

**“Where is the solidarity?”:  
Black women’s experiences attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution**

Emmanuela P. Stanislaus, *Florida International University*

**Abstract**

The topic of diversity and equity in the field of higher education has primarily been explored through examining the experience of Black students attending Predominantly White Institutions. Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) enroll 16% of Black college students (Nuñez, et al., 2015), yet there is a dearth of research that explores their experiences. Despite the increase representation of Black college students attending HSIs, existing HSI research has focused on the student success and experiences of Hispanic students. In light of these limitations, this paper presents a qualitative-case study exploring the experiences of five Black women attending a HSI located in an urban city. Interviews were conducted with the participants and the data were analyzed using Hurtado et al.’s (2012) Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments as a theoretical framework. Results offer insight that the participants did not feel like they were included in the institution’s definition of diversity. Findings also highlight the significance of the local community in constructing perceptions of institutional diversity for Black college women. Participants initially chose to attend this HSI expecting inclusion, however, their overall experience speaks to the reproduction of social hierarchies in higher education settings. This article expands and contributes to understandings of Minority Serving Institutions and complicates perceptions of diverse higher education settings.

*Keywords:* Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), campus climate, Black college women

## Introduction

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 coupled by the killing of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers ignited a summer's long irruption of protests to reform policing and calls for social justice for Black people across all industries in the U.S. Higher education was not exempt from these calls as Black students and Students of Color demanded universities make meaningful changes that increase representation and support. For example, increasing the number of Black campus counselors, faculty, and students; reforms to campus police, as well as addressing racist incidents that occur on campus. Furthermore, students challenged leaders to address systemic racism and inequities embedded in institutions of higher education. Consequently, understanding campus climate is a subject that has been explored in higher education and has been shown to impact student experience, particularly students of color (Griffin et al., 2016; Hurtado et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2012).

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a critical role in educating Black students. Broad education for the Black population was not achieved until the passing of the Second Morrill Act of 1890 and HBCUs served a pivotal role. HBCUs continue to be successful in retaining and graduating Black students and have served as beacons Black alumni (Awokoya & Mann, 2011; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). However, it wasn't until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that a significant number of Black students gained access to Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) that were largely places that barred their attendance with exclusionary and racist admission policies (Allen et al., 2018). An increasingly large population of Black students attend Hispanic Serving Institutions

(HSIs) which are federally designated institutions with at least 25% Latinx student enrollment. Despite the 16% Black student enrollment at HSIs, little is known about their experiences.

Most of the existing research on campus climate has centered on the experiences of Black students attending PWIs. Scholars have demonstrated that campus climate impacts retention, perception, persistence, student success among other areas (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Studies have shown that Black students navigate discrimination, culture shock, and isolation while attending PWIs (Settles, 2006; Shahid et al., 2018).

Black college women make up 64% of bachelor's degrees and 67% of associate's degrees awarded to all Black students (NCES, 2019). The experiences of Black college women are largely ignored as the tendency is to lump data under the students of color umbrella term (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Furthermore, existing studies disseminate resilience rhetoric related to Black college women achievement yet does not examine the racist and sexist systems of oppression that these students negotiate (Patton & Croom, 2017). Patton & Croom (2017) also argue, "beyond the numerical conversation, little is known about how Black women access college, what shapes their college choice, which experiences and opportunities contribute to their retention" (p. 3). In this article, I aim to expand and complicate understandings of HSIs by exploring the experiences of Black undergraduate college women.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review begins with an overview of Hispanic-Serving Institutions. I then continue with an exploration of literature that has examined the experiences of Black college women.

### **Brief History of Hispanic-Serving Institutions**

In the mid 1980s, a group of practitioners representing institutions of higher education with large enrollment of Hispanic students came together to form a coalition of sorts (Galdeano

et al., 2012). They found that there were a number of institutions with large numbers of Latinx/Hispanic students, however, there was no federal funding available to support the work that they were doing to educate this diverse student population. From their efforts, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) was created 1986 with the mission of increasing HSI recognition with a goal of lobbying for policies, special designation, and funding to support (Galdeano et al., 2012). The efforts led to HSIs gaining federal designation in 1994 which initially did not include financial benefit or support. Over time, funding was secured as a part of the 1998 Higher Education Act amendment (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019).

The number of HSIs have ballooned over the past 30 years. HSIs have grown from the initial 18 institutions to 525 as of 2018 (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2018). There are an additional 352 emerging HSIs (Excelencia in Education, 2020) with between 15% to 24% Hispanic/Latinx student enrollment. The growth is due largely because institutions of higher education can become HSIs simply by enrolling at least 25% Hispanic students. HSIs are different from other federally recognized institutions such as HBCUs and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) as the HBCUs and TCUs are a fixed number. The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided definitions and funding for Minority Serving Institutions which included HBCUs and TCUs established prior to 1964. As a result, institutions are not able to become HBCUs and TCUs as is currently occurring with HSIs. Furthermore, HBCUs and TCUs were specifically created with the explicit goal of educating students from those specific communities largely due to discrimination that kept them from enrolling in predominantly white institutions.

