuss Alexander Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement and its significance to how student involvement positively affects students' academic achievement and retention. Furthermore, Astin's theory suggests that students who participate in their college campus have a greater sense of self-worth and perceive that their professors care about them. Astin's theory of student involvement is applicable and relevant to my study for a number of reasons. This theory highlights the importance and effects of student involvement on their campus.

Student involvement has a direct effect on students' learning (Astin, 1975). Furthermore, this theory highlights each student's individuality. This theory postulates that student involvement varies from student to student (Astin, 1975). The quantity and quality of

involvement needed for one student may not be the same for another student. This further supports the number of participants proposed for my study and the use of interviews. The number of participants and the interview questions allowed me to uncover the differing perspectives of each student.

Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement proposed that students who are not a part of their college life have a higher chance of dropping out of school. His theory also proposed that students' involvement and participation on campus is an indicator of their college persistence (Astin, 1975). According to Astin (1999), student involvement is the amount of bodily and mental energy that a student gives to the educational experience. This theory allowed me and university faculty and staff to gauge a pupil's level of campus participation by homing in on behavioral factors (Wise, 2011).

Astin's previous work found that students' academic persistence and retention rates increase if they live, work, and are involved on campus (i.e., in extracurricular activities). He also established that students perceived their time at college as easier if they felt as though the environment made them feel comfortable and acquainted (Wise, 2011). Astin (1999) also found that research linked all types of student participation and involvement to an above-average chance for students' academic persistence versus other means such as aptitude test scores and high school grade point average (GPA). He postulated that if students lived on campus and were involved in campus clubs and activities, their GPA would not be the main indicator of their retention. Wise (2011) stated that this certain theory is significant for Black students because it helps students who performed poorly in high school to overcome their past and to academically succeed in college.

Astin's theory proposes five areas of involvement. These five areas propose a way to assess the amount of time and level of energy a student applies to learning, thus measuring the student's behavior regarding participation. Recently, Astin's theory of involvement has been used to address the importance of student-faculty interactions among minority students. Williams and Johnson (2019) stated that the amount of time a student dedicates to meaningful interactions can be very beneficial to the student's mental development.

There are five postulates in Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. The first postulate defines involvement. It states that involvement is how much physical and mental energy one spends on different things. These things may be general or very detailed. Postulate 2 states that not all students experience the same kind of involvement. Different students will demonstrate different levels of involvement regarding a certain object. Additionally, the same student can have different levels of involvement in varying objects at varying times. Postulate 3 explains that involvement can be quantitative or qualitative in nature. The fourth postulate describes how the amount of student knowledge and personal growth connected with any scholastic program is directly related to the quality and quantity of the student's participation in said program. Finally, Postulate 5 says that the success of an educational strategy or procedure is directly linked to how successful that procedure or strategy is in improving student involvement. Astin's theory links two factors—time and student involvement. Therefore, the more time a student is involved in or participates in campus activities, the greater the likelihood that the attrition rate will decrease and the retention rate will increase. Furthermore, these students are likelier to achieve success while matriculating through college (Wise, 2011). This theory deals directly with students' participation in extracurricular activities, clubs, societies, and affiliations. Their chances to graduate college can be significantly connected to their involvement, participation, and

perception of their campus environment (Wise, 2011). One significant discovery from Astin's (1999) theory is that all kinds of student participation and involvement are related to a stronger chance of achievement than factors like grade point average. Astin pointed out that a student's time on campus in which the student was involved in clubs, counseling, and social groups positively affected their retention even more than their high school grade point average.

### **Involvement**

As stated above, involvement on their college campus is a significant factor in a student's well-being and academic success (Astin, 1999). College students' involvement in extracurricular activities has been shown to have a positive effect on their persistence to graduate (Palmer, 2016). Involvement contributes to students' overall feelings of commitment and sense of belonging to their college campus (Palmer, 2016). However, the quality of the kind of involvement in which a student participates is very important regarding academic persistence (Shaulskiy, 2016). Astin (1999) postulated that the quantity of involvement a student has will fluctuate over time, and different students will need varying levels of involvement to experience the same kind of satisfaction.

### ***Social Integration***

Social integration refers to the number of quality interactions (praises or criticisms) we have with individuals who are significant to us (Tovar, 2013). Jackson (2016) stated that a student's social integration is dependent upon several elements. One of those elements is the social system. Social integration is usually reached when events, relationships, and activities align with students' expectations (Jackson, 2016). However, minority students, especially Black students, may find it particularly challenging to feel as though they belong in a supportive group at their college or university (Tinto, 1993).

Social integration into a college or university requires more than just having positive exchanges with an individual on campus; it is about having professors and peers who share similar characteristics, such as race, culture, background, and so on, available for pupils to create a community of like-mindedness (Jackson, 2016). Predominantly White college campuses like the southeastern flagship state university often do not have faculty and staff who represent minority backgrounds (Jackson, 2016). For minority students, a campus like this may not be able to provide a sense of belonging to them. There are similarities between a sense of belonging and social integration (Jackson, 2016). A sense of belonging is considered a foundation for social integration (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

### ***Belonging***

Student involvement and students' perceived sense of belonging are not always mutually exclusive. Strayhorn (2012a) proposed that as a student's desire for belonging increases, they will seek out areas of involvement or even relationships. Feelings of connections and belonging can combat nonpersistence (Nicpon et al., 2006). If a student is successful in finding an area in which they belong, this will allow them to move on to satisfy higher needs, such as psychological needs (Palmer, 2016). Conversely, if a student is unable to satisfy their need to belong, this can lead to negative outcomes, such as depression (Palmer, 2016).

### ***Sense of Belonging***

A sense of belonging among minority students at PWIs can affect many areas of their lives. College programs should make all students feel genuinely respected and valued, not merely tolerated (Sedgwick et al., 2014). Furthermore, a student's sense of belonging plays a role in their psychological well-being. However, participants in many studies have reported how certain actions, implicit or explicit, contributed to their feeling of not belonging on their college

campus and negatively affected their college experience. Although researchers have found that mentorships can have positive effects on a minority student's sense of belonging, there are many other factors that are negatively affected when minority students feel like outsiders.

Although there have been previous studies on the topic of belonging among minority students, it is crucial that school leadership continues to work to promote equal college experiences between minority students and majority students. This study differs from previous studies and adds to the existing literature because it focused on how a state flagship university that doubles as a PWI can promote inclusion and a sense of belonging among minority students. Also, school leadership should continue to seek answers to important questions regarding how minority students attending this southeastern state flagship university perceive their belonging. If these students are experiencing a lack of a sense of belonging on this campus, then this southeastern state flagship university is lacking in some aspect.

### ***Perceived Belonging***

A student's perceived positive sense of belonging increases their likelihood of persistence to graduation (Medina, 2018). Furthermore, a sense of belonging positively correlates with academic achievement (Medina, 2018). For minority students, a sense of belonging can measure to what degree they feel excluded or included at a PWI (Johnson, 2008). In a study conducted by Johnson (2008), Black women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors reported a lower sense of belonging than their White female peers on Likert-style surveys. Furthermore, Jackson (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study in which minority students attributed the significance of forming relationships with other students and staff to their sense of belongingness and success on their campus.



Previous studies have identified significant factors in a student's capability to develop a sense of belonging on their college campus. Cheng (2004) conducted a study of about 1,400 participants. These participants were college students in first-year, sophomore, or junior courses. Based on the participants' answers on a Likert-style survey, Cheng discovered that there were multiple factors that contributed to a student's perception of belonging. These factors were the feelings of being cared about, being valued as a person, and being accepted as part of the college community (Cheng, 2004). To improve students' sense of belonging on campus, Cheng suggested an atmosphere in which all people feel appreciated and revered. Furthermore, individuals should be able to express their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas without the fear of judgment and criticism (Cheng, 2004). Lastly, Cheng (2004) asserted that it is especially vital for institutions of higher education, such as PWIs, to create a multicultural environment that not only celebrates the history and culture of only the most well-known or prominent ethnic groups on campus but also celebrates the history and culture of all the different ethnic groups and populations represented on the campus.

Developing a perception of a sense of belonging can be particularly challenging for students who are members of societal groups that have an extensive history of marginalization (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012a). Students who are in sexual minority groups and students who are in ethnic minority groups are the individuals who have a history of marginalization in the United States (Medina, 2018). Alas, while researchers have discovered factors that add to a student's ability to perceive a sense of belonging, it is particularly challenging meeting the needs of individuals who are a part of marginalized groups (Medina, 2018). Regarding minority students, Hurtado (1992) concluded that no single factor could decrease racial tensions on college campuses because these tensions derive from a plethora

of factors, such as a campuses' history and present challenges. However, one factor that minority students have identified that has negatively affected their perceived sense of belonging is microaggressions.

### ***Us vs. Them***

Chinyamurindi (2018) conducted a study to explore how international students gain a sense of belonging during their matriculation in a college in South Africa. The researcher placed the participants in focus groups, and the foreign students revealed that feelings of exclusion on their college campuses created an “us vs. them” dynamic. The students reported that they dressed and spoke differently than their peers. Furthermore, this fact made them feel as though they stood out more from other students rather than fit in (Chinyamurindi, 2018). The “us vs. them” perception tends to group minority students together. Although these students are grouped together, it still creates a feeling that they do not belong with the rest of their peers (Chinyamurindi, 2018). The students revealed that they felt as though they were pressured to fellowship only with students like them due to their foreign status (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Even though this study did not take place at a PWI in the United States, its results were similar to those of other studies discussed in this literature review. This is beneficial because it shows that the feeling of not belonging could be a global problem among minority college students.

### **Minority Students' Success in Higher Education**

The need to belong is a foundational need that has been linked to good health, overall well-being, and cognitive functions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Furthermore, minority students seem to benefit more from a sense of belonging than their majority peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Student success and persistence tend to occur when a student has positive experiences on their college campus (Stokes, 2017). Carey (2005) found that one of the key factors in student

persistence and academic achievement was how engaged and connected students were to their campus. Johnson et al. (2007) found that the more committed a campus is to the success of minority students, the higher the perceived sense of belonging will be among those students.

### ***Mattering***

Mattering falls under the same umbrella as belonging, regarding constructs of relatedness. It was initially defined by sociologist Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough (1981) as a kind of outside validation of a person by others both at the personal and societal levels. Although it was introduced to the research world over three decades ago, it has not been studied in depth (France, 2012; Hagerty et al., 1996). Mattering is our subjective belief and understanding that we have a meaningful impact on the lives of others—that we make a positive difference (Tovar, 2013). Tovar (2013) also stated that when others notice our existence and validate our actions, we matter. In the realm of higher education, researchers and experts constantly support the significant impact that mattering has on a college student's achievement and academic persistence (Tovar, 2013).

The personal form of mattering refers to certain individuals in our lives, such as our parents, sisters and brothers, friends, teachers, professors, and student peers. The societal level of mattering is embedded into one's beliefs of being irreplaceable in societal institutions such as one's community, place of faith, government, college, or society.

According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), mattering is made up of three different elements: (a) attention—the perception that one holds, the curiosity or awareness of others, our existence, and our absenteeism; (b) importance—the confidence that individuals care about what we need, want, think, or have to say, as well as the feeling that others are proud of our

achievements and troubled by our failures; and finally, (c) dependence—the awareness that others depend on us or the things we do.

Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggested that a fourth element be added to this list—appreciation. Appreciation is the feeling that we are appreciated by individuals important to us, such as significant others and authority for our works. Schlossberg et al. (1989) described mattering as “the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them” (p. 21). Schlossberg et al. (1989) stated that to the extent that people do not believe they matter, they might feel marginalized or removed. Conversely, those who do feel as though they matter, feel more significant to other individuals, including students on a college campus (Tovar, 2013). Additionally, feeling as though one matters to professors or the administration is significant to positive feelings of belongingness to minority students (Tovar, 2013).

### ***Mentorship***

Several researchers have researched ways a sense of belonging can positively affect a minority college student enrolled at a PWI. In some cases, a faculty member of a similar race or background helped minority students feel more connected to the university. Booker (2016) conducted a qualitative study of how a relationship with a professor of the same or similar race affected a student’s sense of belonging. The researcher found that students who developed a connection with these faculty members were more likely to remain enrolled in school.

Moreover, Brooms (2018) conducted a study that yielded similar results. Brooms’s qualitative study centered on Strayhorn’s sense of belonging theory and a mentorship program called the Black Male Initiative, which connected them with faculty and staff. After interviewing

and surveying 63 Black male student participants, the results indicated that this program increased the students' academic performance, which helped them complete their college career. In recent work, Clark et al. (2012) performed a comparable mixed-methods study and found that a strong sense of belonging positively correlated to academic success in both minority and majority students. Although this study mentioned both majority and minority students, the researchers noted that minority students often face more obstacles in college, such as a lack of similar minority faculty and staff.

### ***Psychological Well-Being***

Researchers have found that a strong sense of belonging can not only positively affect a minority student's academic achievement but their psychological well-being as well. According to authors Hurd et al. (2016), underrepresented minority students are susceptible to mental anxiety and poor academic performance. Despite growth among minority students in colleges, they tend to struggle in college and report that they have a tougher time mentally adjusting than their White peers (Gummadam et al., 2016).