Existing studies of HSIs have focused on the experiences of Hispanic students and the support that these institutions provide them. Conversely, some research has criticized HSIs and called out their lack of uniqueness when compared to PWIs. Garcia (2019) stated "they [HSIs] teach a white curriculum, employ white faculty and administrators, and foster racism and discrimination in similar ways as racially white institutions" (p. 16). Moreover, Vargas & Villa-Race and Pedagogy Journal, vol.5, no. 2 (2021)

Palomino (2019) revealed that HSIs seldom used funds secured through their special designation for Latinx/Hispanic student population specific programming or support but more so efforts that benefited the general student population. Although HSIs enroll large numbers of Hispanic students, they also enroll a large number of Black, Asian American, and White students (Galdeano et al., 2012). HSI Black student enrollment is 16% compared to 10% of Black students attending HBCUs (Nuñez et al., 2015). With this information, it is surprising that the experiences of Black college students attending HSIs has rarely been explored in higher education research.

### **Black Women in College**

Black women representation on college campuses have grown yet there is limited research that centers the experiences of Black college women (Patton & Croom, 2017). Existing research suggests that Black college women experience microaggressions, stereotypes, and overt racism while attending PWIs (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Solórzano et al. (2002) defined microaggressions as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). A specific microaggression faced by Black women is a concept referred to as invisibility and hypervisibility (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). Within the context of higher education, Black college women are hypervisible due to their overrepresentation yet invisible as they often find themselves as the “only” in their classrooms and other campus social settings. Everett & Croom (2017) state, “marginalization of [Black undergraduate women] often translates into invisibility, which is compounded by the devaluing of their social and academic needs and challenges” (p. 76). While seemingly harmless, the culmination or compound effect of microaggressions can lead to depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Auguste et al., 2021). In contrast to the experiences of Black women at PWIs, Black women attending HBCUs exhibited higher levels of cultural congruity and life satisfaction than those attending PWIs (Constantine & Watt, 2002).

Kimberlè Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality which explains the unique oppression faced by Black women due to the convergence of racist and sexist practices. In her groundbreaking article Crenshaw (1989) carefully dissect antidiscrimination decisions involving Black women in an effort to illuminate the need for a multipronged approach that accounts for their race, gender, among other social identities to better understand their experiences. The idea of intersectionality is not a new concept as activists and feminists such as Sojourner Truth, Julia Cooper, and Fannie Lou Hammer have shared their lived experiences that highlight their invisibility in both fights for racial equality and women's rights. The intersecting race and gender identities influence the experiences of Black college women. For example, Shahid et al. (2017) revealed that campus racial climate is a major cause of stress and leads to mental health concerns for Black college women. Additionally, media portrayals compounded with limited representation of Black college women attending PWIs leads to warped/stereotypical ideas of who Black women are and what they represent and Black women. Black college women are then left to combat microaggressions, stereotype threat (the phenomenon of confirming negative stereotypes about one's racial, ethnic, or gender group) and racial battle fatigue (the physical and mental impact and exhaustion experienced by people of color who face constant racism) among other challenges (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Smith, 2004; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Historically, higher education research centering Black college women typically celebrate their resilience (Stewart, 2017). She states:

Black women in college have been incredibly resilient, defying decades of hostile campus climates and atrophied social lives by focusing on their goals and finding support faculty and staff mentors. However, it cannot be ignored that this resilience has been provoked by racism, not by the inherent qualities of Black womanhood (p. 41).

Despite the unwelcoming environments they encounter, Black women represent 64% of bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Focusing on the resilience of Black women, shifts the

accountability away from higher education institutions' role in the deconstruction of racist behaviors and processes (Stewart, 2017). Additionally, concentrating on resilience ignores the unique challenges that Black women experience on college campuses (Stanislaus, 2020).

Given the limited research that explicitly centers the experiences of Black college women as well as rare studies that investigate their experiences within the context of HSIs, this study expands what is known about this population. I now transition to providing an overview of the Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments which is the framework used to examine the campus climate of an HSI.

### **Conceptual Framework: Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments**

Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) builds on previous work and proposes that the model be utilized to study diversity and equity in institutions of higher education. MMDLE is a framework that allows us to examine campus climates and is one that I used to explore the experiences of Black women attending an HSI. Historically, higher education research has explored the experiences of diverse students from a deficit model. Stevenson (2012) describes the deficit model as one that focuses primarily on the student and perceived deficiencies versus interrogating the systemic forces that have fostered the inequities. The deficit model also centers whiteness as it positions white students as the model of success for students of color to be compared. As a result, I reject the deficit model as it neglects the social capital that diverse student populations bring to institutions. Additionally, it absolves institutions from the critical analysis that is needed to make these campus environments more welcoming and address trauma inducing experiences. For example, Shahid et al. (2018) revealed that campus racial tension led to Black college women experiencing stress while attending PWI.

The MMDLE accounts for multiple social identity groups and considers the impact of the institutional actors and practices on the campus climate and student outcomes. Additionally, the

model encompasses five dimensions including (a) historical which involves to the institution's past as it relates to diverse populations; (b) compositional which explains the numerical representation of students as well as faculty and staff; (c) organizational which includes institution policies, curriculum and procedures; (d) psychological refers to how students view campus relations and perceptions of discrimination, and (e) behavioral which includes the results of the interaction among students, faculty, and staff with diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Historical, compositional, and organizational aspects are associated with institutional while psychological and behavioral are on an individual level. Although Hurtado and her colleagues examined PWIs to establish the MMDLE, the framework provides a foundation for exploring aspects that contribute to how diverse postsecondary education environments impact college students. This study specifically explores the historical, psychological, and behavioral dimensions as those were the most prominent and salient to the study's participants during their interviews.

### **Methods**

This study was a single case study that was a part of a larger study that explored the experiences of second-generation Afro-Caribbean college women attending an HSI in the southeast (Stanislaus, 2020). The original study targeted students who identified as Black, an undergraduate, and second-generation Caribbean with both of their parents being born in the Caribbean. A focus on second-generation Afro-Caribbean women was important as it helps to showcase the within group diversity that exists within Black populations.

Merriam (1998) describes case studies as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon" (p. 12). As such, a case study was deemed appropriate to explore the lived experiences of Black college students within the context of an HSI. Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) was used as a framework to explore the experiences of the participants.

**Data Collection**

The study took place at Grand Apple University (GAU; pseudonym), a large, public, four-year HSI located in the southeast region of the United States in a city called Appletown (pseudonym). During the Fall 2019 semester, 64% of the student population identified as Hispanic, 12% as Black, 10% as White Non-Hispanic, 3% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 9% as other minoritized groups. Various student organizations were targeted to recruit participants for the study. Flyers and emails were also distributed to key university staff and faculty to broaden awareness of the study. Additionally, snowball strategy (Bertaux, 1981) was implemented to gain additional participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants to explore how these women made meaning of their race, ethnicity, and gender within the context of a Hispanic Serving Institution. A two-phase interview scheme was employed in which the first interview explored the participants’ early childhood through high school while the second interview focused on their experiences as a college student attending an HSI. Some of the questions included: “What is it like being a student at GAU?”, “What are your friends like at GAU?”, “In what ways do you see your race, ethnicity, and gender affecting your experiences at GAU?” and “What experiences keep you here at GAU?”

All interviews were conducted in person and were audio-recorded. All participants were provided the opportunity to select a pseudonym. In the cases where one was not chosen, I assigned one on their behalf. See Table 1 for interview participants’ demographic characteristics.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Pseudonym	Classification	Major
-----------------------	----------------	-------

Heather	Senior	Computer Science
Maria	Freshman	Sociology
Nadine	Senior	Sociology
Yolette	Senior	Psychology
Danai	Junior	Anthropology

---

### Data Analysis

Merriam's (1998) case study approach calls for the use of simultaneous data analysis which involves analyzing the data during the process of data collection. Engaging in simultaneous data analysis allowed for flexibility during the data collection process, allowing for tweaks to be made to questions as the interview phases progressed. This process involved transcribing audio-recordings from the first interview prior to conducting the second interview.

I conducted a two-cycle coding process to analyze the data collected. The first cycle coding was done line by line using In Vivo coding which utilizes the words used by the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This coding scheme was initially chosen to maintain the voice of the research participants. A codebook of over 200 codes was developed based from the first cycle coding. The second cycle coding was Pattern coding which helps to provide explanations and understandings of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pattern coding allowed the ability to group codes to develop categories. These categories were then analyzed utilizing the MMDLE to analyze the campus climate experiences of the participants. Specifically, the categories were established using the MMDLE's five dimensions mentioned previously (a) historical (b) compositional (c) organizational (d) psychological and (e) behavioral. Most participant quotes were situated in the psychological and behavioral dimensions. From that point, overarching themes were established based on relationships between the data. There were instances when the data applied to multiple dimensions. As a result, I made the decision to use themes that were not specific to the dimensions as I thought that the themes provided more

nuance to the understanding of the data. An example of the data analysis process involves a quote from participant, Heather. The quote reads, "sometimes you just don't have the opportunity to really build those relationships". This quote was coded as relationships then incorporated in the category psychological to correlate to the psychological dimension of MMDLE. Ultimately, the quote was included in the theme, Navigating Race Relations in the Classroom.

I employed several procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the data and findings. First, the multi-interview scheme provided an extended time with each participant which assisted with relationship building and consistency in participants' narratives. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing the transcripts of the interviews with each participant. All of the participants were provided the opportunity to review their transcripts and provide any revisions and clarifications of what they shared. Third, memo writing was also conducted as an additional process of reflexivity (Saldaña, 2009). I wrote memos after each interview as well as during the coding processes as an act of reflecting and processing my thoughts.