Suhlmann et al. (2018) led a recent study in which they examined whether a student's personal values and a university's norms predict a student's sense of belonging to a university and their health and academic success. In this study, the researchers suggested that a strong sense of belonging can positively affect students' academic success and overall well-being. Over 360 German participants completed a Likert-style survey that questioned their dignity, perceived college norms, sense of belonging at the university, well-being, academic motivation, and drop-out retention. This study revealed that a sense of belonging predicted students' well-being and academic motivation and decreased the rate of dropout among students at a university.

A study led by researchers Gummadam et al. (2016) was similar. The researchers conducted a mixed-method study that focused on how a sense of belonging at an institution of higher learning correlated with the psychological adjustment of minority students in college. Minority students who represented African American, Asian, Hispanic, and mixed-ethnic backgrounds participated in this study by self-reporting via questionnaires about their demographic information, sense of belongingness at their institution, ethnic identity, self-confidence and self-worth, and any depressive symptoms. Although the results indicated that a sense of belonging did not correlate with depression, it positively correlated with self-worth. One could infer that a strong sense of self-worth is critical in one's psychological well-being.

### ***Self-Esteem***

A lack of belonging can negatively affect a college student's self-esteem and self-efficacy on a college campus. Gummadam et al. (2016) asserted that a strong sense of belonging increases a student's self-esteem and academic self-efficacy and decreases student depression. In their study, Gummadam et al. (2016) found that a college student's sense of school belonging is significant in their mental adjustment. Furthermore, researchers linked a feeling of campus inclusion among graduate students in their specific departments to a greater sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gummadam et al., 2016).

Furthermore, researchers found that a student's sense of belonging in college mediated the link between social groups and educational and social adjustment in college (Gummadam et al., 2016). This means that school belonging is a relevant predictor of the mental adjustment of college students (Gummadam et al., 2016). Further, school belonging is a significant factor to study when specifically studying the effect belonging or a lack of belonging has on ethnic and racial minority students (Gummadam et al., 2016).

### ***Academic Persistence***

Research has shown that a student's ability to learn and retain knowledge maximized when they perceived a strong sense of belonging at their institution (Booker, 2016). Over the last 20 years, a sense of belonging has surfaced as a major contributing factor in a student's successful completion of college (Museus et al., 2018). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 59% of first-year students graduated within 6 years (Booker, 2016). However, only 38% of African American students persisted to graduation within the same time frame (Booker, 2016).

Booker (2016) also stated that minority students, specifically African American students enrolled at a PWI, have many more negative experiences than their African American peers who attend a historically Black college or institution. These students report experiencing pestering, intimidating classroom interactions, feelings of not belonging, and low self-efficacy (Booker, 2016). These negative experiences can cause long-lasting adverse effects that decrease a minority student's desire and motivation to graduate (Booker, 2016). As mentioned above, these students feel a sense of exclusion, which is the opposite of belonging. One could assume or infer that a lack of a sense of belonging or feelings of exclusion are directly tied to minority students' lack of persistence in obtaining their degree from these universities. Furthermore, a lack of a sense of belonging at school has been noted as a dropout risk and is also considered an indicator of school disengagement (St-Amand et al., 2017).

### ***Microaggressions***

Several researchers have examined how microaggressions contribute feelings of being on the outside and negatively a student's academic persistence, psychological well-being, and self-esteem. In some instances, feelings of exclusion create an "us vs. them" perception in minority

students. Minority students who experience microaggressions at a PWI are likely to feel a sense of disconnect from the campus. According to Ellis et al. (2018), microaggressions are deliberate or unintended short exchanges that communicate aggressive and offensive snubs and insults on a person or groups of people. These exchanges usually affect those marginalized by race, ethnicity, or other identifying factors (Ellis et al., 2018).

The mixed-methods study conducted by Ellis et al. (2018) highlighted the effects microaggressions have on students of color at PWIs. The researchers noted that some participants in this study indicated that microaggressions negatively affected their sense of belonging. First-year students in Booker's (2016) study gave similar responses and said that they had experienced microaggressions from both peers and leadership, which made them feel isolated and alone. Addressing the problems of microaggressions and supporting first-year minority students are imperative because, as previously stated, a sense of belonging affects a student's decision to remain enrolled in college.

While microaggressions are usually covert, they can still negatively impact students of color. Von Robertson and Chaney (2017) examined the experiences of African American males enrolled at a PWI in the southern United States. Through interviews and surveys, the Black male student participants disclosed that the racial microaggressions they faced made them feel less important to the school's faculty and staff.

In the study conducted by Tachine et al. (2017), the researchers collected data in a nontraditional way. The researchers collected the data through an indigenous methodological research approach called sharing circles. In sharing circles, each member gets a chance to answer a question and share their experiences while the rest of the group listens and waits. Native American students attending PWIs experienced microaggressions and microinvalidations from



their White peers that took a negative toll on the students and caused them to feel as though they did not belong at that institution. Further, students who feel as though they do not belong to their institution tend to have more negative peer relationships, which have been linked to more negative self-perceptions of social acceptance (Gummadum et al., 2016). Additionally, students who do not feel as though they belong, or matter, at their college experience more loneliness, which has been connected to increased depressive symptoms and more negative feelings of self-worth (Gummadam et al., 2016).

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, I explored the existing literature surrounding students' connectedness and sense of belonging to their institution of higher education, which serve as a foundation for better academic performance, self-esteem, psychological awareness, and overall experience in college. PWIs, particularly flagship universities, that feel welcoming to all minority students encourage interaction and inclusion to create a positive environment. A welcoming environment that encourages inclusiveness and diversity helps minority students feel as though they are active participants in their academics and college experience (Zosel, 2018). Conversely, the effects on minority students who feel excluded from their campus community can be detrimental. It is up to school administration and peers to ensure that all students feel welcomed on their campuses. Creating an environment in which minority students feel cared about and respected as people on campus can be accomplished by encouraging faculty, staff, and peers to work together, cooperate, and be willing to teach and learn from each other (Cheng, 2004). By ensuring this, all students and the campus climate will benefit.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology techniques, participants, and data collection and analysis of this qualitative study.

### **Chapter 3: Methodological Approach and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to describe the factors, if any, that affect minority students' perceptions of belongingness at a southeastern state flagship university. In this chapter, I discuss the methods, methodology, and data collection that were used in this study. The outline of this chapter includes the research design and method; the setting, sample, and population; trustworthiness and reliability; assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; data collection and analysis procedures; ethical considerations; and a chapter summary.

#### **Research Design and Method**

This study had a basic qualitative design. Qualitative research is centered on how meaning is composed and how people live and make sense of their environments (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). The main goal of a basic interpretive study is to discover and interpret these meanings (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). The inquiry is always outlined by “disciplinary-based concepts, model, or theory that is the theoretical framework of the study” (Merriam & Grenier, 2018, p. 35).

According to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), qualitative researchers can employ qualitative research to understand social progressions of human activities, responses, and communication. I investigated human actions on campus from minority students. These actions include what they think and speak (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Further, I also studied and observed the participants' reactions, which are their responses to an action (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Lastly, Saldaña and Omasta (2018) also described interaction as part of the social process of a qualitative study. Interaction is the repeating sequences of actions and responses (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Qualitative data allow researchers to condense large amounts of data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The research design for this study included open-ended interview questions for each

participant. The studies discussed in the review of literature all included qualitative research in which participants self-reported their feelings via a survey or through interviews. This design was the best fit for my research because it allowed each participant to speak freely and openly about their experiences at this southeastern flagship state university and their sense of belonging. Further, they were able to explain how their peers and leaders can help them feel more connected on campus.

### **Setting, Sample, and Population**

I used social media to advertise the study to minority students who currently attended this southeastern state flagship university. I conducted the study at this southeastern flagship state university using interviews. Each participant was selected via purposeful sampling so I could discover, comprehend, and gain understanding and choose participants that yielded the most information (Yao, 2016). In qualitative research, the sample should be selected on purpose to provide the most information about the topic (Merriam & Grenier, 2018).

Purposeful sampling is grounded on the principle that obtaining the best cases yields the best data (Leavy, 2017). Participants should be identified and sought after based on their connection with the purpose of the study and the study's research question (Leavy, 2017). Based on this fact, being strategic in the sampling process is significant because it helps researchers find "information-rich cases" that best address a study's purpose and research questions.

There were criteria for the specified participants (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). The participants in my study were made up of minority students who were currently enrolled in or were former graduates of this PWI. Each student had been a traditional student and had not participated in distance learning or evening classes. These students were from multiple different colleges and departments within this university to get data that represented multiple areas of the

university. Furthermore, these students were males and females who represented different classifications in college, and I ensured anonymity. The participants' ages varied, but each participant was over the age of 18.

In purposeful sampling, the sample size is not specified; rather, it is based on the information the researcher hopes to gather in the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). The sample size needed for this study depended on the research question, the gathering and analysis of the data, and the resources available to aid the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). I ensured that the number of participants was relevant to the research question and that the sample size would not reach a point of overload or redundancy (Merriam & Grenier, 2018).

I utilized 13 participants in this study. The number of participants is critical in a qualitative study (Leavy, 2017). Too few participants can negatively affect the perception of a study. There had to be enough participants to ensure that the findings were valid and could be perceived to be usable in future studies.

### **Trustworthiness/Reliability**

To establish trustworthiness in the study, I made sure I took steps that would allow the reader to trust the research findings. I ensured the study had as little bias as possible. Further, I recorded the participants' answers truthfully and did not coerce or encourage specific answers. The study was also validated because the data collection method fit the research and research questions, thus adding to the reliability.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a minority student who attended and graduated from this southeastern state flagship university, I was aware of and understood that my proximity to the university and my racial makeup could have influenced my perspective on this study. I strived to remain neutral and

conducted the study in an honest way. Further, I reported results as the study yielded them. I was transparent and trustworthy in all aspects of this study.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions for this study included the notion that all participants would answer each interview question honestly. Further, there was an assumption that all participants were interested in the study and were willing to participate in the study with no ulterior motives. There was also an assumption that no participant was receiving incentives (academic or otherwise) for providing certain answers.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Another limitation was time. I conducted this study for several months, which may not have been enough time to show possible changes in the participants' experiences at the southeastern state flagship university.

The study's sample size was another limitation. There were 13 participants in this study. The number of participants may not have been large enough to draw concrete conclusions about the study.

One main delimitation of this study was that it had a narrow focus. The southeastern state flagship university was the only institution from which I conducted research.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

I employed a general inductive approach for analyzing the qualitative data. I collected data by interviewing the participants. Thomas (2006) defined this analysis as one that can be described. The purpose for using a general inductive approach was to summarize raw data into a smaller format, establish connections between the evaluation and findings, and develop a framework based on the evidence uncovered in the research (Thomas, 2006). Further, this

approach provided a systematic way in which a researcher could analyze qualitative data and yield consistent, legitimate results (Thomas, 2006). I created the interview questions. I recorded each interview with an electronic voice recorder. I then employed the use of TranscribeMe, a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) service, to transcribe each interview. After each interview had been transcribed, I coded them and look for recurring and significant themes that arose.

### **Data Coding**

As aforementioned, coding was employed in the proposed qualitative study after the interviews and focus group discussions. Coding is the process of assigning certain texts or labels to pieces of data and allows the researcher to condense and categorize the collected data (Leavy, 2017). Leavy (2017) asserted that the coding strategy chosen should be linked to the purpose and research questions of a study. Therefore, I used open coding to analyze the collected data.

According to Merriam and Grenier (2018), open coding includes writing or recording data with words or phrases that seem to be responsive to the research question. In open coding, I repeated verbatim the words and phrases spoken by the participant (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). Further, sometimes I used a term or concept that reflected the respondent's exact wording (Merriam & Grenier, 2018).

### **Categorizing and Theming**

Once I completed the coding, categorizing and theming took place. Categorizing occurs when codes, phrases, or words are grouped based on commonalities (Leavy, 2017). Merriam and Grenier (2018) stated that developing categories from open coding includes combining the codes into fewer, more specific categories. This process allowed me to look for patterns and recurring

words and phrases in the participants' answers (Leavy, 2017). This process also revealed relationships between codes.

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation addresses the “what” after collecting the research data. Researchers must be able to analyze the data and figure out what it all means (Leavy, 2017). Leavy (2017) elaborated on this notion by stating that to interpret results effectively, the researcher must utilize their notes, patterns, links, and connections between the collected data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical decisions are critical in a research study. Making ethical decisions speaks to the validity and believability of a research study. One major area of ethical concern when working with human subjects is confidentiality. Confidentiality in research design can help ensure that participants are not harmed or exploited as a result of their answers or participation in a study (Surmiak, 2018). Revealing the identity of participants can put them in compromising positions at their places of employment or could even negatively affect their way of living (Surmiak, 2018).

To maintain confidentiality in the proposed study, two principles were of the utmost importance. The first principle was not disclosing anything a participant said or did in the study without their spoken or written consent (Surmiak, 2018). The second principle in maintaining confidentiality in the proposed study was to always conceal the identity of the respondents (Surmiak, 2018). To help conceal the identities of the respondents, I assigned numbers to the participants instead of using their names.