### **Positionality Statement**

Reflexivity of the researcher is important to demonstrating and increasing the trustworthiness of the data. Lavery (2003) states that researchers must consider how their intersecting identities and experiences are tied to the research topic that is being explored. Furthermore, Tracey (2010) calls on researchers to exercise reflexivity that involves transparency around areas that could be interpreted as bias. Reflexivity provides a venue to share that my lived experiences influenced how I approached this study and how I interpreted the data. I identify as a Black woman whose parents were both born in Haiti. I also attended an HSI as an undergraduate student and currently work at an HSI. As an undergraduate student, I often felt like I didn't belong, but I wasn't quite sure what caused me to feel that way. While working through the data collection process and analysis, I was reminded of my experiences as

a student navigating challenges of attending an HSI. As a result, my shared identity as a Black woman and second-generation Caribbean with the participants allowed us to connect in unique ways and may have influenced their level of openness.

### **Findings**

The participants' lived experiences highlight the challenges faced while attending an HSI. Several themes emerged from the interview data collected and reveal how HSI campus environments are experienced by some Black undergraduate college women. The following are the 3 prominent themes that tie in with the MMDLE.

#### **1. Interfacing with the Local Community/Community Context**

The participants spoke about how their interactions with the local community exposed them to microaggressions, stereotypes, and thoughts/behaviors. Nadine shared,

I've had people in classes that have said things like "oh, I've never experienced racism until I left Appletown". And I'm just thinking to myself that I experience racism in Appletown all the time. But you're part of the majority. You forget, or you don't notice how you treat others...even like little things like being in line at Walmart, and the cashier is being super happy, super friendly. And just super all around great energies with a person in front of you. And then you get there and before even saying anything to each other, the attitude completely changes.

Nadine's experience was a shared experience by most of the participants of this study. GAU is located in a city with a large Latinx population where the participants often encounter community members who only speak Spanish. This presented challenges in communication. Yolette revealed,

There was one time I was with my boyfriend and another time I was with my friends and we were like the only...Black people there. And then like service to us was always like really trash or then like if, there was that language barrier it would be like, okay, we're trying to get, we're kind of conveying our message to them and it was just like completely missblown and then it's like the order was fucked up and it's like, okay, no. Do I even want to fight with you that you messed up my food or do I want to like sit here and eat this?

The majority of the participants discussed their hair and how difficult it was to find products that are specific for the maintenance of Black hair. Some of the women encountered discrimination

based on how they wore their hair, with negative reactions if they wore their hair in its natural state. Maria stated,

So I know in this part of Appletown, if I need anything for my hair, no...I know from the experiences I've had in this part of Appletown that I'm probably going to get looks when going into the store...if my hair natural hair is out, I get looks from people that are not my skin color or don't have my hair type.

Maria's experience speaks to the idea of bracing oneself for potential microaggressions. Her words provides an example of scenarios encountered by Black women that can lead to racial battle fatigue.

## **2. Disconnect Between Institutional Image and Experience**

The majority of my participants chose to attend GAU because it was designated as an HSI. They expected a largely diverse student population which would be different from the makeup of a PWI. They quickly realized that attending GAU was in fact different, however, not in terms of the collective unity that they expected. Maria shared,

I learned that yes, I am a minority and coming to [GAU], I in a sense, I felt like I couldn't relate to people that are not like me on the basis of like we're minorities and we're going to push through. But I learned that there is still, there are levels of it. So, and it goes off the basis of how you, not only physically but also culturally.

Similarly, Nadine did not feel the collective energy on campus. She reflected,

I don't feel solidarity. I don't feel like I go to a school that's a school full of people of color. But then it's weird, because they're not white. So it's like, you know, I mean, if I went to a PWI and I felt excluded or I felt like I was being treated differently, like I was being othered like, I was being judged, or looked down upon, it would kind of make sense. Because I'll be like, well as PWI and this is what happens.

Nadine also brought up what she viewed as a lack of representation of Black students in powerful leadership roles as well as limited Black professionals in faculty and staff roles. She explained,

I do think that something that kind of frustrates me as a student, as somebody who's been a student leader, has been involved is that, GAU is often like, claim this diversity, and like, just so proud of like its diversity, but I feel like, sometimes I feel like diversity is

taken for granted at GAU. Because sometimes I'm like, Where's this diversity? Like, this school is not as diverse as we act like it is sometimes. Especially like, if you look at I don't know like some of like things like SGA that is not really I feel like a very diverse population of people. Or if you look at like, like, the entire, like faculty and staff, and like the hierarchy of it. Like, it's a HSI it's a Hispanic serving institution but then the most of the faculty and staff are not really people of color.

Further, Nadine explained how she thought representation could take shape: "It's that simple to like, be like seeing, maybe the Vice President of SGA as a black person. Um I think it's crazy that I've met both the first black homecoming queen and king of GAU. Like that was within my time here at GAU. I think that's crazy". In Nadine's mind, the fact that GAU's first Black homecoming queen was crowned during her time as a student, was an example of a misalignment of the diversity that the institution purports.