I took specific steps to ensure all aspects of this study were completed in an ethical way. First, I assigned a number to each participant to protect their identity. During the transcription

process, I used an electronic voice recorder to record the interviews. As stated above, I utilized a HIPAA service, TranscribeMe, to transcribe each interview. After use, I digitally shredded the audio files using a file-shredding software. To protect the data, I stored all identities and interview questions on a password-protected Excel sheet and universal serial bus (USB) drive for 10 years after publication.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify any factors that may have affected minority students' perception of belongingness at this southeastern state flagship university. I conducted this study to answer the following research question: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university? The basic qualitative research design fit this study because it allowed the participants to express their thoughts about their perception of belongingness at this institution through open-ended interview questions. The use of interview questions fit this study because it allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences and expound upon their thoughts. Furthermore, this design allowed me to code the responses and identify themes.

The emerging themes contributed to the existing data in similar studies. As shown in the literature review, previous studies revealed the negative effects that can result from minority students feeling as though they do not belong on their college campuses. These effects included, but were not limited to, low self-efficacy and negative effects on academic persistence.

This study highlighted how important belonging among minority students is at southeastern state flagship university. However, the steps taken in this study can be used to help the administration at other southeastern institutions, especially PWIs, ensure that minority students do not feel excluded on campus. As mentioned in the previous chapters, a perceived



sense of belonging among minorities can greatly affect their academic and social achievement.

As colleges and universities continue to diversify, it is imperative that all students feel supported and included on their campus.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences, if any, of minority students at a southeastern state flagship university. This chapter includes findings and results of the study through the description of the research participants' demographics; their experiences, if any, at the university; and a discussion of the themes that emerged from the interviews. It concludes with a summary of the chapter.

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 described how feelings of isolation and not belonging to their college or university can have detrimental effects on minority students. These damaging effects include feelings of low self-esteem, a negative impact on academic persistence, and harmful effects on students' psychological well-being. Through individual interviews, each participant described their experiences, if any, as a minority student at this university. These open-ended interviews yielded answers that revealed themes that helped uncover commonalities or trends in the participants' experiences and perspectives as a minority on this campus.

As defined in Chapter 1, belongingness is the sense that one is connected to or belongs to a community, or a group of individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this study, the community refers to the educational institution. In this study, I also employed Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. This theory explains how participation and involvement on campus are critical to a student's academic persistence, retention, and perception of self-worth. For this study, I explored the following research question: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university?

### **Demographics**

There was a total of 13 research participants in this qualitative study. Of these participants, eight identified as female and five identified as male. When asked about their race

or ethnicity, four participants identified as Black or African American ( $n = 4$ ), three participants identified as mixed ethnicity ( $n = 3$ ), three participants identified as Asian ( $n = 3$ ), one participant identified as Hispanic White ( $n = 1$ ), one participant identified as Pacific Islander ( $n = 1$ ), and one identified as Armenian ( $n = 1$ ). Table 1 below presents the demographics of each participant.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Research Participants*

Demographics	Frequency <i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	5	38.5
Female	8	61.5
Ethnicity		
Black/African American	5	38.5
Mixed ethnicity	2	15.4
Asian	3	23.0
Hispanic White	1	7.7
Pacific Islander	1	7.7
Armenian	1	7.7

$N = 13$ .

## Research Participant Profiles

Table 2 displays the participant numbers that I assigned each participant. It also shows each participant's ethnicity, gender, and academic major.

**Table 2**

### *Research Participant Profiles*

Number	Ethnicity	Gender	Major
1	African American	F	Sports administration
2	African American	F	English literature and African American studies
3	Mixed ethnicity	M	Sports administration
4	African American	M	Computer science
5	African American	F	Elementary education
6	African American	F	Leadership and human resource development
7	Hispanic White	F	Finance
8	Pacific Islander	M	Kinesiology
9	Asian	F	Psychology
10	Mixed ethnicity	M	Kinesiology
11	Asian	M	Nutrition and food sciences and premed
12	Asian	F	Microbiology
13	Armenian	F	Biological science and kinesiology

***Participant 1***

The first participant was an African American senior majoring in sports administration at the university. She had always planned to graduate from the university as well. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, she selected this university because of its size and sports culture: “I selected [this university] because I knew I wanted to go to a big school. I went to a big school in high school; we had a lot of people. Also, I wanted to go to a sports school.” She also stated that she received in-state tuition through a program for her major and that she knew she wanted to get away from home.

She described her time at the university as challenging at first. The transition to the university was harder than she assumed: “I feel like I learned a lot about what I like and what I didn’t like going into college. I didn’t think it would have been as big of a transition as it was.” She went on to state that being away from home is what contributed to a more difficult transition because she did not have many people from her high school enroll at the same university. However, she stated that this challenge helped her get to know herself better during her freshman year.

***Participant 2***

Participant 2 was an African American female senior at the university. She majored in English literature and African American studies and minored in Danish and German. She chose the university because she was not financially able to move out of state, the state scholarship program was a driving factor in her decision, and she had always planned to graduate from the university.

She stated that during her time at the university she did not have many friends. She stated, “I’m not a talker. But the girls that I came to school with, I went to high school with and I

went to middle school with. So, I've had two good friends that I've kept for a very long time here."

### ***Participant 3***

Participant 3 was a mixed-ethnicity male sophomore who majored in sports administration and had always planned to graduate from this university. He was originally from San Diego, California, and chose to enroll in the institution because of the culture and networking opportunities. He stated, "The culture . . . kind of led me back here and [the university] has a very successful sports kind of tradition. I knew I wanted to go somewhere with a tradition . . . in order to gain networking skills." He also added that he had a fun experience at the university and that the campus is open and diverse. When reminiscing on touring the campus, he said, "Whenever I was going around [other campuses], I didn't see as much diversity. When I toured [this campus], I could see diversity everywhere and everyone just kind of getting along. It's a very friendly campus." When describing his time so far at the university, he seemed very pleased: "I mean, pretty fun! That's exactly what I kind of expected college to be. Well, this kind of freedom that I get to have is unparalleled to any." He went on to express that he had grouped himself with four or five people whom he considered friends and that he and this group of friends were all experiencing college together.

### ***Participant 4***

Participant 4 was an African American male in his sophomore year of college. He described himself as a very busy photographer and student. He majored in computer science and minored in digital media. He lived off-campus and had always planned to graduate from the university once enrolled. However, this university was not his first choice. He stated his decision

was “very quick” and was made “kind of in the summer. Like, I was originally going to go to [a close-by HBCU]. But then I chose [this university] mainly because it had better buildings.” He also went on to say that he chose this university because it had the major and minor that he wanted. When asked to describe his time at the institution, he explained that he only went there for school. He went on to say that he did not do extra things. Overall, his tone was neutral when describing the university: “I mean, I’m learning stuff. But a lot of what I’m learning isn’t really what I want to know.” I followed-up this statement with a question about his motivation to stay enrolled in this school if he was not learning what he wanted to learn. He replied that his current major and minor were his motivation; however, the extra classes, like prerequisites, were not classes he desired.

#### ***Participant 5***

This participant was an African American female from Houston, Texas. She moved from there to attend this university. She was an elementary education major and was in her last year as an undergraduate student. Her main motivation for attending this institution was to enroll in a program that would allow her to obtain her undergraduate degree and master’s degree within 5 years. She had since changed plans about enrolling into that program, but she still planned on graduating from the university. She described her time at the university as positive. She said that she was in a program for minority students and that helped her find people like herself. She stated that she had moved to the state without knowing anyone and that “it was very hard to find friends.” However, she stated that the overall journey had been fun, and she had not had many issues school-wise.

***Participant 6***

Participant 6 was an African American female who was a senior at the university. She majored in leadership and human resource development. She stated that she was originally from Atlanta, Georgia, but grew up in Tampa, Florida. She lived in on-campus apartments and planned on graduating from the university. When asked why she chose to come to this university, she had an interesting answer: “For me, growing up, my mom was an HBCU grad, so most of my life I have been taught about going to HBCUs and my dad went to a PWI.” She explained that she was always a part of HBCU culture growing up. For example, she would attend their homecomings and games, but she got tired of it. She chose this university to “do something new.” She narrowed her school choices down to three PWIs and chose this school due to its proximity to an HBCU, its size, the diversity of the school, and the culture of the state.

She described her time at the university as very hard during her freshman year. She said the transition from high school to college regarding workload and study time was difficult. She also said she was not very involved on campus: “I was working and going to school, and I really didn’t find my niche on campus, per se. That’s when I really felt like one of like 1,000 people, and me and my roommates weren’t close.” However, once she found friends and started being involved, she found her passion and the university felt more like home.

She also described the university as very diverse: “There are many people with many backgrounds. And you’re gonna have to look for it, but you will find your niche.” She went on to explain that she felt like a student could make the school feel like home if they worked at it. She concluded with saying that she believed the football culture on campus helped bring everyone together.



***Participant 7***

Participant 7 was a female who identified as a Hispanic White. She majored in finance at the university. She chose this university because she wanted to be in a program that was not an online program. The university was close by, and she applied and was accepted. She always planned on graduating from the university.

She described her time at the university as a time when she noticed the privilege that a lot of students had. She said many of the students she worked with did not have to work and they did not understand having to pay for things. She said this was very apparent in smaller settings. She also said that she did not have many friends as an undergrad because she always worked. Unlike most of the other participants, she did not view the student body at the university as diverse: “Mostly, [the school] is really White, and I thought that was weird just in general.” Overall, she described her time at the university as “just OK.” She said she did not love it, but it was close by, so that helped.

***Participant 8***

Participant 8 was a male who identified as a Pacific Islander. He was born and raised in the Philippines and moved to the United States at the age of 13. He majored in kinesiology. He worked at the campus library and at a campus coffee shop. He lived off campus and always planned on graduating from the university. He selected this university because his family pushed the idea: “It’s the main university that everyone talks about especially because it was what was close to home—it was known. And it would be a lot cheaper in regards to [being] on my own.” He also chose this university because he thought the campus was beautiful.

He described his time at the university as fun but challenging. He said he felt as though he had a purpose when he was on campus. With working three jobs during his undergraduate years, he was always very busy. He stated that being continuously busy ensured that his time at the university was not boring.

### ***Participant 9***

Participant 9 was an Asian female whose parents were from Vietnam. She majored in psychology and lived off campus as an undergraduate. She said that she chose this university because it was well known and it was the one closest to her home. Once enrolled in the institution, she had always planned to graduate from there.

When asked to describe her time at the university, Participant 9 was very positive in her answer. She stated, “Oh, I had a great experience. I met a lot of friends. I feel like I was more independent than I was in grade school.” Overall, she stated that she had a good experience during her time at the university.

### ***Participant 10***

Participant 10 was a male who identified as mixed ethnicity. He traveled a lot as a child due to being in a military family. He stated that he had lived in Japan, Turkey, and Korea. He explained that he chose this university because of financial opportunities and his desire to be independent. He stated that the state scholarship program was “the main thing and I wanted to be away from home. But I applied to mainly—I think I applied to all schools in [the state] outside of a few small ones.” He majored in kinesiology and lived off campus. He also explained that at one point he was almost persuaded to transfer to another university. He explained that one

semester his friends suggested he transfer to the institution in which they enrolled. He pondered the idea but realized it was expensive and unrealistic and that the scholarship paid for his tuition.

When asked to describe his time at the university, he said, “I think it was fun. I think the biggest transition from high school to college was the social aspects—meeting a lot of different people.” He went further, saying that everything was different. He believed that it was a time where he and others were able to get out of their bubble to experience things. He also stated that he was a sports fan so the institution’s sports culture created a positive experience for him.

### ***Participant 11***

Participant 11 was an Asian man who majored in nutrition and food sciences and premed at the university. He had always planned to graduate from the institution. Except for one semester, he had lived on campus during his entire time as an undergrad. He selected this university because he loved the campus and because many of his friends also enrolled there.

He described his overall experience at the university as positive. He stated, “Oh, I thought it was amazing—best experience of my life. If I had the opportunity, I would definitely go back.” Additionally, he reminisced on the friends he made while enrolled at the university.

### ***Participant 12***

Participant 12 was a female who identified as Asian. She majored in microbiology and minored in business. She selected this university because it gave her independence. She explained that she wanted more of a college experience because if she had stayed in her hometown, she would have continued to live with her parents. She had planned to graduate from the university during her entire time as an undergraduate.

Participant 12 described her time at the university as exciting. Her voice perked up and she let out a chuckle. She stated, “Those were the best 4 years of my life.” Although excited about her years at the institution, the participant did not go further into detail.

### ***Participant 13***

Participant 13 was a female who identified as Armenian. She stated that she changed her biological name about 14 years ago because she’s Armenian but gets confused as Caucasian. Having a name that represented her culture was very important to her. She double majored in biological science and kinesiology. During her time at the university, she lived off campus. This university was the fifth undergrad institution that she had attended. She stated that she knew she would not have gotten into the school if she had applied immediately after high school. However, she knew she always wanted to attend that university. She said, “I chose it because I felt like the degree that you got there had a lot of integrity. But I remember being in high school thinking I know I would never get accepted into that school unless I would transfer.”

When describing her time at the university, she explained, “I felt very comfortable being myself. There are all types of people that went there, and I feel like every day I spoke to someone different—either faculty or students.” She further explained that at this university, she felt as though it was much easier just to be herself and that she believed there was a certain degree of open-mindedness that not a lot of other colleges or universities had.

### **Description of Research Participants’ Experiences**

Astin’s (1975) theory of student involvement and the literature surrounding a student’s perceived sense of belonging on campus were used to inform the interview questions each participant answered. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Astin’s theory of involvement posits that

involvement is positively associated with one's overall skills and higher-order thinking, retention and academic persistence, and academic achievement. Further, this theory also states that a perceived sense of belonging is positively correlated to one's greater perception of self-worth, the perception that one's professor cares for them and their well-being, and a lower level of expressing difficulties (Astin, 1975).

The interview protocol was developed so that each participant was able to describe what their involvements on campus were. Participants also explained what it was like being a minority at this university. They were asked to describe and define what a sense of belonging meant to them. Finally, they explained what, if anything, about this university made them feel a sense of belonging, and what, if anything, about this university made them not feel a sense of belonging.

### ***Participant 1***

Participant 1 seemed to have mixed feelings during her interview. She explained that she had not had many challenges as a minority on campus. However, she stated that she did not interact much with students who did not look like her and perhaps this was the reason she did not meet many challenges as a minority student on this campus. She did explain that, overall, being a minority student on this campus was a learning experience. She came from a predominantly Black high school.

**Involvements on Campus.** At the time of this interview, this participant served as an ambassador in her academic college. She was also a member of two groups for minorities, which were Black Women Empowerment Initiative and Minority Women Movement. She was also a part of the sports administration association.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** Overall, she said she did not feel like she had not had a real challenge yet. She credited this to her major because there are many minority

students who share her major, which was sports administration. She said, “I do see a lot of people who do look like me in my major classes. Like, electives, yeah, it’s hard to be a minority, but I feel like because it’s so big and the classroom sizes.” She explained that she had not had any direct instances with being stereotyped because she did not put herself in position to be around others. She went on to say, “It’s hard, because you don’t see any teachers that look like you. It’s hard, too, because I feel like people shy away from you in group assignments—just things like that.” This participant also suggested that it may be just because people tend to navigate toward others who look like them. She stated, “It may be natural for them, just like how it’s natural for us to go to people who look like us.”

This participant did credit the school for trying to implement programs and safe spaces for minority students. She explained, “It’s not as challenging as it can seem because it is a PWI. I mean, it has its struggles, obviously, just by being a minority, but I do feel like they have a lot of resources for minorities.” She named some resources, such as cultural fairs and different organizations. She felt as though the opportunities for minorities were there at the campus, but minority students just must put themselves out there more.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 1 defined a sense of belonging as “just having people around you to genuinely help, support, and encourage you. Not just tell you, like generalize things that they would tell anybody.” She also defined a sense of belonging as being around people who are concerned and care about you. She said that these people would give one a sense of family with genuine love and care.

**Experiences, if any, That Contributed to A Sense of Belonging on Campus.** When asked about what experiences, if any, had helped her feel a sense of belonging, she first credited her advisors. She said, “Every advisor—academic advisors and advisors that were in my

organization—were very helpful. They advised me to keep going because when I first got there I was like, this was not for me.” She went on to say that being in her minority organizations really marked their footprint on campus. She was glad to be around academically successful people who looked like her in the same academic setting. She ended this answer with stating that basically her minority groups and advisors made her feel a sense of belonging. I asked her if her advisors were minorities, and she confirmed they were. I asked if she thought having minority advisors played a factor in her positive experiences with them. She explained,

I think it does. I did have one White advisor my freshman year. I think she was really helpful, as well. My college is more hands-on service, as well. So, I think that can play a part in why they have been so helpful.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

This participant first stated that one thing that made her not feel a sense of belonging on campus was a lack of minority teachers. She explained, “I also feel like the bigger classrooms sometimes is intimidating. So, I think that can cause a lack of connection with my professors.” She also admitted that she did not know how to handle diversity, which made her shy away and make her feel as though she did not belong. I asked if it was harder for her to enter or communicate with groups of people who did not look like her. She confirmed this but further explained that she had tried to join in with others who do not look like her but was not expecting the reaction she received when trying to join. She ended her last answer saying, “Overall, I feel like it is a lack of diversity on my part. I feel like I haven’t had any prior good experiences, so I am trying to make more.”

## ***Participant 2***

Participant 2 was an African American female. At the time of this interview, she was majoring in English literature and African American studies with minors in Danish and German. However, she had started her freshman year as an engineering major and had lived in the engineering dorms. She said because of this she had spent more time around White students but mainly White men. Her interview answers centered on her experiences being around White students much more than she had ever been.

**Involvements on Campus.** This participant was not involved in anything on campus. She was a full-time student and full-time worker at the time of this interview.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** Participant 2 described a few interactions between herself and her White peers. When asked how it was being a minority student on campus, she gave a very detailed answer:

It was very different for me, because growing up in New Orleans, even though there is clearly a racial difference, even the White people have a chiller attitude. So, like coming here and like being around different kinds of White people from all over . . . it's very different to see how different each of them are going to interact with you as a Black person.

I asked her to explain or describe the interactions she mentioned. She brought up instances where she felt uncomfortable as a minority student on this campus:

OK, so through work, I made a friend; it was a White guy. And he used to say a lot of things that were pretty derogatory. And to him, they were just jokes—they weren't statements that mattered or that had any significance; it was just something that somebody told him, so he repeated it. So, that is a lot of experiences that I have had on



campus with a lot White people. Just like being in spaces where they don't know what they are saying is offensive. They don't know that the things they are doing are offensive. Regardless of the [other] person's race anyway, I've noticed they don't have an outward consciousness of respect like everybody else does. Like the things that they do are just way more egocentric, and you can tell they are only worried about themselves.

She stated that being an "other" on the campus meant seeing White students as egocentric:

There are so many of them against a small backdrop of us. We're still learning the same things they are learning . . . like, the education style doesn't change. You know, we're in the same classrooms as them. But it's like, when we get to that one-on-one level, that group project level, like the individual level, that's when it becomes way more noticeable, like your race becomes way more noticeable.

She went on to say that she would suggest that students find their group. She said, "Just coming up here and not having a little sense of who you are, you kind of get lost." She mentioned having the African Student Union and Black Student Union available, but she felt that only students who were secure in their Blackness would search those programs out. However, for students who were not secure in their Blackness or themselves at all, she feels like it would be hard for them to assimilate into the culture of the campus. She suggested that students find people who work well with them.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** She defined a sense of belonging as follows:

walking into a space and you do not have to think about yourself in this space. You can literally just walk into the space and conduct yourself in whatever manner you feel is appropriate for the situation, but you don't have to feel insecure in your interactions.

**Experiences, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** She stated that her academic achievements gave her a sense of belonging. She said that she enjoyed discussions and talking about ideas, being in class and being in an environment where it was OK to share things and understand that there are certain boundaries that you cannot go past. She also felt that having minority professors gave her positive experiences. She explained:

Both of the minority professors I have, they are the African American lit professors, so because we're talking about our experience and it's a Black person teaching our experience, the conversations are different. You know, it's just a little more, like, familiar. I'm not saying that there isn't a teacher/professor relationship; there definitely is that there. But because I'm an "other" in so many of my other classes, the things we talk about don't relate to me. I get to go to this one class where it's, like, my moment; I get to talk about my life experiences, my people's life experiences, so it's just like a little easier and comfortable to, like, share the spaces.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** The participant stated that there were a lot of things on campus that did not give her a sense of belonging. She chose to talk only about what she considered the most significant things:

Walking around campus, and not even just being in class, just walking around campus, sitting down, maybe in the quad or something like that, and how people will look at you based off the things that you're doing. So, it's like I've noticed, like, sitting in the quad, in like, I'll sit on the grass if it's a nice day or whatever. Like, if you want to play your music or you have a phone conversation, you're talking, you're getting strange looks. Maybe you may just be a little too loud or your music might not be what they want to

hear. And when I say “they,” I mean the White kids passing by. That’s one of the biggest things—not being able to feel comfortable doing simple things.

Another example she gave was centered on her major and the fact that she was around a lot of White men often. She described a few experiences in her classes:

That’s where I came in the most contact with the White men on this campus. And some of the things they would say and how they would treat you, would be a little, very weird for me because, I’m living in the same building as you, I’m going to the same classes as you, there is no difference in us, but yet and still you don’t feel that I can do what you can do. You don’t feel that I can contribute to the same amount of information that you can contribute to.

Participant 2 was able to recall specific interactions in which negative comments and microaggressions were made toward her:

I took this class two semesters ago. It was Black women in America, and we would discuss. I think we happen to be on the topic of like rape or whatnot, and it was one guy in this class. All of the girls were Black and there was this one frat boy—I think he was like half Asian American or something like that. We were talking about the issue or whatever, and he couldn’t understand why Black women are hypersexualized. He couldn’t like grasp that ’cause in his mind it’s just like, “I want to have sex with all women.” He just couldn’t understand that specific things that you would do to Black women would be offensive to them and not offensive to White women or women of another race. And, like, he just could not understand it—you could tell that he just didn’t want to understand it. I mean, you’re in a room full of Black women, the best people who

could explain this experience to you, and you don't even want to open yourself up to even understanding that.

### ***Participant 3***

Participant 3 was a male who identified as mixed ethnicity. His mother was originally from the Philippines and his father was from Georgia. He came from a military family and was originally from California. He majored in sports administration and had a minor in business at the time of this interview.

**Involvements on Campus.** This participant was involved in the sports administration club and the campus e-sports club. He joined the sports administration club for networking reasons and joined e-sports club for leisure. He said he was still trying to work on time management due to also working off campus.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When asked what it was like being a minority student on this campus, he stated that it was not too bad. He went on to say, "My actual friend group consists of literally every race, so I get to experience their different kind of cultures and get their different experiences in life." He added that he did not have a certain perspective on how race influenced his experience. I asked him if he believed being of a mixed ethnicity had any effect on his perspective. He replied,

I would say so. With my dad being from Georgia, I got to experience an African American household while also experiencing an Asian household back in California. So, I was already exposed to multiple different kinds of perspectives and cultures. So, learning more cultures was all just natural to me.

As a follow-up question, I asked if he would describe his professors as diverse. He replied, “Not really. I tend to see all of my professors be Eurocentric.” I asked him if that made a difference to him or if it did not matter. He responded,

I think it does [matter], just because I think I would like to see a more diverse group here, just because different cultures or a diverse group will be able to bring over different perspectives. They’ll be able to teach—every person will be able to teach in their own way, and everybody, of course, are going to include their own perspectives. So, if you have a more diverse group, then that will also lead to just better learning overall.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** When defining a sense of belonging, the participant stated, “It’s how comfortable you are in an environment.” He added that if one is not comfortable in an environment, they would not feel as though they belong in that space.

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** He explained that the people and business acquaintances he had already met made him feel a sense of belonging on campus. He stated, “I already have a mentor here. I have a couple of mentors here that have been helping me guide down my path and of course people here that are helping my experience just become that much more special.” He also credited his small group of friends as a contributing factor to his sense of belonging on campus. He elaborated, saying, “I like to keep things small. As soon as you’re trying to make things too big, that complicates everything.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** The participant noted that the size of the school contributed to an experience that did not give him a sense of belonging. He explained:

Of course, every college is huge, especially a D1 school like this. So, sometimes I get lost in exactly how big college is. Like there are so many people that, to where you can kind

of feel overwhelmed if you don't kind of just centralize yourself. So, you don't want to get lost.

#### ***Participant 4***

Participant 4 was an African American male who described himself as very busy. In addition to being a student, he was a photographer. He quickly made the decision to enroll at this university the summer before the fall semester started. As stated, his motivation for enrolling at this university was the campus aesthetics and the availability of the major he had chosen.

**Involvements on Campus.** Alluding to the fact that he was always busy, he stated that his major involvement on campus was going to class. He also added that he is a part of a campus church group.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When asked to describe how it was being a minority student on this campus, he had a very interesting answer. He replied, "I have no idea. I don't really consider myself a minority, to be honest. I just don't ever care about race, to be honest." He went on to say that if I had never asked the question, he would have never thought of being a minority student on campus.

As a follow-up question, I asked him about the diversity of his professors. He responded that he had a very diverse group of professors who represented ethnicities and races such as Asian, Black, and Caucasian. He stated that the diversity of his professors did not really have an effect on him.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 4 defined a sense of belonging as "which club you decide to go into."

**Experiences, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** When asked about experiences that contributed to his sense of belonging on campus, Participant 4

responded, “They have a lot of welcoming clubs and clubs in general that probably relate to yourself—like art clubs, tech clubs, math, games, stuff like that.”