Despite the challenges my participants experienced, they held positive thoughts about the institution and had strong desires to help the institution improve. Danai shared, "I feel like GAU is just so inclusive, you know, I don't like to say diverse, I prefer to say inclusive, because they're actively trying to be inclusive". Danai's comments were a sentiment shared by the majority of the participants. Nadine's thoughts provide some insight into the complex position of loving the institution but also being critical of it. She shares,

It's complicated, because, I'll hear people talking about how proud they are of the diversity of GAU...but then at the same time a lot of us that are not Hispanic like we don't feel all of this great positive diversity...we don't feel like we're seen or heard sometimes.

While the participants shared their love for the institution, they still felt invisible. The invisible feeling bled into other areas of their experience and students' needs were not met or considered.

### **3. Navigating Race Relations in the Classroom**

The classroom was another venue where the participants experienced othering and isolation. The participants often found themselves as the only or one of few Black women or students in a given class. Maria shared,

We were like, no more than 15 and I enter the class and I sat down and like I already noticed that I was the only black girl and I was like, I know this was going to happen...the professor...was talking about the movie Hidden Figures and she asked how many people have seen the movie and one, I think it was only two of us that has seen the movie. And coincidentally we were the only two black people in the class. And so then she asked me, seeing you as the, you as a black woman, like how do you feel about the movie? And I understood she didn't do it intentionally just for the fact of like, yeah, I am the only black girl...I was just like, oh my gosh. Wow.

Maria's story highlights the reality faced by members of minoritized groups who are sometimes not afforded the opportunity to simply be students but are also expected to teach or enlighten others about their experiences. Furthermore, there is the expectation that minoritized groups to represent their racial or ethnic group.

The classroom did not provide an opportunity for my participants to expand their social circles and build friendships with Latinx students. Heather explained, "sometimes you just don't have the opportunity to really build those relationships". Heather continued, "[GAU] being a larger Hispanic demographic, I think sometimes it is harder to make certain relationships". She specifically shared that it is hard to relate and connect and that the language difference can also make it difficult. Similarly, Yolette had a challenge connecting with students in the classroom. She shared,

Making friends in my classes was hard because everybody was so competitive. So whenever you asked someone for help, it would either be like they didn't know, just like you didn't know or they would act like you were stealing like their answers and it's like, no, help me please.

Yolette was hoping to make friends but was also seeking assistance. However, her cries for help were misinterpreted as attempting to get over on her peers.

Nadine realized some differences between herself and her Latinx peers. This difference led to having to educate them about various types of higher education institutions. She explained,

One time I said the phrase PWI in a class...I can't remember if it was a class or if it was in one of my jobs. And people were like, "What is that?"...And I was like, "PWI is a predominantly white institution." And they were like, "Oh, well, like, what does that mean?" I was like, like, a school that's like, mostly white people. And then I was like, like

an HBCU Historically, Black College or University...And they're like, well, "What is GAU? and I was like, you don't even know what GAU is? I'm like GAU is an HSI, Hispanic Serving Institution. And I was just like, ohhh chile. You guys don't even know like, what these simple things are like...I was like, well maybe it's just something that like, black people now these terms because it's something that we consider when we're applying to colleges, and some people just go to whatever college they want to go to...Like, when I'm, when I was going to college, I was thinking about that and considered do I want to go to a PWI? Do I want to go to an HBCU? Do I want to go to this? And, you know, I thought that somewhere like GAU would not be the way that it is. There are times when I'm like, I'm not even I might as well be at a PWI? Because I don't know if it would be better or not.

Nadine's discussion with her peers forced her to examine her personal college choice process and compare with others of different races and ethnicities. She was under the impression that terms such as PWI, HBCU, and HSI were widely known by most students of color and used during the college decision making process.

Yolette specifically expressed the difficulty she experienced during her first years attending GAU. She expected that faculty would be more supportive when she was experiencing academic challenges. Yolette revealed,

I've had battles with my mental health throughout my, through my tenure here at GAU for that first, I don't think I 100% was understanding like how is it affecting me or that I really had a problem...But then it's like when I approached professors about it, it was just kinda like, oh well you just need to do better. Like you're not doing enough or like, and I felt like it, it was like a, you're looking at me and saying that like I'm probably just like not doing what I'm supposed to and I'm trying to finesse you but like, no, like I'm genuinely struggling. I like, like it would be like, you don't understand what it took me to get out of bed right now. Like, so having those conversations but like them not understanding I think I feel like my race did play a role in that, like looking at me as like a black person maybe.

Yolette believed that she was treated differently because of her race and gender. She ended up seeking the help of an on campus mental health counselor after a friend recommended that she visit the counseling center.