**Experience, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

When asked about experiences that did not contribute to his sense of belonging on campus, he seemed concerned with the size of the campus:

So, this one’s kind of obvious. Like, when there’s a lot of people and you’re like overwhelmed by like, “Man, I don’t know any of these people. If I learned one name, I’d probably forget it in a week and like I’ll ever see them again. So, I guess you could say like you feel like you could get lost in the amount of people there are, and you can’t stand out.

He went on to explain that he would feel a greater sense of belonging if the setting were smaller or if he found a small group of friends to hang out with.

***Participant 5***

Participant 5 was an African American female from Houston, Texas. She majored in elementary education and her main motivation for attending this university was a program it offered that allowed education majors to obtain their bachelor’s and master’s degrees all within 5 years.

**Involvements on Campus.** During her freshman year, she was accepted into a scholars program for minority students. She stated that this program was in place to help minority students feel included. She used this program to help her find people who looked like her. At the time of this interview, the participant had also applied to become an ambassador for her academic college.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When asked about how it was being a minority student on this campus, she replied:

Honestly, I had not really thought about it until, I want to say, a couple of months ago, which is really weird because I've been here for 3 years already. But, so like, a couple of months ago, we had just started in our blocks of classes, and I was just looking around and I was just like, wait, I'm the only African American person in here. You know, like not really registering it, even though, like, that's kind of common throughout my whole school. Even where I grew up, I was always like even the only Black face in the class or even in the school, or whatever. But I never really thought about it until recently, and I'm just like, well, I surround myself with, like, all types of people. But it is good to know, like, I feel like I'm beating a certain stereotype. So, I definitely, like, I feel good about coming here. Like, I wouldn't regret it or anything. I don't see it as a challenge; I see it more of like an accomplishment.

I asked her if her involvement in the scholars program made a difference in her experience, and she confirmed it did. She responded:

Oh, I do think so because they were, like, sort of my first friends. And I think it was good that I had, you know, like, I have all different types of friends. It was good to have friends that were like me, and I wouldn't have to . . . I don't have to, like, feel like I have to be different or code-switch. Like, I wouldn't have to do any of those things because, like, I'm around people who might have an understanding of what it's like to be around people that are not like you.

I asked a follow-up question about code-switching. According to Myers-Scotton and Ury (1977), code-switching is defined as “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same



conversation or interaction” (p. 7). I inquired if she found herself code-switching in class or on campus when she was not surrounded by people who looked like her. She responded:

All the time. I just feel like I do all the time, especially at work, because I speak on the phone with customers on campus, and I just feel like I have to sound a certain way for them to take me seriously more—to really listen to what I’m saying. Or, especially in class, like, when we touch on certain topics, people expect me to respond a certain way, but I don’t end up responding that way. I don’t want them to have that type of stereotyping on me.

She explained that the most recent time she felt as though her classmates expected a certain answer from her was a week prior to the interview when they were discussing whether they would expect their future students to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

As another follow-up question, I asked about the diversity among the professors she has had. She stated that she had not had a very diverse group of professors. She added:

That’s why I feel it’s important for me to become an educator because I just think it’s important for kids, too. Even though you’re not supposed to while teaching, teachers do put their opinion sometimes in their lessons. So, I think it’s important for students to have different opinions from teachers who may not be like them or who may be like them or, like, African American teachers from my point of view. So, I have not experienced that much [diversity of professors] at all. And then when I did have the opportunity, like, my teacher ended up not having the class anymore. I was kind of disappointed about that because it was also one of my education classes. So, I think it would have just been different if I would have had that point of view. Especially, when we’re like touching on

topics like we were last week, because everyone's kind of going to agree with each other, if they all think like that. And then it'll be me who's, like, the outsider.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 5 defined a sense of belonging as “having an understanding of where you belong, where you fit in.”

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** Overall, the participant felt as though her decision to enroll at the university made her feel as though she belonged.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

The participant stated that the realization a couple of months prior to this interview that she was the only minority in her class contributed to her not feeling a sense of belonging. She stated:

Probably when I realized a couple of months ago that, like, I was, like, the only African American in my class. Like, I felt like when we go to the schools to observe and everything, I still feel like it's kind of all eyes on me. You know, even though it's probably not like that, but I just feel like that because I know I'm sticking out from everyone else.

***Participant 6***

Participant 6 was a senior at the university. She majored in leadership and human resource development. She was from Tampa, Florida, but grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. As a student leader, her leadership position on campus allowed her to share her experiences from a different perspective.

**Involvements on Campus.** This participant stated that she was the current president of the training and development campus organization and the Society of Human Resource organization. She also worked and was a part of an internship.

**Being a Minority on this Campus.** When I asked her what it was like being a minority student on campus, she admitted that it could be difficult at times, but she felt as though it made her appreciate her experience even more:

It's a struggle sometimes. But I feel like it makes you work harder at the end of the day. I feel like it makes me hustle harder. Like, yeah, I know stuff isn't given to me easily, but I know once I get through it, I worked hard. It gives me more appreciation for my degree. So, like, when August comes, I know I will be really happy, because there's been a lot of trials and tribulations. But it just made me a better person in the end. I think college does that for anyone, but being a minority at a PWI, it really makes you grow because you're uncomfortable in a lot of situations, especially with your professors or anybody. You're going to be uncomfortable in a lot of situations or conversations or just even in class when stuff comes up. And you're gonna hear different people's opinions, and it's gonna help you—you can either help someone else grow or you're going to grow. And it's gonna open your mind a lot.

I probed and asked her if she could name any specific instances or examples of trials or tribulations that she had faced as a minority on this campus. She reminisced on a roommate situation:

Roommates will be one. I've had roommates—I've had White roommates for like a majority, for like the first 2 years. Some things are, like, getting along because of differences, maybe backgrounds, I don't know. I usually get along with everyone, but

they were just very picky, I guess. And I always get along with people, so not getting along with my roommates was really, like, weird for me, and I never felt comfortable where I lived until I moved to my apartment now with my roommate.

When I questioned the race or ethnicity of her then current roommate, the participant responded that they were Black.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 6 defined a sense of belonging as “somewhere where I feel like I’m making an impact, where I don’t feel uncomfortable. I feel comfortable. Like, there’s someone or people I can go to who have my back—kind of like a foundation.”

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.** When I asked if she had any experiences that contributed to a sense of belonging for her, she credited her professors and special people she had met with providing positive experiences. She answered:

I would say the people I have met and who have supported my dreams and aspirations, that’s one thing it is. Like, I have professors who are not African American, but they are still supportive of my dreams and aspirations and my goals—they are always trying to help. My friend group, my support group, that’s really what helps it. And, then, my support group, it’s a mixture. Some of my classmates, they’re not Black. They’re like, they’re Hispanic or Black and probably a couple of Asians. But we are always studying together. Like when we have those hard classes, we’re just helping each other. So, that’s a sense of belonging. So, like, without them, I kind of wouldn’t have made it this far.

She also described how a close group of friends gave her a sense of belonging, not only on an academic level but also on a personal level:

And then just my college friends I've made here too, who, like, during those personal they've—because, you're not really with your parents, you're away from home, well, some of us. So, that's like your family to get you through those days when you don't want to go to class or you don't want to be productive. You have those friends who just get you through it.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

Regarding an experience that did not make her feel a sense of belonging, Participant 6 explained that finding help on this campus was not always easy.

I would say it's hard to get help, though. Sometimes when you do ask for help from some people, they don't want to help you—from the majority race. I would say [the university] is a “who you know” type of place, and I think that's the workforce too. But I think that's one of the hardest things. It's like, I'm paying the same amount of money as the other people, so even if they're in this clique or whatever [or] you know them, I should still get that same help. Like, if you know someone in my field that can help me, why can't you give me [their information]? So, that's what I would say the biggest thing is to get help sometimes. It is truly hard to find someone to truly help you.

***Participant 7***

Participant 7 was a White Hispanic and considered herself a minority. She majored in finance at the university and described her major as a male-dominated field. Throughout her interview, the participant talked about her experiences as a minority student and as a woman.

**Involvements on Campus.** The participant stated that she had been involved in the Student Finance Association, the Economics Club, and a business fraternity.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When describing how it was like being a minority student on this campus, the participant stated that she noticed a lot of people had privilege. She recognized her privilege, as well, but stated that some students there had much more. She also went on to state that the campus was not very diverse. She said, “[The university] is really White, and I thought that was weird just in general.”

She mentioned that group projects seemed to emphasize her status as a minority on campus.

Whenever we would have group projects, there would be, like, males who a lot of times would “mansplain” something. You know, I knew it already, but they would still tell it to me. Or I would come up—and this still happens—with an idea, and they would sort of just be like, “Yeah, oh, yeah.” But then like 10 minutes later, they’d be like, “Hey, let’s do this!” and it would be like what I’d just suggested.

I went a bit further and asked her if she would describe the professors she had as diverse. She replied, “I would absolutely describe them as diverse.” She went on to explain that this was a hindrance sometimes because of the communication barriers that may have been there.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 7 defined a sense of belonging as “people who share commonalities and belief structures that you can relate and not feel like you have to act differently.”

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

When asked if she experienced anything that contributed to her sense of belonging, she replied in an interesting way. The respondent answered, “A lot of the sense of belonging I had was, how do I say this, it was almost a mirage.” She further explained that she initially wanted to enroll at this university because her whole family attended the university. She continued, “But

when I got there, I mean, it was . . . I couldn't say I ever, like honestly, I didn't socialize a lot in my undergrad."

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

When describing what made her not feel a sense of belonging on campus, the participant spoke from more of a woman's perspective than that of someone who identified as a racial or ethnic minority:

Male teachers—so, like, they're teaching—a lot of the analogies that male teachers would make were always sports related or like things that men would know about, but women, only by association, could just assume. Just so many male references. For me, I was always more textbook related, but I don't know.

She also stated that the university had many cliques and sororities that made her feel excluded because she was not a part of those types of organizations. She also felt that people who may have wanted to be friends with someone in a sorority may have also felt excluded.

***Participant 8***

Participant 8 was an Asian male who immigrated into the United States at the age of 13. As previously stated, he chose this university due to its proximity to his home. He also stated that it's what he believed was expected of him.

**Involvements on Campus.** The participant stated that, other than volunteer work, he never really participated in many clubs or organizations due to maintaining three jobs.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When I asked him about his experiences being a minority student on campus, he explained that he's never really thought about it. He replied:

To be honest, I never really thought about it. I never really thought about it simply because you do see a lot of races around campus quite a bit. I mean, collectively, I can say that I do see a lot of different, like, Asians, African Americans, Caucasians, like, within the university. So, I never really felt like I was alone. But the cool thing is I usually get excited if I can identify someone that's, like, Filipino. "I think they're Filipino! OK, cool!" Because that is just something that's just rare here in the South—especially in here in [this city], but I never really thought about it that much.

I asked him if he thought he had a diverse group of professors. He confirmed that he did.

He went on to say:

I did feel that a lot of my professors were very diverse. I've had someone with a very thick accent. I also had several Asian professors that were phenomenal, so I've had a very diverse group of different professors that I felt collectively made me feel like it's an international school. Because you have all these different people teaching the class that doesn't come from the U.S., so that's what I felt. I felt important because they had someone from Asia.

I asked if having Asian professors made him feel more comfortable or if it did not have any effect. He responded,

I felt the same as the others. But I did feel in a lot of ways lucky if that makes any sense. Because of the fact that knowing someone from a university from a completely different country is teaching here in the U.S., and out of all the universities, they are teaching here.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 8 described a sense of belonging as “being able to fit in, being able to be a part of something more than just in the sense of having to. It's like being a part of something that you feel like is important.”



### **Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

When Participant 8 described the experiences that gave him a sense of belonging, he responded:

The fact that when I walk into the classroom, in more ways than one, and I can't speak for other peoples' experiences, but I felt like I was not the only color that I see. I did see a lot of different races. When I went there, I felt like the classes that I was in, there was a lot of mixture of, like, Asian, Blacks, Whites—there was just a good mixture of people, I felt. And everyone was friendly.

### **Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

Participant 8 explained that the size of the campus contributed to him not feeling a sense of belonging on campus. He replied, "It's too big. I know that sounds crazy. But it's too big."

### ***Participant 9***

Participant 9 was an Asian female who had a very positive experience at the university.

**Involvements on Campus.** Participant 9 was a part of the Vietnamese Student Association. She stated that she felt that her involvement in this organization contributed to her feelings of inclusion. However, if she had not been a part of this organization, she would not have felt excluded on campus; rather she just would not have felt as involved in college.

**Being a Minority on this Campus.** When asked about her experience of being a minority student on campus, she replied, "I didn't really feel any changes, because, since at [university], there is a whole diversity of people there. I didn't feel like I was excluded or anything."

She also stated that she felt as though her professors were diverse but that it did not have any effect on her experiences at the university.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** This participant defined a sense of belonging as being accepted by other people.

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

I asked about any experiences that may have contributed to her sense of belonging on campus. She replied, “I guess just being open with people around you, and they are not judgmental.”

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

I asked about any experiences that may have contributed to her not feeling a sense of belonging on campus. She responded, “I mean, the classes here are huge. So, some professors don’t know who you are. It’s kind of hard to be one-on-one with the professors. That’s the bad thing about it.”

***Participant 10***

Participant 10 was a male who identified as being a mixed ethnicity. He grew up in a military household and traveled quite a bit. His family finally settled in the northern part of the state before he attended the university.

**Involvements on Campus.** The participant stated he was involved in a kinesiology group, a pre-physical therapy group, and the Vietnamese Student Association. He believed that being a part of the Vietnamese Student Association helped him become more social and meet other people.

**Being a Minority Students on this Campus.** I asked this participant to describe what it was like being a minority at this institution. He replied,

It wasn’t too bad. I feel like it was pretty open at [the university]. Considering because I knew coming from [prior city], it’s a smaller city compared to [current city]. So, diversity

there wasn't as large, despite having an air force base, which a lot of people from different backgrounds and whatnot live in that general area. But at [the university] I met a lot of different ethnicities. I felt like I got to meet people from all over the world at that point.

When I asked about the diversity of his professors, he explained that they were not too diverse. He felt that most of his professors were White males. He stated that when he took foreign language classes, the professors for that class were usually from a country in which people spoke the language they were teaching. He explained that he believed his experiences would have been different in a positive way if he had had a more diverse group of professors.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 10 defined a sense of belonging as “when you feel comfortable in whatever situation or group that you’re in and everybody is open to you.”

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

For this participant, the significant sports culture of the university contributed to his sense of belonging. He described it saying,

For me, I feel like I grew up in the household where my dad was a huge sports fan. So, when you hear [the name of the university], you always think about sports. I mean, it still is good education, don't get me wrong. But, like, when I went there, I was like, I can't wait to go to football games, basketball games. . . . So, I feel like I belong there, being a huge sports fan.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

This participant cited financial reasons when I asked him what experiences, if any, did not contribute to his sense of belonging at this institution.

### ***Participant 11***

Participant 11 identified as an Asian male. Although he was not involved in many campus groups, he seemed to have an overall positive experience at this university.

**Involvements on Campus.** When asked about his involvement on campus, he replied, “I really didn’t participate too much in anything. I did intramural sports and that’s pretty much it.”

**Being a Minority on this Campus.** I asked what it was like for him as a minority at this institution, he responded, “It felt pretty natural. I get along with everybody in general. So, it didn’t make me feel out of place or anything.” He also stated that his professors were very diverse but that it had no effect at all on his experiences at the university.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** This participant had difficulty describing what a sense of belonging meant to him. To him, a sense of belonging centered on how friendly people and staff were on campus.

#### **Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

Participant 11 explained that his group of friends contributed to his sense of belonging. He explained, “A lot of my friends went there. . . . [It] just kind of felt like home.”

#### **Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

The participant stated that nothing at the university made him feel as though he did not belong on campus.

### ***Participant 12***

Participant 12 identified as an Asian female. Before coming to the university, she lived at home with her parents. She chose this university because it gave her more independence.

**Involvements on Campus.** Participant 12 was a part of the Student Government Association, where she served as secretary.

**Being a Minority Student on this Campus.** When I asked her how it was being a minority student on this campus, she stated, “It’s no different than not being one. I feel no different.”

The participant could not recall if she had a diverse group of professors, so she stated that it must not have had that much of an effect on her.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** Participant 12 described a sense of belonging as “being around like-minded people.”

**Experience, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

She stated that overall, the people on campus contributed to her sense of belonging.

**Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

When asked what experiences, if any, did not contribute to a sense of belonging, she replied, “I was far away from my family.”

### ***Participant 13***

Participant 13 provided an interesting perspective to the study. She identified as an Armenian female but looked Caucasian. She changed her first name because she stated that people often confused her race for Caucasian instead of Middle Eastern. She explained that her ethnicity and race were very important to her.

**Involvements on Campus.** Participant 13 stated that she was a part of the Spectrum organization on campus.

**Being a Minority Student on This Campus.** When asked to describe how it was to be a minority on this campus, she explained:

It’s interesting. Because I think when you’re someone who’s mixed, you don’t technically look like a minority to some but to some people you do. I never had a

problem being what it is that I am. I guess I was just very lucky or privileged there because I never really was treated a different kind of way based off my ethnicity, looks, orientation, gender. . . . I never felt that.

I followed up her answer by asking her if she felt that her Caucasian features had anything to do with her experiences. She explained she was not quite sure:

I think sometimes people can interpret situations as, like, being specifically against them. It may not even be that. So, unfortunately for me and for this interview, I'm going to have to say I don't know. I constantly feel like I'm being discriminated against; it might not be why I think it is. I've never had someone specifically telling me that they had a problem with me because I was Armenian but look Caucasian. I've never come across that.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging.** When she described what a sense of belonging meant to her, she said, "It's kind of like if you don't want to smile, it's OK. If you hear something that makes you want to dance, and you [are] comfortable with dancing, you dance."

#### **Experiences, if Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

Participant 13 enjoyed the sense of independence she felt at this university. She stated,

How they went about things and didn't try to hold my hand. Like, they let me walk how I needed to. When someone holds your hand, you technically aren't setting your own pace and walking. You're technically not walking like you would have normally done. And so, they let you walk. They let you go where you need to go. They don't try to alter How you decide to get there. Unfortunately, with that you can possibly not do well or be successful. So, to me, the sense of belonging was I actually got to become aware of myself without other things trying to pull me in a certain direction.

### **Experiences, if Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus.**

The participant described a time when rumors were spread about her in an organization that made her not feel a sense of belonging. She stated, “People that I related to when it came to orientation, I feel like I was bullied there.”

### **Summary of Research Participant Experiences**

The participants in this study represented multiple races and ethnicities. Although they each shared different stories and experiences, their interviews revealed many similarities and themes.

#### ***Involvements on Campus***

Almost all the participants were involved in their campus in some capacity. Some of the organizations that the students were involved in centered on their race or ethnicity. Participant 1 was an African American female who was involved in the Black Women Empowerment Initiative and the Minority Women Movement. Participant 5 was a member of the Presidential Millennial Scholars Program. Participants 9 and 10 were both members of the Vietnamese Student Association. Most participants joined clubs or organizations that centered on their majors and minors. Participant 1 and Participant 3 both majored in sports administration and were members of sports administration organizations. Furthermore, Participant 7 was a finance major and joined the Student Finance Association, the Economics Club, and a business fraternity. Participant 10 was a kinesiology major and was a member of both the kinesiology and pre-physical therapy groups. Participant 6 majored in human resource development and gained membership in the Society of Human Resource Organization.

A few participants held leadership positions in clubs or organizations on campus. Participant 1 served as a student ambassador in her academic college. Participant 6 was the

president of the training and development campus organization, and Participant 9 was the student government secretary.

Other participants joined clubs or organizations based on leisure or their identity.

Participant 3 reported being a part of the campus e-sports club. Unable to be very active on campus, Participant 11 partook in campus intramural sports. Participant 4 explained that while he was very busy, he was a part of a campus church. Lastly, Participant 13 stated that she was a part of the campus Spectrum club that supports students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, or asexual/aromantic.

There were, however, some participants who were not involved in anything on campus. Participant 2 and Participant 8 were not involved in any clubs or organizations. Both participants cited their employment and full-time student status as reasons they did not have the time to become members in campus organizations.

### ***Being a Minority Student on Campus***

The participants had various experiences of being a minority student on campus. Some shared instances of hearing microaggressions or feeling as though they could not be themselves around the majority race. Others felt as though their minority status did not yield different experiences at all.

Participants 1, 2, 5, and 6, all African American females, shared negative experiences of being a minority student at this institution. Participant 1 explained how she felt as though potential group mates shied away from her when a professor gave group assignments. Participant 2 explained how a White student used microaggressions and said derogatory statements that he considered jokes. Participant 5 spoke of when she realized she was the only minority student in her class. Additionally, she explained that she felt as though her peers expected certain answers



or viewpoints from her during class discussions. Lastly, Participant 6 shared that being a minority student on campus was a struggle that made minority students grow. She explained that this experience was very challenging and could be uncomfortable at times. She spoke of how she and her White roommates did not get along, though she felt like she usually got along with almost everyone.

### ***Defining a Sense of Belonging***

When asked to define a sense of belonging, most participants seemed to include the same elements. Some elements were friendliness, acceptance, love, and feeling like they were a part of a family. However, the most common word that surfaced in the definitions was “comfort.” Most participants cited comfort and the ability to be one’s self as a factor in a sense of belonging.

### ***Experiences, If Any, That Contributed to a Sense of Belonging on Campus***

Commonalities among the participants seemed to surface when they described experiences that contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. Many of them explained that a small group of friends was the main factor that gave them a sense of belonging. Another common factor was supportive advisors, mentors, and professors. Some students shared that these individuals showed that they were genuinely concerned about their well-being and that they care about them. A few participants stated that seeing other ethnicities on campus gave them a sense of belonging. Further, a couple of participants stated that sports culture of the campus brought a lot of students together.

### ***Experiences, If Any, That Did Not Contribute to a Sense of Belonging on Campus***

The most common factor that did not contribute a sense of belonging among the participants was the size of the school. Participant 3 described the size of the school as overwhelming. Participant 11 explained that her class sizes were so large that it was difficult to

be noticed by professors. Participant 5 explained that being the only minority face in the room sometimes made her feel like an outsider. Participant 1 said that the lack of minority professors contributed to her not feeling a sense of belonging. Lastly, Participant 12 stated that the fact that she was away from her family contributed to a lack of a sense of belonging on campus.

### **Emergent Themes**

This section presents the themes revealed from the data analyses and a discussion of how each theme connects to the research question. Pinpointing emergent themes is necessary in a basic qualitative research study because this process allows the researcher to look for patterns and repeated words and phrases in the participants' responses (Leavy, 2017). Emergent themes shed light on experiences that participants may have in common. Further, emergent themes can be used as a foundation to recognize how these experiences affect each participant.

Through 13 individual one-on-one interviews, two different themes emerged in the experiences of these minority students. Addressing the research question of how minority students described their experiences, if any, at a southeastern state flagship university yielded two themes: (a) support and (b) environment. A comparison of these themes to the current literature about minority students' experiences and sense of belonging on predominantly White campuses is discussed in Chapter 5. Table 3 summarizes the emerged themes for the research question.

**Table 3**

*Emerged Themes from Research Question*

Research question	Theme number	Theme name
How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university?	1	Support
	2	Environment

The themes for this study surfaced during data analysis of each participant's transcribed answers. In Table 4, the emerged themes are shown in descending order based on how many times the research participants mentioned the specific theme. The frequency of each theme revealed its importance to answering the research question.

**Table 4**

*Summary of Emergent Themes*

Themes	Number of participant statements ( <i>n</i> )
Theme 1: Support	40
Theme 2: Environment	22

The frequency of each emerged theme may show the importance of an emerged theme in the participants' experiences as minority students at this institution. Table 5 shows the research question, each emerged theme categorized, a description of the categories, and evidence of the theme.

**Table 5**

*Summary of Theme Categories, Description of Categories, and Evidence of Emerged Themes*

Themes	Categories	Descriptions
Support	Involvement	The groups and organizations the participants joined
	Friend groups	Participants established bonds with groups of friends who showed they cared for their well-being.
Environment	Comfortability	The impact of experiences on the participants' mental ease
	School size	The physical aspects of the institution, such as campus,

### **Findings Related to the Research Question**

The research question was as follows: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university? In exploring how minority students described their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university, I saw two themes emerge: The research participants described the support they received on campus and the campus environment.

#### ***Theme 1: Support***

The first theme that emerged that addressed the research question was identified as support. Support includes the friends, advisors, mentors, and professors the participants stated contributed to their sense of belonging. Support also included the organizations, groups, and clubs the participants joined. The emerged theme of support yielded two categories: friend groups and involvement. Eleven of the 13 participants mentioned support in terms of friend groups and involvement. Below are the participants' significant responses pertaining to support:

- Participant 1: "I'm also a part of different organizations, like BWEI, which is basically Black Women Empowerment Initiative and Minority Women Movement."
- Participant 1: "A sense of belonging to me is having people around you to help support and encourage you."
- Participant 1: "I feel like I've had some good advisors, which is fortunate."
- Participant 1: "My organizations are very helpful. People over the group are really there and they really help me."
- Participant 1: "I met a few friends who gave me a sense of belonging, and my

roommate.”

- Participant 1: “It’s good being around successful people who look like you.”
- Participant 2: “I don’t have many friends.”
- Participant 2: “Through work, I made a friend, and it was a White guy who seemed to say a lot of things that were pretty derogatory.”
- Participant 2: “I would definitely recommend them to find people who work well with you.”
- Participant 3: “I like to group myself with like four or five people that I consider friends.”
- Participant 3: “My actual friend group consists of literally every race.”
- Participant 3: “I decided to join the sports admin club because I wanted to improve my network.”
- Participant 3: “I was a part of [the campus] e-sports for a little bit.”
- Participant 3: “The business acquaintances I’ve already met, and I already have a couple of mentors here that have been helping me guide my path.”
- Participant 5: “I’m also in a program for minorities to help me not feel left out.”
- Participant 5: “That was a way for me to find people like me.”
- Participant 5: “There are so many things to get involved in, so I feel like there’s never a group left out.”
- Participant 6: “Once I found friends and started going to the different things on campus and being involved, that’s when I started finding my passion in life.”
- Participant 6: “There’s so many different organizations out there, and once I started getting out there more, I started meeting more friends.”