Danai discovered that her race was important to others she considered while dating. She shared that she was admittedly more comfortable approaching and being approached by someone with her shared race. She expressed that attending an HSI helped her expand her thoughts about dating outside of her race because of the large number of Latinx students.

Unfortunately, her expressed interest to a Latinx student was not received the way that she expected. She explained,

And I told him, "I really think you're really cool. Do you want to go out sometime, like without, you know, being in this environment?" And he was like, "Oh, yeah, but I like I'm white girls." So I was like, oh okay cool. Which was like very shocking to me. I was like, I've never heard somebody say it like that, you know?

Danai went on to share,

Sometimes when white guys speak about black women and dating black women, it's sort it sounds like they're fetishizing us. You know, it's like, to me, it's like, stop calling me a queen every day...But stop talking about oh, how cute our babies would look. It's like, no, I was made from two black people. I'm cute. So I don't understand why you have to match with me in order for our babies to be cute. My babies still gonna be cute. I don't understand that. So it's kind of like you're between that am I not desired? Or am I being fetishized?

Danai's story is an example of the complex racial campus climate that my participants had to navigate. Experiences like the one Danai shared are not necessarily what one would expect to occur at a Minority Serving Institution.

### **Discussion**

The findings illuminated three themes: interfacing with the local community, Disconnect Between Institutional Image and Experience, and Navigating Race Relations in the Classroom. These findings were explored from the use of the MMDLE and highlighted the historical, behavioral, psychological aspects to viewing the campus climate of an HSI through the experiences of Black college women. This research extends and challenges what is known about HSIs and MSIs campus climates in general. Specifically, this research demonstrates that anti-black racism can exist in these largely diverse spaces. In this particular study, in general, the Latinx student and community took on ideas about Black women that have long been held by the dominant culture. These ideas caused the Black college women in this study to feel othered, isolated, unwelcomed, and unsupported which is similar to previous research (Griffin et al., 2016). The following sections provide discussion around the themes presented in the findings.

### **Disconnect Between Institutional Image and Experience**

Some of the participants chose to attend Grand Apple University (GAU; pseudonym) because of its HSI designation in hopes of countering some of the reported challenges of PWIs. A few of the students specifically chose the institution as an alternative to attending an HBCU with expectations of GAU being more welcoming than a PWI. However, they were surprised to find a misalignment between the institution's stance on diversity and their lived experience. The participants generally felt othered and lacked a true sense of belonging. Additionally, they were disappointed with the lack of solidarity among diverse student populations on campus as they expected to mirror the collective unit found among POCs in the larger society (Liu & Shange, 2018). As noted, participants were drawn to GAU because of perceived diversity and inclusion and mission to support diverse student populations. GAU's website states its mission as "serving its students and the diverse population of Appletown." The students were disappointed to feel as if Black students were not a part of the espoused diversity of the institution. Consequently, the participants' perception that their needs were unheard by campus administrators linked to experiencing a level of invisibility.

### **Interfacing with the Local Community/Community Context**

Hurtado et al. (2012) highlight the important role that local communities have in understanding institutional context. The local community is an aspect of the institution's historical dimension. While discussing their college experiences, the participants of this study shared their experience navigating and interfacing with members of the local community while running everyday errands. During these encounters, the participants were left frustrated, misunderstood, and unwelcomed. Messages of unbelonging were implied by the lack of access to products specific for Black hair both on campus and the surrounding area. The participants believed that they were treated differently because of negative views and beliefs about Black women. Furthermore, Spanish is widely spoken as a first language of those in the local

community and presented a challenge for the participants, which left the participants feeling discriminated against. Maria shared her experience visiting a Hispanic/Latinx run beauty supply store, "they would skip over me and my friends, they'll charge us extra". Her assessment of this type of treatment was because she is Black and did not speak Spanish. Similar to Hurtado et al. (2012), all of the participants' experiences influenced how they viewed the institution even though the incidents did not occur on campus.

### **Navigating Race Relations in the Classroom**

Previous research has revealed that Black college women and Black students in general experience stereotypes and are expected to represent their race in the classroom (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; George Mwangi et al., 2018). Those studies centered on the experiences of Black women/students attending PWIs while this study focuses on HSIs. This study suggests that Black women experience stereotypes, isolation, and anti-Black racism even in the majority minority student demographic of an HSI (Stanislaus, 2020). Similarly, Garcia (2019) shared, "despite efforts to become more compositionally diverse or inclusive of racially minoritized groups, whiteness continues to be valued, even at racially minoritized institutions such as HSIs" (p. 11). Participants found it was difficult to cultivate relationships with Latinx student populations. The participants expressed competition in the classroom that hindered relationships as well as what could be interpreted as negative assumptions about Black women. Despite the discrimination and othering experienced by the participants, they continued to maintain positive thoughts about the institution and had the desire to see the environment improved for future students. These findings complicate discussions related to race and ethnicity as the participants' stories magnify the anti-black racism that is prevalent both in higher education and society as a whole. Specifically, the findings related to race relations in the classroom and is an example of the MMDLE historical dimension and racial composition as it

demonstrates that increasing numbers of diverse populations alone will not move the needle forward on campus climate, diversity, and belonging.