- Participant 6: “Some of my classmates have turned into friends.”
- Participant 6: “I would say, the people I’ve met who have supported my dreams and aspirations—that’s one thing I like.”
- Participant 6: “I even have professors who are not African American, but they are so supportive of my dreams, aspirations, and my goals, they are always trying to help.”
- Participant 6: “My friend group, my support group—that’s really what helps.
- Participant 6: My support group is a mixture. We have Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians. We’re always studying together for hard classes and helping each other. That’s a sense of belonging, because I know without them, I wouldn’t have made it this far.”
- Participant 6: “And my college friends that I’ve made here, too.”
- Participant 6: “You’re not with your parents, you’re away from home, so that’s like your family to get you through those days when you don’t want to go to class. . . . When you don’t want to be productive, you have those friends to help get you through it.”
- Participant 7: “I was in the Student Finance Association. I was in the Economics Club. I was in a business fraternity.”
- Participant 7: “There were just a lot of cliques and sororities, and I didn’t do that. So, I felt like that sort of excluded anyone who wanted to be friends with other people in sororities.”
- Participant 9: “I was a part of the Vietnamese Student Association.”
- Participant 9: “A sense of belonging means being accepted by other people.”
- Participant 10: “I was a part of the kinesiology group and the pre-physical therapy group, and there was also a Vietnamese Student Association.”

- Participant 10: “The organizations were very open and friendly.”
- Participant 11: “I did intramural sports and that’s really about it.”
- Participant 11: “During my time there, I met my best friend.”
- Participant 11: “I think everyone was pretty friendly. The staff there accepted me.”
- Participant 11: “A lot of my friends went there, so it kind of felt like home.”
- Participant 12: “I was in student government, and I was the secretary.”
- Participant 12: “If I were around like-minded people, it would make me feel a sense of belonging.”
- Participant 13: “I was part of the Spectrum organization.”
- Participant 13: “So, I think that gave me an opportunity to reach out and identify with people I can relate with specifically to my organization.”

### ***Theme 2: Environment***

The second and final emerged theme that addressed the research question was identified as environment. Environment included two categories: comfortability and school size. Comfortability involves the impact of experiences on the participants’ mental ease. School size involves the physical aspects of the institution, such as campus, physical classroom size, and number of students. Ten of the 13 participants mentioned the environment in terms of comfortability and school size. The participants spoke of how the environment impacted their experiences as minorities at this university. Below are the participants’ most significant responses pertaining to environment.

- Participant 1: “I chose [this university] because I knew I wanted to go to a big school.”
- Participant 1: “The bigger classrooms sometimes are intimidating.”

- Participant 2, when describing classes in which she had a minority professor: “It’s easier and comfortable to share.”
- Participant 2: “That’s one of the biggest things—not being able to feel comfortable doing simple things.”
- Participant 3, when defining a sense of belonging: “Really, I would define it as how comfortable you are in an environment.”
- Participant 3: “One of the most important things about social interaction is if you’re not comfortable in an environment, then you’re not going to feel like you belong there.”
- Participant 3: “Your comfortability is only going to be natural in any environment you’re in. You’re going to decide whether you like the environment almost instantly.”
- Participant 3: “Sometimes I get lost in just how big college is. There are so many people to where you can feel overwhelmed if you don’t kind of centralize yourself.”
- Participant 4: “[This university] is freaking big.”
- Participant 4: “There’s a lot of people and you’re overwhelmed.”
- Participant 5: “The campus is really big, and everyone knows that. But there’s also many things to get involved in.”
- Participant 6: “It’s a bigger school. I’ve always like bigger schools because there are so many different people.”
- Participant 6: “A sense of belonging to me is somewhere I feel like I’m making an impact. I don’t feel uncomfortable; I feel comfortable.”
- Participant 6: “I never felt comfortable where I lived until I moved to my apartment now.”



- Participant 6: “Being a minority at a PWI makes you grow because you’re not comfortable in a lot of situations.
- Participant 6: “You’re going to be in a lot of uncomfortable situations or conversations.”
- Participant 8: “OK, it’s [the university] is too big, and I know that sounds crazy. It’s too big to the point that it’s ridiculous how when you pick classes, one could be on the other side of the campus and one could be 2 miles away.”
- Participant 8: “Be prepared to work hard to be able to get noticed because in a lot of ways, it’s a great experience, but it’s a huge university. Too many students, and it’s growing.”
- Participant 9: “I mean, the classes are huge. So, the professors don’t really know who you are. So, it’s kind of hard to be one-on-one with the professor.”
- Participant 10: “Telling people you go to a big university was pretty cool as well.”
- Participant 13: “I was comfortable being myself. There are all types of people that went there.”
- Participant 13: “It’s kind of like if you don’t want to smile, it’s OK. If you hear something that makes you want to dance, and you’re comfortable with dancing, you dance.”

## Summary

Chapter 4 began by presenting the findings of the study. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe the experiences, if any, among minority students at a southeastern state flagship university. This study included a total of 13 research participants ( $n = 13$ ). I described the participants’ demographics, which were gender, race or ethnicity, and major,

followed by a summary of each participant. Next, I described each participant's answers regarding their involvements on campus, their experiences as minorities on campus, how they described a sense of belonging, what experiences, if any, contributed to their sense of belonging on campus, and what experiences, if any, did not contribute to their sense of belonging on campus. Through one-on-one interviews with each participant, two themes emerged through the participants' interview responses.

The research question of how minority students describe their experiences, if any, at a southeastern state flagship university yielded two themes: support and environment. Support was broken down into the two categories of involvement and friend groups. Environment was broken down into the two categories of comfortability and school size. A comparison of the themes to the existing literature on minority students and a sense of belonging on PWIs is discussed in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 included the introduction to the study, a literature review on minority students and a sense of belonging at PWIs, and the research methodology and data analysis. Chapter 4 described each participant's demographics, the interview responses, and the themes that emerged from the interview responses. Chapter 5 includes the overview of the study, interpretation of findings, conclusions, recommendations of the study, a chapter summary, and an overall summary of the study.

### **Overview of the Study**

This basic qualitative study described the sense of belonging among minority students at a southeastern state flagship university. Minority students often graduate at a lower rate than their White peers (Jackson, 2016). Furthermore, the graduation gap between majority students and minority students is growing (Bonner, 2018). Minority students are prone to feelings of isolation, low academic achievement, and a lack of academic persistence. When minority students feel a sense of belonging at their institution, they are more likely to achieve academic success and graduate (Stokes, 2017).

An essential factor to help minority students feel a sense of belonging is involvement. Astin's (1975) theory of involvement states that students who live, work, and are involved on their campus are more likely to stay enrolled in school and persist to graduation. Additionally, this theory also states that involvement is a better indicator of students' academic persistence than aptitude tests or their high school GPA.

Another key component regarding a student's involvement is social integration. Social integration is the number of valuable exchanges (positive or negative) we have with those who are important to us (Tovar, 2013). To reach social integration, events, relationships, and activities

must align with minority students' expectations (Jackson, 2016). This includes having positive interactions and support from their peers as well as professors who share commonalities with these students (Jackson, 2016). These commonalities include race, ethnicity, background, and culture. According to Tinto (1993), minority students, specifically Black students, may have difficulty finding a supportive group in which they can feel as though they belong.

Unfortunately, many PWIs, such as this southeastern state flagship university, often do not have faculty and staff to represent minority students (Jackson, 2016).

Thirteen minority students at a southeastern state flagship university that was a PWI participated in one-on-one interviews to describe their experiences, if any, at this institution. Using basic qualitative research, I addressed the following research question through interviews that described the experiences of each participant: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university?

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The review of literature of Chapter 2 highlighted the importance of having a sense of belonging among minority students. Additionally, Chapter 2 described the positive experiences minority students may have when they feel as though they belong on their campus. However, the literature review also explained the detrimental experiences minority students may have if they do not feel as though they belong on their campus.

The results of this study coincided with previous literature surrounding minorities and a sense of belonging at PWIs. However, in this study, I explored the experiences of minority students at a southeastern state flagship university. Each participant responded to individual, one-on-one interview questions about their experiences at this university. The findings from Chapter 4 are interpreted compared to existing literature.

## Research Question

How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university? Addressing the research question of how minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university, I saw two themes emerge: (a) support and (b) environment. Support comprised two categories: involvement and friend groups. Environment also comprised two categories: comfortability and school size.

### *Theme 1: Support*

Being a minority student at a PWI can be challenging and difficult. As stated previously, students, especially minority students, benefit from quality campus involvement and meaningful college relationships. These involvements include clubs, organizations, or groups. Also, meaningful relationships are usually between minority students and peers or professors with whom they share commonalities. According to Astin (1975), not all students will require the same type of support, and the same student may not require the same type of support throughout their college years.

Five of the 13 research participants received support from close friends or faculty or staff. Participant 1 mentioned that all her academic advisors had been very helpful to her. She stated that most of her advisors were minorities; however, she had a White advisor who also supported her. Participant 2 advised future students to find their friend group and people who work well with them. When mentioning contributions to her sense of belonging, she said that both of her minority professors helped her feel as though she belonged. She stated, “I get to go to this one class where it’s, like, my moment. I get to talk about my life experiences, my people’s life experiences, so it’s just like a little easier and comfortable to, like, share the spaces.” Other participants surrounded themselves with a mixed group of friends. Participant 3 explained that

his friend group was so diverse that he felt as though he was able to experience different cultures and different experiences. Participant 6 also mentioned that she had a diverse study group and a close set of personal friends. She felt as though without them, she would not have made it far in college. She also mentioned that her close friends motivated her to keep going. Lastly, Participant 11 shared that he met his best friend at the university.

Other participants received support in the form of involvement on campus. Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 6, Participant 7, and Participant 10 were all involved in clubs or organizations that were directly related to their majors. Participant 1 and Participant 3 were sports administration majors who joined the sports administration club. As a finance major, Participant 7 joined three clubs centered on her major—the Student Finance Association, the Economics Club, and a business fraternity. Participant 10 majored in kinesiology and joined the kinesiology and pre-physical therapy club. Lastly, as a human resource development major, Participant 6 joined the Society of Human Resource organization.

As stated in Postulates 2 and 3 of Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, involvement will vary from student to student. Involvement can also be quantitative, which is based on how much time a student devotes to involvement, or it can be qualitative, which refers to how serious the involvement is to a student. Most of the research participants were members of organizations. However, three participants held leadership positions. Participant 1 served as an ambassador in her academic college, Participant 6 was the president of the training and development campus organization, and Participant 12 was the student government secretary.

Research has shown that minority students sometimes form their academic and social groups with other minorities to evade microaggressions and racism (Solórzano et al., 2000). These groups provide a space for students to connect with others who have had similar

experiences. Additionally, these spaces provide benefits such as meaningful, trusting relationships; positive learning environments; and validation of experiences (Solórzano et al., 2000).

There were a few participants who were involved in organizations that were exclusively for students who shared their race or ethnicity. Participant 1 stated that the minority organizations on campus marked minority students' footprints on campus. She also felt as though these minority groups contributed to her sense of belonging. She was a member of the Black Women Empowerment Initiative and the Minority Women Movement. Participant 5 was a member of the Presidential Millennial Scholars program. The main objective of this program was to help minority students feel included on campus. She said that she used this program to help her find others who looked like her. Participant 9 identified herself as Vietnamese, and Participant 10 stated that he was mixed with Vietnamese. They both were a part of the Vietnamese Student Association.

### ***Theme 2: Environment***

Not only do meaningful relationships and quality involvements have a positive impact on minority students but so does the campus environment. In fact, a campus environment is significant in shaping a sense of belonging among minority and White students (Museus et al., 2018). However, the existing literature states that students from diverse minority groups experience a college environment and a sense of belonging in different ways (Museus et al., 2018). Ten of the 13 research participants mentioned the campus environment in terms of comfortability and school size in their experiences. Participant 13 described the university as a place that she was comfortable being herself. Most of the participants spoke of being comfortable when defining a sense of belonging. However, three participants explained what

made them feel uncomfortable. Participant 2 reminisced of a time when a White coworker told a derogatory joke that he had heard from someone else. Participant 6 stated that minorities would feel uncomfortable in a lot of situations on campus. She also explained that minorities might possibly feel uncomfortable in many conversations as well. She spoke of a time when she felt uncomfortable around her White roommate, which was not the norm for her because she felt as though she usually got along with almost everyone.

When asked about what did not contribute to a sense of belonging, nearly all the research participants cited large class sizes, a large campus, or the significant number of students enrolled at the university. Participant 1 explained, “I also feel like the bigger classrooms sometimes is intimidating. So, I think that can cause a lack of connection with my professors.” Participant 3 and Participant 4 thought that the size of the school was overwhelming. Participant 4 felt as though there were so many people on campus, one could get lost. Participant 8 explained that he thought the campus was too big and that it was hard to get noticed on campus. Lastly, Participant 11 stated that her class sizes were so large, she felt it was tough to get noticed by professors and get one-on-one time with them.