### **Implications for Practice & Research**

Participants' stories demonstrated that Minority Serving Institutions may not be the inclusive spaces that we expect them to be. To counter what they perceived as non-inclusive spaces, the participants created small support systems made up of both men and women from similar backgrounds. In the case of Yolette, her friend was instrumental in recognizing that she needed help and encouraging her to visit the on campus counseling center. A few of the participants never found the opportunity to cultivate a support system with one deciding to leave the institution as a result. Support systems are critical to the retention and success of students and therefore, it is imperative for colleges to find ways to create opportunities for Black women to cultivate relationships with one another. Furthermore, support for racial and ethnic student organizations beyond Black Student Union is necessary to foster a sense of belonging.

The historical exclusionary practices of higher education leads to a tendency to view Black college women and Black college students in general as resilient for successfully progressing through these racialized spaces. However, researchers need to interrogate campus climates to disrupt and dismantle these toxic spaces. Stereotypes and tropes about Black women distort the ways that they are viewed and supported. For example, Corbin et al. (2018) found that Black college women use STRONGBLACKWOMAN imagery to combat racism and be heard in white spaces, yet the concept appears to contribute to their invisibility. Faculty and staff may not believe that Black women are in need of support because of the strong Black woman myth and reports of Black woman graduation success (Patton & Croom, 2017). Training is needed to address bias, anti-Black racism, and provide tools to recognize signs for counseling referrals. It is not enough to applaud these women for successfully making it through historically oppressive institutions. Although what Black college women are accomplishing is

remarkable, we need to call out policies and procedures as well as the actions of institutional actors so that there is no need for Black college women to be resilient.

It is imperative that faculty and student affairs practitioners alike work to cultivate opportunities where Black and Latinx students can engage and form relationships. Deeper relationships could help combat anti-Black views. This research took place in a city with a minority majority Latinx community and a history of strained relations between the Latinx and Black communities. This setting and history presents a unique context but also supports past research that demonstrates the importance of the local community in students' understanding of campus climate (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 2012). As such, college administrators should work with the local community to educate them about diverse populations and assist them in understanding their role in student success. Furthermore, more research should be done to further explore the experiences of Black students attending HSIs to understand college choice, persistence, and affinity.

This study focused on the experiences of Black college women attending an HSI. Further research should be replicated to explore the experiences of Black women with other intersecting identities. Specifically, studies that look into the experiences of Black Latinx women attending HSIs can broaden our understanding of intersecting identities in racially diverse settings. While this study explored the experiences of Black women, it did so through the examination of second-generation Afro-Caribbean women. It would be interesting to see future research explore the experiences of students with a history of generations in the U.S.

Patton and Croom (2017) called out the limited research that explicitly focuses on the experiences of Black college women. Future work should continue to center the voices and experiences of Black college women. Additionally, researchers should resist the temptation to group all women of color or all Black students which ignores the unique experiences of Black college women.

### **Conclusion**

Race and Pedagogy Journal, vol.5, no. 2 (2021)

Since the HSI classification is tied to enrollment of Hispanic/Latinx students, the number of HSIs will continue to grow. As the number of HSIs increase, it is important to examine both the experiences of Latinx students as well as the other students of color with large populations. This study broadens the literature that explores the experiences of Black college women attending an HSI. The participants' narratives highlight the salience of their race in understanding their experiences within an HSI. Their race and the ways that other students understood race, played an important role in how these Black women were treated and supported or lack of support on campus. Notably are the ways in which the participants experienced similar stereotypes and isolating feelings as Black college women attending PWIs. Instead of students and institution agents, the participants in this study were on the receiving end of racist views held by their Latinx classmates and those within the community. It was challenging for the participants to build relationships within the classroom with Latinx students. This was unexpected to some of the students as they thought that the student population would mirror social justice movements on a larger scale that tends to involve people of color from all backgrounds. To counteract their feelings of exclusion, they looked for ways to develop a supportive network which tended to include other Black students.

Utilizing the MMDLE as a framework for this study allows for an examination of what Hurtado et al. (2012) states is "the interaction of systems and reciprocal influences that constrain or lead to an institution's role in producing social transformation or the reproduction of inequity" (p. 103). While Hurtado et al. (2012) specifically provide guidance related to PWI campus climates, my research shows that it is necessary to explore all campus environments. This article provides insight on campus climate for Black college women attending and HSI and challenges us to think through ways that colleges reproduce societal inequities. Making campus environments more inclusive and equitable requires us to bring these experiences to light to be able to address them head on.



## References

- Allen, W. R., McLewis, C., Jones, C., & Harris, D. (2018). From Bakke to Fisher: African American students in U.S. higher education over forty years. *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 4(6), 41-72.  
<https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2018.4.6.03>.
- Auguste, E. E., Cruise, K. R., Jimenez, M. C. (2021). The effects of microaggressions on depression in young adults of color: Investigating the impact of traumatic event exposures and trauma reactions, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22675>.
- Awokoya, J. T. & Mann, T. L. (2011). *Students speak! Understanding the value of HBCUs from student perspectives*. Fairfax, VA: UNCF/ Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute.
- Bertaux, D. (1981). *Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences*. SAGE.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Constantine, M., & Watt, S. (2002). Cultural congruity, womanist identity attitudes and life satisfaction among African American college women attending historically Black and predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 184-194.
- Corbin, N. A., Smith, W. A., & Garcia, J. R. (2018). Trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman: Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominately white institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1468045>.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, 139-168.

- Everette, K. D., & Croom, N. N. (2017). From discourse to practice: Making discourses about Black undergraduate womyn visible in higher education journals and student affairs practice. In L. D. Patton, & N. N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success* (pp.75-87). Routledge.
- Excelencia in Education (2020). Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2018-19. Retrieved from <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/data/emerging-hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis-2018-19>.
- Fries-Britt, S., & Griffin, K. (2007). The black box: How high-achieving Blacks resist stereotypes about Black Americans. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 509-534. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0048>.
- Fries-Britt, S., & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful black collegians at a black and white campus. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25, 315–330. <http://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2002.0012>.
- Galdeano, E. C., Flores, A. R., & Moder, J. (2012). The Hispanic association of colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions: Partners in the advancement of Hispanic higher education. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 11, 157-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2012.686352>.
- Garcia, G. A. (2019). *Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Opportunities for colleges and universities*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- George Mwangi, C. A., Thelamour, B., Ezeofor, I., & Carpenter, A. (2018). “Black elephant in the room”: Black students contextualizing campus racial climate within US racial climate. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(4), 456-474.
- Griffin, K. A., Cunningham, E., & George Mwangi, C. A. (2016). Defining diversity: Ethnic differences in Black students' perceptions of racial climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9, 34-49. <https://doi.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0039255>.

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. (2018). HACU 2018 Annual Report.

Retrieved from [https://www.hacu.net/hacu/Annual\\_Report.asp](https://www.hacu.net/hacu/Annual_Report.asp).

Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, C., Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments: The scholarship on creating and assessing conditions for student success. In J. C. Smart & M. B. Paulsen (Eds.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (27 ed., pp. 41-122). Springer. [http://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2950-6\\_2](http://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2950-6_2).

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3), 21-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940690300200303>.

Liu, R., & Shange, S. (2018). Toward thick solidarity: Theorizing empathy in social justice movements. *Radical History Review*, 131, 189-198. <http://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-4355341>.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. Jossey Bass.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis (2nd ed.)*. Sage.

Núñez, A.-M., Hurtado, S., & Galdeano, E. C. (2015). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing research and transformative practice*. Routledge.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, L. D., & Croom, N. N. (2017). Critical perspectives on undergraduate Black women. In L. D. Patton, & N. N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success* (pp.1-13). Routledge.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. SAGE.

Settles, I. H. (2006). Use of an intersectional framework to understand Black women's racial and gender identities. *Sex Roles*, 54, 589-601. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9029-8>.

Race and Pedagogy Journal, vol.5, no. 2 (2021)

- Shahid, N. N., Nelson, T., & Cardemil, E. V. (2018). Lift every voice: Exploring the stressors and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominantly white institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology, 44*(1), 3-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0095798417732415>.
- Smith, W. (2004). Black faculty coping with racial battle fatigue: The campus racial climate in a post-civil rights era. In. D. Cleveland (Ed.), *A long way to go: Conversations about race by African American faculty and graduate students* (pp. 171-190). Sage.
- Solòrzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical Race Theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 69*, 60-73.
- Stanislaus, E. P. (2020). *We're here, we exist: An exploration of how second-generation Afro-Caribbean college women make meaning of their race, ethnicity, and gender* (Publication No. 4486) [Doctoral dissertation, Florida International University]. Higher Education Commons.
- Stevenson, J. (2012, October). *Black and Minority Ethnic student degree retention and attainment*. Higher Education Academy. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/black-and-minority-ethnic-student-degree-retention-and-attainment>.
- Stewart, D. L. (2017). (In)visibility, involvement, and success: A counternarrative of Black women in predominantly white liberal arts colleges, 1945-1965. In L. D. Patton & N. N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success* (pp. 31-43). Routledge.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.

- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077800410383121>.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex of student*. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_322.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_322.20.asp).
- Vargas, N., & Villa-Palomino, J. (2019). Racing to serve or race-ing for money? Hispanic-serving institutions and the colorblind allocation of racialized federal funding. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(3), 401-415. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2332649218769409>.
- Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *The unchosen me: Race, gender, and identity among Black women in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Winkle-Wagner, R., Kelly, B. T., Luedke, C. L., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). Authentically me: Examining expectations that are placed upon Black women in college. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(2), 407-443. <http://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218798326>.