According to Vaccaro and Newman (2016), for students to feel a sense of belonging, they must be in an environment in which they can be their true selves. However, a few participants described the environment in terms of feeling alone, not being able to be themselves, and being judged. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Participant 5 stated that she often felt as though all eyes were on her due to her being the only minority student in class. She also felt as though her White peers expected certain answers from her during class discussions. Participant 2 shared stories of getting looks when she played music or talked too loud on the campus quad. This made her feel as though she could not be comfortable just being herself. She also spoke of feeling uncomfortable



when she was assigned to a small group. Participant 2 felt as though when it was time to work with a small group, her classmates would shy away from her. According to her, being in small groups only seemed to emphasize her minority status.

## **Conclusions**

This study produced two emergent themes regarding the experiences of minority students at a southeastern state flagship university that also doubled as a PWI. Through individual, one-on-one interviews, the emergent themes of support and environment arose. Previous literature has stated that a sense of belonging is positively linked to academic success, motivation, and persistence to graduation (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). However, scholars maintain that finding a sense of belonging on college campuses, mainly PWIs, can be challenging for minority students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Stephens et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2012b). Strong support systems and involvement have been linked to feelings of belonging among minorities (Freeman et al., 2007). These support systems include friendships, relationships with professors or peers, and mentorships. Freeman et al. (2007) and Strayhorn (2012a) agreed that positive relationships with mentors and professors have a positive impact on a minority student's sense of belonging. As more minority students enroll into college, it is important that they have individuals around them with whom they can create a genuine connection.

Additionally, involvement plays an important role in a sense of belonging. However, minority students tend to feel as though involvement only plays a significant factor if they are still allowed to be themselves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Most of the research participants were either involved in extracurricular activities related to their major or to their ethnicity or race.

Campus climate or environment has also been shown to have a significant effect on a sense of belonging among minority students. It is imperative that campus leadership foster an environment in which minority students feel comfortable and welcomed. Many of the research participants in the current study stated that a sense of belonging included being comfortable presenting their authentic selves.

The purpose of this study was to describe how minority students described their experiences, if any, at a southeastern state flagship university. This study sought to answer the research question: How do minority students describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university? To answer the research question, minority students described their experiences being a minority student on campus, through which I uncovered two emergent themes: (a) support and (b) environment. Support included friend groups and involvements; environment included school size and comfortability.

Most research participants defined a sense of belonging in term of feeling comfortable. Conversely, most cited a large school, campus, and classroom size as to what contributed to their lack of a sense of belonging. Furthermore, nearly all of the research participants were either involved in extracurricular activities, had positive relationships with professors or mentors, or had a group of friends with whom they spent much time. This study was successful in allowing minority students to describe their experiences on this campus.

Most of the research participants shared positive experiences being a minority student on campus. Some participants stated that they felt no different being a minority student on campus. One African American male said that he did not consider himself a minority. A few participants explained that the diversity on campus helped them feel included. Some shared that their group of friends and the football culture aided in their positive experiences on campus.

However, the four African American women shared negative experiences when responding to what it was like being a minority student on this campus. Participant 1 explained that although she did not interact with groups that do not look like her, she noticed a lack of minority professors. She stated, “It’s hard, because you don’t see any teachers that look like you. It’s hard, too, because I feel like people shy away from you in group assignments—just things like that.” Participant 2 also mentioned small group settings. She explained that when she interacted with her majority peers in a one-on-one or group level, she felt as though her race was much more apparent. She also explained how a White friend would share derogatory jokes around her. Participant 5 described the moment she realized she was a minority on campus. She came to the realization while participating in an elementary education class. She also expressed that she felt as though her White peers expected her to have certain viewpoints on a topic because of her minority status. Lastly, Participant 6 expressed that being a minority student on a PWI would put one in many uncomfortable situations. She also reminisced on what she referred to as trials and tribulations. She explained that one example of this is when she had difficulty with a White roommate. She stated that she was a person who got along with almost everyone and how that experience was odd to her. However, once she had Black roommates again, she felt more comfortable.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

Belonging has been linked to academic persistence, motivation, and positive psychological effects; therefore, it is important for campus leaders to understand how to create and maintain a sense of belonging among their students. Previous research has emphasized how a sense of belonging among minorities is especially beneficial. White students are graduating at a faster rate than minority students, which causes a graduation gap. Fostering a sense of belonging

among minority students is crucial in closing this gap and increasing academic and personal achievement among them. The one-on-one individual interviews revealed that minority students need support on campuses, especially PWIs. They also revealed that the campus environment was a significant factor that contributed to minority students' sense of belonging.

This study's findings should prompt campus leaders to deeply consider continuing to provide support and maintaining a campus environment to foster belonging. As mentioned in Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement, different students require different types of involvement and support.

As supported by Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement, nearly all the research participants were involved on campus in some capacity, and many stated that the clubs or organizations they were a part of helped them feel like they belonged. The research participants felt supported by the other members of these organizations, their groups of friends, and key staff on campus such as mentors, professors, and academic advisors. However, involvement alone will not foster a student's sense of belonging. Out of the 13 research participants, the four African American women cited negative experiences they had endured while being a minority student on campus. The findings of this study suggested that minority students also need to feel a sense of belonging in required involvement, such as small group assignments or class projects. When conversing with professors, campus leaders must communicate that positive involvement must take place not only on a campus level but on a small group and class level as well.

The emerged themes of support and environment seemed to show that minority students want to be themselves on campus. Through the interviews, the participants revealed they were part of friend groups that allowed them to be their authentic selves. Further, most participants joined organizations that were directly related to their race or ethnicity. When defining a sense of

belonging, most participants stated that a sense of belonging included one's comfort. The following recommendations for practical and future research are based on the findings of the study.

### **Recommendations for Practical Application**

It is important that PWIs, such as the one in this study, make a serious effort to create and foster a sense of belonging among minority students. Based on the results of this study and existing literature, I recommend the following practical applications.

#### ***Support for African American Females***

Interestingly, all participants except the four African American women explained that their minority status on campus had not affected them in any way. However, even with being involved in campus organizations and surrounding themselves with friends, the four African American females in this study shared negative experiences they had endured on campus as minority students. This study revealed that there is gap in the perceived sense of belonging among African American women compared to their minority peers. Campus leaders should open the lines of communication and create safe spaces for African American women to share their needs and experiences. Additionally, campus leaders should seek ways to ensure all students feel accepted by professors, staff, and all peers on campus by holding forums, panels, and events that highlight the difficulties African American women face at PWIs and ways to combat these issues to foster a higher sense of belonging.

#### ***Make Large Campuses Feel Smaller***

Nearly all the research participants stated that the campus size, classroom size, or number of students did not contribute to their sense of belonging. There is not much campus leaders can do to change this, but there are things leadership can put into place to make minority students

feel more comfortable with large campuses. Minority students should be encouraged to get involved in small groups or in their living community if they live on campus. Further, the research participants mentioned not feeling noticed by their professors. Professors should try to reach out to minority students and other students who have been shown through research to have a lower sense of belonging. If possible, advisors may suggest smaller sections of classes for these students as well.

### ***Promote Small Group Sensitivity***

Some research participants noted that they feel avoided or uncomfortable in class small groups. Leadership and professors should first emphasize sensitivity in assigned small groups. Perhaps professors should consider creating groups of many different ethnicities and races so that one race or ethnicity will not feel as though they are the only one different. Further, campus leadership should continue to emphasize an appreciation and celebration of differences with events, clubs, and highlighting the positivity in accepting differences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

PWIs should continue to seek ways in which they can foster a sense of belonging among their minority students. The findings in this study revealed other areas of research that may be beneficial to PWIs seeking to create or maintain an environment of belonging for students and others.

Previous research covered in Chapter 2 discussed how a sense of belongingness, or lack thereof, can have positive or negative effects on minority students. These studies, as well as the current study, sought the perspectives of minority student participants. Based on the research findings from the current study and previous studies, here are suggestions for future research surrounding a sense of belonging among minorities on college campuses.

### ***A Qualitative Study Exploring Minority Professors' Sense of Belonging on Campus***

In this study, I explored a sense of belonging from the viewpoint of minority students at a PWI. However, this study revealed that some participants felt as though they did not have a diverse group of professors. Previous studies have also shown that there is a lack of diversity among professors at PWIs. A future study that explores the experiences of minority professors will be beneficial to the literature and to minority professors. Since some students stated that having more diverse professors would be positive for them, this hypothetical future study may be beneficial to minority students as well.

### ***A Qualitative Study Exploring a Sense of Belonging Among Minority Students Who Major in Certain Majors***

A few participants noted that there were very few minority students with whom they shared the same academic major. Future studies should investigate a sense of belonging among minority students who are involved in academic majors that tend to lack diversity. Instead of looking at a campus overall, this study would give insight into how minority students feel in smaller groups and a smaller setting. Further, this study might inform professors who teach these major classes how to ensure their minority students feel comfortable and that they belong in their classes.

### ***A Qualitative Study Exploring a Sense of Belonging Among White Students Enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities***

This study focused on minority students and their sense of belonging. However, the need for all students to feel a sense of belonging to their campus is important and beneficial to the academic and personal success of all students. Future studies should seek to explore how White students describe their experiences at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). A

study like this will combat bias because it will seek to allow majority students to share their experiences as well. This study may inform HBCUs on how to create a campus environment that is seen as comfortable and welcoming to White students. Further, it may highlight issues on campus that are nonconductive to fostering a sense of belonging among White students.

***A Larger Qualitative Study Exploring a Sense of Belonging Among Minority Students  
Enrolled at a Predominantly White Institution***

The current study used a total of 13 research participants. However, a study with more research participants might yield more reliable results. Furthermore, using more participants will contribute to more information that will make the findings easier to generalize instead of having to mainly rely on inferences.

**Summary**

Chapter 5 started with a short summary of the previous chapters and the overview of the study. The research question was addressed, and the emergent themes were again presented. The emerged themes that arose from the participant's statements were support and environment. Support included involvement and friend groups, whereas environment included comfortability and school size. Next, the conclusion of the study was discussed. Finally, recommendations and implications, recommendations for both practical application and future research were suggested.

**Overall Summary**

This basic qualitative study sought to describe the experiences, if any, among minority students enrolled at a southeastern state flagship university. This study revealed that there were factors that could positively or negatively impact a minority student's sense of belonging on campus. Students must have support and must feel comfortable on campus. It is imperative that faculty and staff at institutions of higher education make sure that all groups feel as though they



belong on campus. This study provided insight from the perspective of minorities about what contributed and did not contribute to their overall sense of belonging.

This study provided minority students with an opportunity to share their experiences at a PWI. Having minority students share their experiences informs campus leadership of how to create and foster a sense of belonging among students at their institutions. In conclusion, this study showed that support and a welcoming environment are important in building a foundation that helps minority students feel as though they are important individuals who belong on their college campus.

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[intergroup-dialogue-projects-and-restorative-justice-programs](https://arbitrationlaw.com/library/creating-sense-belonging-how-intergroup-dialogue-projects-and-restorative-justice-programs)

### **Appendix A: Social Media Solicitation Advertisement**

My name is Shakia Davis, and I am a current doctoral student in Organizational Leadership with a track in Higher Education. My dissertation seeks to explain how minority students describe their experiences, if any, at [university]. If you are a minority student who is at least 18 years of age and currently attends [university], I am hoping that you will participate in an interview with me. The interview will take approximately 15–20 minutes and will ask students about their experiences, if any, at [university].

I believe this study will be very beneficial to students, university administration, faculty, staff, and student organizations. I appreciate your consideration in participating in my study and interview. Participants will have the opportunity to be entered into a raffle for \$10 gift cards.

Again, thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Shakia Davis

### **Appendix B: Introduction and Consent Letter**

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this survey. The purpose of this study is to allow minority students the opportunity to describe their experiences, if any, at this southeastern state flagship university. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. This interview will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Because some information may be viewed as sensitive, all responses will be confidential, and no individual will be identified in the results. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You may withdraw from the interview at any time with no explanation needed. If you would like to document your consent in this study, I will provide you a signed copy of this form. Again, thank you for your consideration in participating in this survey. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Shakia Davis

### **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What is your major and minor?
3. Do you live on or off campus?
4. Where are you originally from?
5. How do you identify yourself? (race/ethnicity).
8. Why did you select [university]?
9. Do you plan to graduate from [university]?
10. How would you describe your time at [university]?
11. What is it like being a minority at [university]?
12. What are your involvements on campus?
13. How would you describe [university]?
14. What does sense of belonging mean to you? How would you define sense of belonging?
15. What, if anything, about [university] make you feel a sense of belonging?
16. What, if anything, about [university] does not make you feel a sense of belonging?

## Appendix D: ACU's IRB Approval Letter

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



January 24, 2020

Shakia Davis  
Department of Organizational Leadership  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Shakia,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "A Sense of Belonging Among Minority Students at a Southeastern State Flagship University",

(IRB# 20-012 )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs